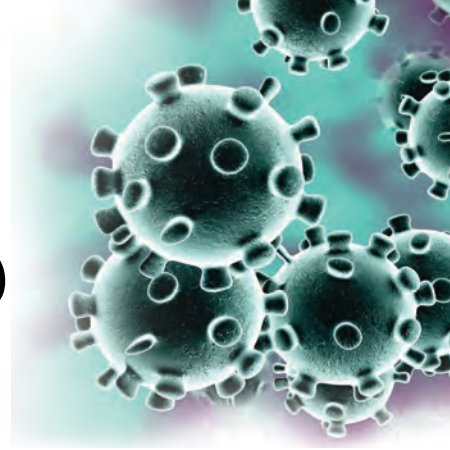


Why does God allow *suffering?*



Human suffering is one of the greatest barriers to a belief in the existence of a loving God. The question is often asked: ‘Why does God allow war and suffering?’ It is one of the arguments used by those who deny the existence of God. The Bible gives us the answer to the question.

The reason why so many people are troubled by the existence of suffering is that they do not understand what the Bible has to say on the subject. Most religious people believe that death, so often the result of suffering, is the gateway to a better life in heaven. This idea contradicts Bible teaching which reveals that death is the divine punishment for sin. The Bible does offer a hope of everlasting life and freedom from suffering, but it is a hope based on the resurrection of the body, not of immortal souls going to heaven at death.

The reason for death

Suffering and death were the direct result of failure to obey God – we are all under the sentence of death because we all disobey Him. This came about in the first place as

described in the first book of the Bible, in Genesis chapters two and three. God is truly a God of love but there is also another side to His character, in that He cannot overlook wilful disobedience of His commandments.

Two contrasting aspects of God’s character are plainly revealed in the Bible. For example the Apostle Paul urges us to ‘*consider the goodness and severity of God*’ (Romans 11.22). God created mankind with free will; He was not interested in creating robots that would be programmed to obey Him, but in people who would do so of their own free will.

At the same time He warned our first parents that disobedience to His commands would bring death (Genesis 2.17). They exercised their free will by disobeying God and death inevitably followed. However, we do not die merely because of the sin of Adam and Eve, but because we inherit their sinful nature and we too, having free will, are sinners ourselves. The Apostle Paul endorsed the record in Genesis and summed up the natural state of the human race in these words:

‘Therefore, just as through one man (Adam) sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.’ Romans 5.12

God has placed the sentence of death on us because we all sin. Death therefore comes about as a result of disobedience to God's commands.

Pain is not always evil

But it may be asked, could not God have foreseen that mankind would disobey Him and have created us in such a way that we would die without feeling pain? This is a complex issue – more so than most people realise. There are people who do not feel pain, but far from this being a blessing, they have a very serious disadvantage because they don't learn one of the basic needs of life, which is to avoid accidents and other things that cause pain.

Pain is a necessary part of learning in this life. Children who suffer as a result of an accident for example, learn to avoid such accidents. Some pain is also desirable as a warning to us that something is wrong. A severe toothache warns us that the tooth is bad and needs extracting. Without the pain, there would be little or no warning that anything was wrong.

More importantly, if we put our trust in God, pain and suffering are a

necessary part of the development of character. We are told in the epistle to the Hebrews that Christ was made perfect through sufferings (Hebrews 2.10). If we are rightly influenced by suffering when we experience it, it will help to mould our character, as we read again in the epistle to the Hebrews, where, quoting from the Old Testament, the writer says ‘...whom the LORD loves he chastens (disciplines), and scourges every son whom he receives’ (Hebrews 12.6). Adding his own inspired comment, the Apostle wrote:

‘Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it’.

Hebrews 12.11

Don't miss the importance of that last phrase, ‘*to those who have been trained by it*’.

God's love shown through suffering

The above statement from the letter to the Hebrews shows that suffering can be a sign of God's love to those who are willing to accept it. God has also promised that although chastening is necessary for His sons and daughters while they have human nature, He will not allow them to be tempted (tested) more than they can

bear (1 Corinthians 10.13). This demonstrates that through suffering, God still loves those who are his true sons and daughters, as a parent loves the child he disciplines.

Natural disasters

Some people are rightly concerned about earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes together with famine in the developing world and similar disasters. Such events seem to strike indiscriminately and ‘innocent’ people including children suffer as a result. Could not a loving God have prevented such tragedies occurring?

These happenings are no doubt a direct result of the changed circumstances that occurred through the sin of our first parents when God placed a curse on the earth, a curse that will not be lifted until God’s kingdom is established (compare Genesis 3.17–19 with Revelation 22.3). The wise man Solomon reminds us of this truth when he wrote:

‘The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise...but time and chance happen to them all. For man also does not know his time: Like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them.’

Ecclesiastes 9.11, 12

If God is left out of our lives, He should not be held to account, or His very existence challenged when things go wrong as a result of human error or mistake. Often man brings disasters on himself, either by greed, building in the wrong place, poor maintenance, or other causes. God allows us free will in such matters, so He cannot be blamed when things go wrong.

Suffering caused by war

War is a major cause of suffering, both to the victims and those that love them, but it is brought about by the wickedness of man, despite

A mother and daughter survive the earthquake that completely destroyed their village in Italy in 2016



attempts by some, through the U.N. and other organisations to stop wars. Their efforts are doomed to failure because we are told in the Bible that man is incapable of governing himself satisfactorily. In the letter of James we read these words:

‘Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires... that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain...’

James 4.1, 2

The Apostle James was referring to wars brought about by human lust. But there have been times in the past when God has used war for the furtherance of His plan. This is going to happen again in the future, which we believe to be near, when God will again use war as a judgment on the nations prior to the establishment of His kingdom on the earth.

War will be abolished

God has promised that when Jesus returns and establishes the kingdom of God upon earth, the *‘inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness’* (Isaiah 26.9). This righteousness will prevail over sin and the result will be a time of peace. The words of the prophets of Israel remind us that war will then be a thing of the past. For example Isaiah foretold that in the last days, the days of the future

kingdom of God on earth, *‘Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’* (Isaiah 2.4).

Then, and only then, will be fulfilled the words of the angels at the birth of Jesus: *‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men!’* (Luke 2.14). The one cannot be fulfilled without the other – there will be no peace on earth until there is glory to God in the highest.

The effect of this will be a lasting peace, as we are told in the same prophecy of Isaiah: *‘The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever’* (Isaiah 32.17). There are many other prophecies in the Scriptures that speak of this future time of peace and prosperity. Jesus, as the future king of the world, has been given the title *‘Prince of Peace’*, and the prophet adds, *‘Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end’* (Isaiah 9.6, 7).

We see that there can be no peace without righteousness (obedience to God). The Bible tells us that

‘the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. “There is no peace”, says my God, “for the wicked”’

Isaiah 57.20,21

This shows us why peace cannot prevail in the present climate of godlessness. The verses we have quoted and others like them, demonstrate that God knows of man's desire for peace and that He has planned for it to happen when Jesus returns as the future king of the whole world.

God's promise to remove all suffering

God plans to rid the earth of sin and death, along with natural disasters, as He told His servant Moses:

'but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD'. Numbers 14.21.

The present situation, where man does what is right in his own eyes, but which is usually wrong in God's eyes, does not fulfil that condition. It will only be attained when God sets up His kingdom over the earth, which He has promised to do through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Without the existence of suffering now, we would never appreciate the freedom from suffering that God has promised to those that love Him.

We are told in the Bible that God will abolish sin, suffering and death, but it will be in His own time and in His own way. The Bible confirms what we know from experience to be true, that man is incapable of making such decisions for we read *'It is not in man*

who walks to direct his own steps' (Jeremiah 10.23).

There will come a time when God will remove the sentence of death, through the work of His dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, a time when there will be no more human suffering and death itself will be no more, as we are told in the last book of the Bible:

'... God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.'

Revelation 21.4

It is our wish that you with us may be among those who are ready to welcome the *'Prince of Peace'* when he returns from heaven to establish the kingdom of God on earth; to be among the true friends of Jesus in that day.

Editor's note:

We have reproduced this article which originally appeared in Light volume 20.2. The writer fell asleep in Christ a few years ago, and rests in hope of a resurrection to eternal life, and a place in the coming kingdom of God.

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