

How Can A Good God Allow Suffering?

Introduction

Many find the presence of evil and suffering in the world a great problem to having faith in God. The problem of pain and suffering is a problem that cannot be ignored and the question of how God can allow it has been asked throughout the ages.

The argument can be summarized this way:¹

- Evil & suffering exist in the world.
- If God were all-powerful, he could prevent evil and suffering.
- If He were all-loving he would want to prevent these.
- If there were an all-powerful God, there would be no evil and suffering in the world.
- God is therefore powerless, loveless or nonexistent.

There are many causes of suffering and evil in the world:

- Natural Disasters - Tsunami, 26 December 2004. Over 280,000 people died in Sumatra, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Maldives
- Accidents - Titanic sank in 1912 with over 1,500 losing their lives. Nuclear reactor in Chernobyl, April 1986. Over 800,000 Ukrainian children are likely candidates for Leukemia as a result.
- Man on Man - Adolph Hitler and 6 million Jews exterminated in WWII. Rwanda 1994 genocide where 800,000 people were slaughtered. 9/11 terrorist attacks in NYC 2,300 people died. ILL: My Dad
- Human error/incompetence - Though there is enough food on the planet to feed everyone, every year millions die from starvation. Smokers, heavy drinkers, drug addicts, STD's.

The Bible does not give simplistic answers to these questions in order to neatly solve the problem. It reminds us that we “see through a glass dimly” (1Cor.13:12). Consider what Scripture says:²

- The very existence of a truly transcendent God is a mystery. If we could understand everything about God he would not be God.
- There is no logical basis for assuming that God owes us an explanation for anything that happens in the world.
- To say that the Bible does not tell us everything is not to say that it tells us nothing.
- There is a difference between the way God thinks and the way we think. “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8)
- The Bible does not tell us all we want to know, it does tell us all we need to know.

¹ *Where Is God When Things Go Wrong?* p.5, Blanchard, John. Evangelical Press, 2005

² *ibid*, p18-19

Philosophical Problems³

1. Evil and suffering isn't evidence against God - Just because evil or suffering seems pointless to you, does not mean it is pointless. To suggest such shows that you have immense faith in your own cognitive reasoning. Just because you cannot see or imagine a good reason why God might allow something to happen, does not mean that there can be one.
2. Evil and suffering may be an evidence for God - These objections to God are based upon a sense of fair play and justice. People ought not to suffer, be secluded, die of hunger or oppression. If God does not exist then the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection must be true. Natural selection depends upon death, destruction and the violence of the strong against the weak - this is what is perfectly natural.

Though we might want to demand God to intervene to prevent evil and the suffering it causes, that would remove from God the very qualities that make Him God, and give them to ourselves.

If an all-holy God were to intervene in moral issues to prevent suffering which ones must he intervene in? Certainly we would wish for him to intervene in the atrocities of Adolph Hitler and the 9/11 Terrorist Bombing. Surely He should take action to prevent child abuse, rape, drunk-drivers, etc... yet logically this argument leads to the conclusion that we would all be reduced to the role of puppets, not responsible for a single thought, word or action.

Personal & Painful

Christianity does not provide the reason for each experience of pain, but it does provide deep resources for actually facing suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair.

How it all began

1. Man was created as a (Gen.1:27):
 - Personal being - capable of a living relationship with his Creator and other human beings.
 - Moral being - his conscience making him aware by nature the difference between right and wrong
 - Rational being - able to think, draw conclusions, make decisions and more specifically make moral choices

Man had the ability to obey God and the freedom to disobey Him. Satan entered the garden and persuaded Adam and his wife Eve to disbelieve God and disobey his clear instructions. At this moment "sin entered into the world" (Ro.5:12)

2. The consequences of Man's disbelief and disobedience was catastrophic:⁴
 - Man retained his spiritual nature, but lost his spiritual life.

³ These points are found in *The Reason For God*, p23-27, Keller, Tim, Riverhead Books, 2008

⁴ *Where Is God When Things Go Wrong*, p.20

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- Man lost his innocence and his moral free will. His nature became infected with godless ideas, attitudes and affections.
- Man's own personality was wrecked - he lost his self esteem, knew for the first time what it was to be guilty, alienated, ashamed, anxious and afraid.
- His interpersonal relationships were poisoned by suspicion, dishonesty, mistrust and the need to justify himself.
- His body became subject to decay, disease and death.
- His world, environment was devastated - thorns, aggressive wildlife, natural disasters - volcanoes, floods, winds etc. *Rom. 8:22: For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.*

"Like poison dumped at the source of a river, Adam's polluted and depraved nature has flowed on to every succeeding generation." (Ro. 5:12, 8:22)

A Helpful Case History

There are two men that stand out to us in the Bible who endured extraordinary suffering. Joseph is one of those men. You can find his story in Genesis 37-50. Though Joseph faced great suffering at the hands of evil men, years later he could see what God was doing and said, "you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." (Gen. 50:20).

The other man was Job. Job was the "greatest of all the people in the East" (Job 1:3). In one day he was hit by natural disasters and the actions of evil men. He lost 11,000 of his animals and the remainder were incinerated by a huge fireball. Many of Job's servants were killed and his 10 children died when a tornado struck the house where they were holding a party. (Job 1:13-19).

Soon afterward, Job lost his health when he was stricken with painful boils from the top of his head to the soles of his feet (Job 2:7).

Job's wife suggested that he "curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Soon his friends arrived, but instead of bringing him comfort, they accused him of some hidden wrongdoing that caused God to bring these calamities into his life.

Job's response to his suffering vacillated between amazing faith in God and deep despair. His initial response was to worship (Job 1:20-21) and at one point made an amazing statement of his faith in a good and sovereign God (Job 19:25,27). Soon however he began to question his existence, "why did I not perish at birth?" (Job 3:11). Why do the wicked seem to go to the grave in prosperity and peace while the righteous suffer (Job 21:13)?

Finally God spoke directly to Job. God's response to Job's suffering is very instructive as we face the consequences of evil in our own suffering:

God pointed Job to his own overwhelming greatness and power in contrast to man's dependence and weakness:

- Can you set up God's dominion over the earth? (38:33)
- Do you have an arm like God's? (40:9)
- Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place? (38:12)
- Do you send the lightning bolts across the sky? (38:35)
- Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? (40:1)
- Will you discredit God's justice? (40:1,8)
- Will you condemn God in order to justify yourself? (40:1,8)

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God never explained the cause of Job's pain and suffering, but focused instead on man's response to that suffering.

Job's Perspective Changed:

- God is in absolute control of the universe (42:2)
- He was in no position to argue with God or question Him. (40:4)
- He did not possess all the facts (42:3)
- A living relationship with God was infinitely better than religious feelings or ideas. (42:5)
- He should confess that he had been wrong to question god's power, justice and love and should humbly commit himself to him. (42:6)

Job responded "like a child in the darkened gripped in his father's arms." God does not give us all the answers we want, at to claim that he does is both cruel and absurd.

"The last thing needed by hurting people is the voice of opinionated advisers who presume to interpret providence." - Peter Bloomfield

It is less important to know all the answers than to know and trust the one who does.

The Suffering of God

The Son of God is mysteriously one person in the Tri-unity of God. He was not created but was eternally "in the bosom of the Father" (Jn. 1:18).

Jesus knew physical pain. The pain of the whipping, the pain of the crown of thorns, the pain of the nails used to hold him to the cross.

Jesus suffered the pain of separation from His Father! Jesus, as our substitute bore in our place the pain of eternal exclusion from God. Imagine how painful this must have been for the One who had throughout eternity been in perfect fellowship with the Father. In the Garden, Jesus cried out: "If possible allow this cup to pass by me." On the cross he screamed in anguish of soul, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me!" (Mt. 28:46)

Jesus knows first-hand the despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, abandonment, bereavement, torture faced by people. On the cross Jesus suffered the worst form of physical suffering, but he also suffered the pain of rejection and loss.

"In His death, God suffers in love, identifying with the abandoned and god-forsaken.' Why did he do it? The Bible says that Jesus came on a rescue mission for creation. He had to pay for our sins so that someday he can end evil and suffering without ending us."⁵

God Understands Suffering

God understands suffering because he has experienced it! (Rom. 6:23, 5:6, 1 Peter 3:18) Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). He rose three days later proving that he had accomplished that task!

Jesus is the one and only mediator between God and men (1Tim.2:5)! He offers forgiveness of sin and a living eternal relationship with God.

⁵ *The Reason For God*, p.30

CONCLUSION:

We are all guilty of the evil that contributes to the suffering faced by human-kind. “Unless you repent, you will likewise perish!” (Luke 13:4-5)

- It is only God’s mercy that all of humanity is not wiped out.
- If all of humanity was wiped out right now God would merely executing His justice and righteousness!
- The fact that we are here on planet earth right now proves that God does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. (Ps. 103:10)

We have hope in the midst of our pain!

- God is with us in our suffering
- Our suffering is not in vain! We will one day have all the wrong, pain and suffering undone! There will be no more pain, sorrow or suffering! Rather the eternal joy, peace in perfect fellowship with God and one another. (Revelation