

#2 How Could A Good God Allow Suffering?

Some say unjust suffering is a philosophical problem, calling into question the existence of God. For others it is intensely personal, refusing to believe in any God who allows history to proceed as it has. A tsunami killed over 250,000 in Dec '04. A reporter wrote: "If God is God, he's not good. If God is good, he's not God. You can't have it both ways." Despite this confident assertion the effort to demonstrate that evil disproves the existence of God is now agreed on almost all sides to be completely bankrupt. Why?

Evil and Suffering Isn't Evidence Against God: Philosopher J. L. Mackie writes: "A good and powerful God would not allow pointless evil, but because there *is* much pointless evil in the world, the traditional God could not exist." Other philosophers have identified a major flaw in this reasoning. The hidden premise is that if evil appears pointless to me, then it must *be* pointless. Apparently, if our minds can't plumb the depths of the universe for good answers to suffering, well, then, there can't be any! This is blind faith of a high order.

An account in Genesis illustrates an arrogant young man, Joseph, hated by his family and sold into slavery. He experienced years of misery, yet his character was refined and strengthened by his trials. Eventually he rose up and became prime minister of Egypt and saved thousands of lives from starvation. If God had not allowed Joseph years of suffering, he never would have been such a powerful agent for social justice and spiritual healing on a national level.

Many admit that what they needed for success in life came to them through their most painful experiences. I knew a man who lost his sight after he was shot in the face. He told me he had been an extremely selfish person, blaming his legal and relational problems on others. Losing his sight devastated but humbled him. "As my physical eyes were closed, my spiritual eyes opened. I finally saw how I'd treated people. I changed, and now for the first time I have real friends. It was a terrible price, yet worth it."

With time most of us can see good reasons for at least *some* of life's tragedies. From God's vantage point isn't it possible there are good reasons for them all? Being angry at God because he is great and transcendent enough to stop suffering also means he's great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue. Indeed, you can't have it both ways.

Evil and Suffering May Be (If Anything) Evidence for God: Though inexplicable suffering cannot disprove God, it's still a problem for Christians. However, it is perhaps a greater problem for nonbelievers. People, we believe, ought not to suffer. But the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection depends on death, destruction, and violence of the strong against the weak—these things are all perfectly natural. On what basis therefore does the atheist judge the natural world to be unjust? Nonbelievers don't have a good basis for being outraged at injustice—requiring eons of suffering to explain our existence. If you are *sure* that this natural world is unjust and filled with evil, you assume the reality of some extra-natural (or supernatural) standard by which you make your judgment.

Suffering is as big a problem for nonbelief in God as for belief. It's a mistake to think that by abandoning belief in God it somehow makes evil easier to handle. This may sound cold to a real-life sufferer. "What if suffering doesn't logically disprove God? I'm still angry" they may say. The Christian God came to earth to deliberately put himself into human suffering. Christianity doesn't provide reasons for each experience of pain. It provides deep resources for actually facing suffering with hope rather than bitterness.

The Suffering of God: On the cross, Jesus suffered a three-hour long death by slow suffocation and blood loss. As terribly painful as that was, there have been far more excruciating and horrible deaths that martyrs have faced with far greater confidence and calmness. Why was Jesus so much more overwhelmed by his death than others have been?

Jesus is introduced in John's Gospel as tri-personal. Jesus, the Son of God, has lived forever in absolute relational intimacy and love with his Father. But at the end of his life on earth he was cut off from this eternal relationship. There is no greater inner agony than the loss of a relationship we desperately want. Criticism becomes more painful the more we know somebody. We cannot fathom what it would be like to suddenly lose the infinite love that Jesus had experienced from all eternity. His suffering would have been eternally unbearable. Jesus became our substitute and bore the endless exclusion from God that the human race has merited.

Redemption and Suffering: Jesus' death was qualitatively different from all other deaths. The pain was nothing compared to the spiritual abandonment. Christianity alone among the world religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human and knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture and imprisonment. Why did he do it? The Bible says that Jesus came on a rescue mission for us. He had to pay for our sins so that he can end evil and suffering without ending us.

If we ask again: "Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?" and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still have no answer. However, we know what the answer isn't. It can't be that he doesn't love us or that he's indifferent to our condition. He takes our misery so seriously that he took it on himself. Embracing this gives us deep strength to face the realities of life. We can know that God is truly with us even in our worst sufferings.

Resurrection and Suffering: But we need more than just knowing he's with us. We all need hope that our suffering is not in vain. Families of lost loved ones go to great lengths to change social conditions that led to the death. They need to believe that the death will lead to new life—turning injustice into greater justice. The secular view of things sees no ultimate restoration after death or history. Eastern religions believe we lose our individuality; our natural lives are gone forever. Even religions that believe in a heavenly 'paradise' consider it a consolation of the losses and pain of this life and the joys that might have been.

Christian faith provides resource for this in the resurrection—a restoration of the life you've always wanted. In Revelation 21 we don't see people taken out of this world into heaven, but rather heaven coming down and cleansing, renewing, and perfecting this material world. This means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual joy even greater. I once dreamed that my family died. When I woke my relief was enormous and my delight in each family member was enriched. Why? My joy had been greatly magnified by the nightmare. My love for them was only greater for having lost them and found them again. In Matthew 19:28 Jesus insists that his return will be with such power that the very material world and universe will be purged of all decay and brokenness. All will be healed and all might-have-beens will *be*. This is the ultimate defeat of evil and suffering.

Discussion Questions

- 1) When has a difficult situation in your life turned out for your good?
- 2) Do you think your unbelieving friends would buy the argument that the absence of a clear answer to suffering doesn't rule out the possibility that a plausible — but hidden — explanation exists? What might be their objections?
- 3) Do the laws of natural selection and survival of the fittest contradict human values that oppose suffering, discrimination, and the victimization of the poor and powerless? Discuss your thoughts.
- 4) How have you shown compassion to someone during a time of suffering in their life? What kind of hope did you give them? Discuss for believers and non-believers.
- 5) How does the hope of a perfect future, heaven cleansing earth, change the way you live now? Do you make decisions based on immediate satisfaction or long term satisfaction?
- 6) If someone is really angry with God because of personal suffering and is seeking genuine answers, what is the best way to help them? How does the material discussed here fit in?

Romans 5:3-5 (NIV)

“... we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us”

Final question: Suffering strengthens faith—either faith in God or faith against him. How have your most difficult or painful experiences helped to mature your character or increase your empathy? How has this pushed you towards or away from God?