

Why Does Mankind Suffer?

Introduction. There is no experience more universally peculiar to humans than suffering. You look at the news online and see how much of it is really "good news." In Judges 6, for seven years the Israelites were victimized by the Midianites. Israel's crops were destroyed, their livestock was confiscated, and the people were forced to seek refuge in dens and caves. During this time, the messenger of the Lord appeared to Gideon and declared, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor." Gideon responded, "Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us" (Judges 6:13)?

This appeal has been echoed countless times by those languishing under suffering. Man's usual response to tragedy is to blame God, as Charles Darwin did after the death of his daughter Annie. Her death destroyed Darwin's beliefs in a moral, just universe. Later he would say that this period chimed the final death-knell for his belief -- He would now take his stand as an unbeliever. Media mogul Ted Turner. Having lost his faith after his sister died of a painful disease, Turner claimed, "I was taught that God was love and God was powerful, and I couldn't understand how someone so innocent should be made or allowed to suffer so." These and a thousand similar sentiments grip the human heart, and cry out for an answer.

I do not have all the answers for suffering. I have learned a lot about suffering from the Bible, but I imagine that in my lifetime I will learn much more. My function is to declare to you the whole purpose of God, and I will, to the best of my ability, discharge that duty regarding suffering and the testing of our faith (Acts 20:27).

I. ***The Problem Stated***

- A. With many people, the great obstacle to belief in God is the problem of evil and suffering. Because men cannot meaningfully analyze suffering, the assumption is sometimes made that a loving God cannot exist. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (342-270 B.C.) argued that if God wishes to prevent evil, but cannot, then He is not all-powerful; if He can prevent evil, but will not, then He is not good. If He has both the power and the will to eliminate evil, then why is evil in the world?
 1. The Bible says that death came as the result of man's sin (Genesis 3:19). Evolution says that death has always been a part of nature. Can both be true? Obviously not.
 2. "Theistic evolution" tries to merge the Genesis account and the concept of millions of years of evolution. Theistic evolution postulates millions of years of death before God stepped into the process and created the Garden of Eden. As a result, theistic

evolution requires God to call millions of years of death and suffering "very good."

3. On the other hand, if the fossil record is the product of a catastrophic global Flood in which vast numbers of organisms were suddenly buried in chemical-rich water and sediment, the need to postulate millions of years of history goes away. God's account of a perfect world ruined by sin and destroyed by a watery judgment is consistent with the fossil evidence in the world.
- B. The fallacy of the argument is the assumption that God is the one who initiates suffering. Imagine God sending sickness, disease, blindness, deafness, and other afflictions only to have Jesus come and undo it (Luke 4:40). Did Jesus heal in opposition to God's will? No!
 1. Upon being questioned for having healed a woman who had been sick for 18 years on the Sabbath Jesus said that it was Satan's fault (Luke 13:16).
 2. Paul attributed his thorn in the flesh to Satan (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Satan takes great pleasure in ruining God's creation and causing misery and suffering (1 John 5:19).
- C. Galatians 6:7 is an unchangeable, universal, superb law of God. The conditions that exist, the suffering that has to be endured, and the ensuing death is a result of man being out of sync with God's laws. God does not change His natural law because a saint must suffer in consequence of the violation of law. Suffering, therefore, is not sent from God, nor is it punishment from God for sins committed by the individual. It is the inevitable consequence that comes from violated law.

II. ***The Problem Addressed***

- A. In order to understand suffering, we must understand God's nature, and how He has created man. God's creation of man was an expression of His love (1 John 4:8). His love was further demonstrated when He endowed man with freewill (Genesis 2:16-17; Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 7:15; John 5:39-40; 7:17; Revelation 22:17). Could God be a loving God if He created intelligent beings, then programmed them to slavishly serve Him without choice? No! We would cease to be human. We would cease to be in the image of God.
- B. Also, where freedom of choice is permitted, there exists the possibility that finite creatures will make wrong choices. But wrong choices must entail some adverse consequences. If all choices, both good and bad, produced exactly the same effect, how would one ever learn to choose good and reject evil? Suffering consequences produces a willing consent to choose good rather than evil.

- C. We also sometimes assume that no good purpose can be served by the existence of evil and suffering. No one can be so presumptuous as to assert that man can completely understand the problem of suffering. Other than what He has revealed to us in the Bible, the mind of God is unknown to man (Romans 11:33). Enough of the answers are suggested in the Bible, however, to allow us to trust in the loving God who always does what is right (Genesis 18:25). We have to accept this, even in adversity.

III. ***Suffering In Our World***

A. Personal wrong choices.

1. We frequently bring suffering upon ourselves because of the bad decisions we make. In the case of the Israelites considered earlier, we are informed that "the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord: and the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years" (Judges 6:1).
2. If a man steals and goes to prison, is it not his fault? If a man murders and is executed, will God be blamed? Someone may argue that God could have prevented the crime and the suffering. Not if He wanted to preserve man's freedom of choice! God limits His own activity by lovingly granting man freewill (1 Peter 4:15)!

B. Personal wrong choices of others.

1. A good deal of suffering is caused by the bad choices of other human beings. You cannot argue that we can have freedom of choice, and deny it to everyone else.
2. God is no respecter of persons so an innocent person may be killed or crippled in a wreck involving a drunken driver (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). In time of war, many are killed because of the evil decisions of a few.

C. Personal wrong choices of former generations.

1. A lot of the world's suffering is the result of the freedom of choice that was abused by generations of the ancient past. If we reap the benefits of the good labors of former generations (e.g. scientific discoveries), can we avoid reaping the evils too?
2. God warned that rejection of Him would affect generations yet unborn (Exodus 20:5-6). A baby born with AIDS or a deformity caused by the mother's use of drugs or alcohol suffers consequences resulting from the choice of other people.

D. Our world of natural law.

1. We live in a world regulated by natural law. Since this is the case, suffering is inevitable. If the law of gravity behaves consistently, a building may fall on someone and kill them. In the incident of the

- collapse of the tower of Siloam and the deaths of 18 men, Jesus said they were not greater sinners than anyone else (Luke 13:4-5).
2. We benefit tremendously from the laws of nature, and we suffer the consequences when we violate them. Suppose a plane crashes and many people are killed -- will we blame God because an engineer, mechanic, navigator, or pilot overlooked or ignored an aeronautical principle, or failed to take into account a weather factor? Someone might ask, "But why will God not intervene and stop these disasters?" Do you realize what sort of world this would be if God directly intervened, suspending His natural laws, each time one of His creatures encountered a life-threatening situation? This would render the natural laws of our planet completely undependable and make life hopelessly confused.
- E. Suffering as a means of testing our faith.
1. We will develop this topic in greater detail later, but it is sufficient at this time to say that God allows the suffering of Christians to test their faith (Hebrews 12:4-11; James 1:2-4, 12; 1 Peter 1:6-7).
 2. A Christian can suffer in many ways including sickness, death, and persecution. Satan tempts us to sin. But because we recognize, and are prepared for it, we resist and become stronger for having endured the testing (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Conclusion. If we are honest, we must admit that there are some benefits to suffering. For instance, what if we could experience no pain? Does not pain sometimes send us to the doctor for treatment? Is it not true that suffering helps to develop the noblest qualities of which mankind is capable? If there were no suffering, could such traits as patience, bravery, etc., be cultivated? Remember, where there is only sunshine, there is a desert!

Suffering and evil remind us that this world was never designed to be man's eternal home (Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 2:11). There is a place where the "wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest" (Job 3:17). The Lord has prepared a better home for those who serve Him, and suffering makes us "homesick." That suffering per se is not contrary to the goodness of God is revealed by the fact that even Christ suffered (Hebrews 5:8; 1 Peter 2:21).