

How can a loving God allow suffering?

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Location: St George's

Series: Exploring Christianity

Texts: Psalm 22; Mark 15:16-39

Today we're looking at the question, "How can a loving God allow suffering?" Back in 2007 I attended a 4 week course called "The Problem of Evil: A Tour of Christian Responses." The course was life changing. Not because of the content, but because that's where I met Claire. Love you could say is the answer. The problem of evil and suffering is logical and global and in the end personal. I know some of your sufferings, cancer, chronic pain, abuse, disability, grief. But perhaps I've felt the question most powerfully standing as they lowered the tiny casket of my dear friend's son into the grave. Why? How could you let this happen God?

Suffering is a universal human problem which we all have to face. How do we make sense of life in the face of suffering? Where do we find the resources to deal with suffering? "I couldn't believe in a God who allows suffering," some people say. Suffering presents a problem for Christianity. The atheist David Hume famously put the question along these lines.

If God was all powerful he could do something about suffering.

If God was all loving he would do something about suffering.

But suffering exists, and therefore God does not.

But I want to suggest that suffering is not just a problem for Christianity, it's an inescapable problem that all religions and worldviews have to wrestle with. So before we come to the Bible I want to briefly look at the answers to suffering given by 3 significant traditions - Hinduism, Buddhism and Atheism or Materialism. Let's take each in turn.

For **Hinduism**, the answer to the question why do we suffer, is karma. All of us are trapped in the cycle of death and rebirth. The deeds of our past lives are repaid in the present. Every experience of suffering - rape, disease, disability, poverty, flood and so on - is the operation of karma, a balancing of past actions in the present. All suffering then is deserved. According to the law of karma, the death of my friend's son must have been because of what he or his son did in a previous life. The goal of life then is to escape the karmic cycle of death and rebirth and this can be done through either right action, right knowledge, or right devotion to a god who will release you from the wheel. There is an elegant justice and explanatory power to karma. But I do wonder what comfort it would give to a grieving father.

For **Buddhism**, the answer to the question why do we suffer, is that suffering is an illusion caused by desire. Buddhism recognises that life is suffering. In fact this is the first of the 4 Noble truths. The second is that suffering comes from desire. That is, we suffer because of our attachment to the things of this world - our money, our house, our children, even our very selves. To be freed from suffering we need to be freed from desire. This is the third Noble Truth. The 4th Noble truth is that we need to follow the eightfold path to extinguish our desires. Again this has great explanatory power. Being overly attached to money and even to a loved one is a problem. But again, I'm not sure if it's livable. The great *Haiku* master Kobayashi Issa expresses the problem well. His life was one full of tragedy. After the death of one of his daughters he wrote these lines, which express the fundamental conviction and the tension in Buddhist thought:

This world of dew

Is only a world of dew
And yet, and yet.

Atheism or perhaps better scientific naturalism is the default assumption of western culture. That is that the material world is all there is and science is how we can know everything. The answer that naturalism gives to suffering is that it is, funnily enough, natural. We should not be surprised by suffering. Nature is red in tooth and claw. Richard Dawkins puts it like this:

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.¹

To say suffering is simply natural, is intellectually coherent. But I wonder whether it is livable. To say to a victim of domestic violence that her suffering is just a product of chance in a universe of pitiless indifference not only offers no comfort; it also erases any meaningful distinction between good and evil and robs us of our ability to seek justice.

Suffering remains a problem for every religion and worldview and for us as individuals. But I want to suggest that what the Bible has to say about suffering while it might not answer every question, it is thoroughly livable. So what does the Bible have to say about suffering?

When we ask “How can a loving God allow suffering?” we are asking, what is the reason for suffering? I want to touch on three things the Bible says about suffering that while true, are not the ultimate *reason* for suffering. In fact, we get into problems when we make any of these three things the ultimate reason for suffering. These are freedom, growth and providence. Let's look at each in turn.

Freedom

You may have heard the argument go like this. Suffering is a result of the Fall, that is Adam and Eve's sin in the garden of Eden. Why didn't God simply make things so our first parents couldn't sin? The answer usually goes, because without a real possibility to turn away from God they wouldn't be truly free to love God. This argument draws our attention to the central place the creation accounts have to Christian theology.

Humanity was created to be in harmony with God, with each other and with the creation. Yes, we were created as free creatures. But rather than using that freedom in dependence upon and love towards God, we sought autonomy - to become a law unto ourselves. Because God is the source of life, to turn away from him is to turn towards nothingness. And so sickness and suffering, disease and death - the natural evils of this world, are, according to the Bible, the result of the spiritual disintegration unleashed by our first parents.

God says to Adam, “Cursed be the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you...”²

Because we cannot create from nothing our creative freedom directed away from God now becomes the will to dominate. We use other creatures for our self creation as we grasp for equality with God. Every generation of humanity is enmeshed in the moral and spiritual

¹ *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*

² Genesis 3:17-18

disintegration wrought by our first parents. And so we perpetuate the moral evils in this world.

Does our freedom then come at the terrible price of the suffering of the world? I think that goes beyond what Genesis claims. The Genesis account well describes the dynamics of evil and suffering in this world in a way that makes sense of our experience, but it doesn't say what the reason for suffering is.

Soul Making

A second strand of thought in the Bible can be found in a text like Romans 5.3-4

We glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope.

Or again Hebrews 12

Endure hardship as discipline: God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ... God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. (7, 10)

In God's hands suffering can be an instrument of personal growth. The apostle Peter uses a picture taken from the smelting workshop. The metal ore is thrown into the furnace. The impurities are burned away and you are left with the pure gold. So too with suffering. God uses it to refine us, to burn away our character flaws. He uses suffering to shake us free from the idols we trust in, because they cannot save us in the fire, and instead we put our feet on him as the solid rock.

Now all of this is true. And we would do well to ask in the suffering we experience, How is God using this to refine my faith and grow character? But it would be a cruel father who creates suffering simply to teach his kids. That God uses suffering to grow us does not mean this is the ultimate reason suffering exists.

Providence

A third way the Bible speaks about suffering is in terms of what theologians call the doctrine of God's Providence. That is God's sovereign upholding and care of his creation. Nothing happens by chance. God directs or allows all that happens by his sovereign power.

The classic illustration for this is the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50. You might remember. Joseph was his father's favourite. His jealous brothers conspired to sell him into slavery in Egypt. He ends up in gaol in a miscarriage of justice, but then becomes the right-hand man to Pharaoh, leading Egypt through a famine. In this position he is able to save his family from starvation. After their father Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers worry that Joseph will take his revenge. But Joseph says to them,

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.³

After speaking about the suffering of creation and our own suffering, St Paul writes in Romans 8,

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

³ Genesis 50.20

The sovereignty of God in using evil for good is seen most clearly of course in the cross. That supreme act of human wickedness - murdering the Lord of glory, was, in the secret purposes of God nothing less than the redemption of the world.⁴

The doctrine of God's providence reminds us of just how limited we are and just how big God is. We cannot know our end from our beginning. We are never sure of the outcome of any circumstance. And so we're invited, in the darkness, to trust the God who knows us and loves us and is working for our good. Sometimes that is all we can hang on to.

And yet we can so emphasise the sovereignty of God that we are not able to call evil for what it is, an alien intruder that has no place in God's good creation. We can make God the author of evil. And if that were the case how could we say that he was good? God does not will evil. He is light, in him there is no darkness. And yet such is his sovereign power that he is even able to take that which is most opposed to him, in spite of itself and weave it into his purposes, overthrowing and defeating it.

I fear that if this is where we finish we miss out on the deepest words the Bible has to say to us in our suffering. For when we face suffering what we need most is not an explanation or a reason for it. We need someone to do something about it. We need the certain hope that it will come to an end. We need someone to be with us in our suffering now. And this is just what God offers us in Jesus.

Jesus

In Exodus God says to Moses, "I have seen the misery of my people ... I have heard them crying out ... I am concerned about their suffering ... So I have come down to rescue them..."⁵ In the person of Jesus this is just what God has done. On the cross Jesus went into mortal combat and defeated our great enemies of sin and death. His resurrection was the beginning of God's great victory over suffering and evil and his project to renew all things. Jesus promised that he will return and make all things new. The closing chapters of the Bible picture this as a moment of judgment and restoration. God will not abandon his creation. His judgment is the execution of justice on all that causes suffering in our world. And because all that would harm and destroy God's good creation will have been done away with, there comes the restoration and renewal of creation.

Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. **2** I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **4** "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

This is the promise of an end to suffering that we all long for - guaranteed and begun in Jesus' own resurrection.

⁴ Acts 2:23

⁵ Exodus 3:7-8

The final thing that the Bible has to say about suffering is that we are not alone. What we need in suffering is consolation. This is a compound word - *con* means “with” and *solator* means one who comforts. We need one who is with us to comfort us. And this is exactly who we meet in Jesus. God is not removed from our suffering and misery. On the contrary, he shares in the wounds of this world. In Jesus he has entered into our suffering and borne it upon himself. Hebrews says he shared our flesh and blood. He is able to sympathize with us because he was like us in every way.⁶ He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He has not only suffered with us, but also for us to bring us home. That cry on the cross, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” is the cry of every son of Adam and daughter of Eve. And yet here Jesus stands godforsaken with us. He takes the place of the godforsaken. He is God, forsaken by God, that we might be brought home.

And by the power of the Holy Spirit he is present with us in every suffering. He is near to us in suffering, and we are nearer to him. Indeed in suffering we participate in his suffering. Paul writes,

For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.⁷

Even as Christ is present with us in our suffering, so he empowers us to share in the sufferings of others. Our hearts are enlarged to suffer with others. And we can work for justice now because we know that it is not in vain. He will bring in his kingdom of justice when he returns.

How can a loving God allow suffering? We’ve looked at how different worldviews answer this question. I confess I don’t think in the end the Bible gives us a reason. But it does say look upon the wounds of Christ. God has entered into the wounds of this world and made them his own. He has promised to heal all wounds and he is with us in our suffering. After the carnage of the First World War Edward Shillito wrote a poem, Jesus of the scars. Let me finish with the last stanza.

The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak:
They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.

⁶ Hebrews 2.14; 4.15

⁷ 2 Corinthians 1.5