

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

The Bible answer to human tragedy

SUFFERING is a problem in life that comes home to everyone. A child is born blind, deformed or mentally afflicted; and the question comes: Why? The child has done no harm.

A man or woman of fine character and in the prime of life is racked with pain in a hopeless disease that can only end in death. Why him? Why her? These are the people who can least be spared.

Millions in the world are suffering semi-starvation and disease in countries with vast populations and low agricultural productivity. Others perish or are made homeless in floods and earthquakes. Why should *they* suffer?

Pain, torture and death have been imposed on helpless millions by the tyranny of man and the destructiveness of modern war. Countless lives are lost in acts of terrorism, by brutality and hijacking. Accidents there have always been, but the scale of today's disasters and natural calamities is often overwhelming: a passenger aircraft crashes; an oil rig blows up; fire traps hundreds in an underground train. People ask: Why does God allow it?

Does God care?

The questions readily arise and on the surface they seem reasonable: yet a candid look at them shows that they carry certain implications. They imply that suffering in human life is inconsistent either with the power or with the love of God: that as a God of love He has not the power to prevent the suffering, or if He has the power then He has not the will, and is not a God of love. It is assumed that the prevention of suffering as it now affects the apparently innocent is something we should expect from a God of love who is also Almighty. Are these assumptions justified?

Facts of life

Some facts about life must be taken into account before we try to form a judgement:

1. Man lives in a universe of cause and effect and the consequences of certain causes are inescapable. Fire burns, water drowns, disease germs destroy. These facts have moral implications. People live in a universe in which the consequences of what they do are inescapable, and therefore their responsibility for what they do is equally inescapable. Without this burden of natural law man could do as he liked with impunity, and there would be no responsibility. God made the universe this way because He is a moral God who makes men responsible beings with freewill to choose how they will act.
2. Man's neglect and misuse of his own life has corrupted the stream of human life itself, and left evils which fall on succeeding generations. These, again as part of natural law, may manifest themselves as hereditary weaknesses and tendencies to disease. The very stuff of life may be affected as it is passed on from generation to generation.
3. The consequences of man's acts are not only directly physical. The social and political evils which they have created throughout history have left a gathering burden

on the generations following. People today are caught in a net of the consequences of past history, and even when they try to right one evil, another is brought to bear:

“The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.” (Romans 8:22)

Should people be saved from themselves?

Taking such facts as these into account, it must be asked, What is it we are really doing when we require God to remove suffering? Are we not asking that God should (a) suspend natural law, (b) divert the consequences of heredity, and (c) turn aside the effects of man’s inhumanity to man? Have we the right to expect God to save men from the consequences of human acts? Would it be a moral universe if He did?

‘Acts of God’

These questions can only be asked of situations when the hand of man is involved. Earthquakes, tempests, famines and floods are called ‘acts of God’ because usually there is no other explanation for their occurrence. So if we look beyond human acts to natural disaster, we find that it falls upon all, innocent and guilty alike. As soon as we begin to question the suffering of innocent victims of these disasters another dilemma is raised. Are we saying that the calamities should be selective in their working, searching out only those who ‘deserve to suffer’?

An evil or a symptom?

Underlying all the loose thinking on the subject which has been surveyed so far is one basic assumption: it is that suffering is evil in itself. It is this belief that suffering is the essential evil that lies at the root of Buddhism. The Bible view is radically different: suffering is not evil in itself, but a symptom of a deeper evil. The scriptures portray suffering as a consequence of sin: not necessarily the sin of the individual who suffers, but sin in the history of man and in human society. Its origin is succinctly put by the Apostle Paul:

“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” (Romans 5:12)

The sentence upon the woman after the disobedience in Eden says:

“I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

To the man God says:

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Genesis 3:16,19)

The teaching is simple. With man’s disobedience there came a dislocation in the relationship between the Creator and the created; the relation between God and man is out of joint. The first sin brought a fundamental change which affects all with the evils which are common to man. Death is universal: God does not modify it for the particular individual. The Bible teaching is that men and women are left to their own ways and the working of nature’s laws,

though there may be times when natural disaster is divinely directed as a judgement upon man and for the cleansing of the earth. The outstanding example is the flood in the days of Noah.

At the same time it is true that in the Bible, for those who seek to serve God, suffering takes on new meaning; they are in a new relationship to the Creator, and will learn to see tragedy in a new light. What is it?

A Godly man's experience

The answer may be seen in the example of Job. Here is a devout man who meets with disaster in the loss of his flocks and herds ó the source of his wealth; with terrible bereavement in the loss of all his children at one stroke; and then is stricken with a tormenting disease which separates him from men. Yet he says: "What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10). He recognises the important principle that he cannot claim good as a right: it is not for him to decide what God shall do.

The agonizing problem

The time comes, however, when the suffering is so unbearable that death seems preferable. In agony and bewilderment he asks, in effect: Why should a man live if it is only to suffer? Can God, who has made man, destroy him like a discarded plaything?

Job's friends argue that there is a direct connection between a man's sin and his suffering and they therefore contend that to suffer so greatly Job must have greatly sinned. Job is convinced of his own integrity: he is human, but he knows that he is not guilty of the sins they try to fasten upon him. Yet he has enough of his friends' philosophy to feel now that he suffers unjustly. Has God chosen him to be set up as a mark to shoot at? Because, compared with others, his sufferings seem wholly disproportionate to any faults he can confess. To him it seems that his affliction can only mean that God has turned against him, and this moral problem adds to his bitterness. The "tents of robbers prosper: why should the righteous suffer? If God is judging him, is it right that he should be judged by a standard human nature cannot reach?"

The friends utterly fail to shake Job's conviction in his own righteousness, and at last they cease to argue. But underlying Job's contention is an ultimate faith in God, in spite of all the questionings, and a belief in God's justice; and so Job reaches out to the hope that in another life, if not now, God as his Redeemer will vindicate him and be on his side. And so he introduces a new element in the argument when he looks beyond the grave to resurrection and reconciliation. That belief, hinted at in Job, is fully declared elsewhere in both the Old and New Testaments, and it gives a new perspective to the problem. Yet it does not in itself explain why men and women should suffer in this life.

God speaking to man

When the friends are silenced and Job has made his final speech, the young man Elihu comes into the argument. He shows that Job in his extremity has impugned the righteousness of God, but he also throws a new light on the problem. God speaks to men (a) through revelation, and (b) through suffering. God, by His own means, is communicating with men and women and bringing them to Himself (read Job 33:14-18).

God speaks to men, says Elihu, for their spiritual education, their guidance in life and their preservation from destruction. He withdraws man from his purpose, and hides pride from him, leading him away from his own self-assertive course of life, for pride is the source of sin. As to the other means of communication, Elihu says:

He is chastened also with pain upon his bed,
and the multitude of his bones with strong pain:
So that his life abhorreth bread,
and his soul dainty meat.
His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen;
and his bones that were not seen stick out.
Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave,
and his life to the destroyers. (Job 33:19-22)

The description of suffering perfectly fits Job, and Elihu is saying that even he needs the chastening, reproof, discipline of the Lord not for the specific sins alleged by his friends, for Elihu does not mention them, but for a more subtle fault. Elihu has already hinted at it, for it is the sin of spiritual pride, and only the experience of suffering can bring it to light so as to convict him of it.

God's working with man

Suffering can, therefore, be part of the ways of God's working with men for their own development and to bring them to a knowledge of Himself; and the outcome for Job was a new and intimate knowledge of God. He could say:

I have heard of thee with the hearing of the ear:
But now mine eye seeth thee.
Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent
in dust and ashes. (Job 42:5,6)

This working of God with man must in its nature be individual: only the man who suffers can gain this as a personal experience. The larger problem of suffering remains, and the only answer to be extracted from the Book of Job is that man cannot question the majesty and wisdom of God: He is the Creator and Sustainer of all life, and His works are beyond man's knowledge. It is this answer which is elaborated with such power and beauty by the Voice from the whirlwind in chapters 38-41. Man can only accept that the ways of God are beyond his judgement.

“Does Job serve God for nought?”

While, therefore, the Book of Job offers no simple answer to the problem of suffering, it has been raised to a wider level. Only by loss and suffering could Job know that he did not serve God for the sake of houses, lands, flocks and herds, or even children. He did not even serve for the sake of his own skin, his health and well-being. He worshipped God for Himself, and in spite of all the wild words which came from his stress of mind and body he had an ultimate belief in God's righteousness and faithfulness. It was only when stripped of everything that he really knew that God was his only refuge, and in that discovery he was triumphantly vindicated against the slander of the Adversary epitomised by the three friends.

Job's faith in God was put to the test under trial, and by trial it was tempered as steel. It was by his final acceptance of the wisdom of God, and by learning that faith could be developed through suffering, that Job came at last to the fuller knowledge of God.

Some conclusions

The conclusions to be drawn from what has been considered so far may be summarised as follows:

1. Man lives in an ordered universe of cause and effect and must accept its consequences; and since sin entered into human life these must involve suffering. The suffering, however, may not be directly related to the sin of the sufferer but may result from the acts of former generations.
2. At the same time it is the universe of a God of wisdom and love who can guide and control the suffering for those who seek Him in order to bring them to a deeper knowledge of Him.

A divine discipline

It is in the light of this latter conclusion that we may understand a passage in the Letter to the Hebrews based on a saying in the Book of Proverbs:

“And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees í ö (Hebrews 12:5-12; Proverbs 3:11,12)

Read in its context, the passage expounds itself. Suffering and loss are common to man, but for the children of God they are directed by their Heavenly Father as a spiritual training, and as such are the expression of His love.

Does God suffer?

One stage more may be reached in the understanding of suffering. It is that God Himself is involved in the suffering of man, for out of His love He gave His own Son to die for them, and allowed him to suffer too. Jesus was wholly innocent, untainted by sin of any kind, yet he voluntarily laid down his life, suffering injustice and cruelty for the sake of his friends:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not

perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.ö (John 3:14-17)

öGreater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.ö Greater love even God could not have than to give His beloved Son to the suffering of the cross for the redemption of men.

It is true, therefore, to say that even God suffers, and it becomes possible to understand the saying of the prophet concerning God's relation to Israel:

öIn all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them.ö (Isaiah 63:9; see also Judges 2:16)

Why does God not intervene?

The God of Israel is not a remote, impassive First Cause: His Holy Spirit can be grieved, He can be moved with yearning compassion. He can love with an everlasting love. All these are scriptural expressions, and they reveal God as the supreme Personality who can from His holy transcendence enter into the lives of the men and women He has created.

People often ask: Why does God not intervene to stop suffering, to halt war, to prevent disease, etc.? God does, of course, intervene in human affairs; He has shown His power at many times in history. But there is a limit to this intervention: He has allowed man freewill, and He allows man to use that freewill ó for good or ill.

God intervened in the history of His chosen people Israel and gave them special opportunities to worship Him and be His witnesses. He entrusted them with His revelation and with the promises and prophecies of a coming Messiah.

God sent His Son

So it was that, some 2,000 years ago, God intervened in the lives and history of man by giving His Son Christ Jesus to share in human suffering to the uttermost in order to bring about redemption from sin and death. Christ came in the life and nature of man; he shared our experience and endured the temptations from within and the afflictions from without that are the common lot of all mankind:

öIt became him í to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings í In all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.ö (Hebrews 2:10-18)

öThough he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered.ö (Hebrews 5:8)

In accepting suffering in obedience to the will of God he raised it to a new plane, and showed it no longer as the greatest evil but as a means to an end: for through suffering, in his perfect obedience to God, he overcame the power of sin in human nature, and so made possible resurrection from the dead to eternal life with the Father. In this he obtained perfection, a

tried and tested faith, completeness in obedience, wholeness in the love of God and the service of man ó an example to all his followers.

Perfect through suffering

“For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.” (1 Peter 2:21-24)

And “having been made perfect, he became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9). He is the author, the source, the cause, of a salvation men cannot attain for themselves, since on account of his sacrifice men and women who come to him for life are by God’s grace accepted as members of Christ. And so, as Christ rose the third day, there is spiritual resurrection to new life now for those who are baptized into him, and the hope of physical resurrection and a change to immortality in the day when he returns.

“Partakers of the divine nature”

If men and women were to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), raised out of sin to a level where they could truly know God, enjoy eternal fellowship with Him and share His incorruptible life, then God alone knew how this was to be achieved consistently with His own majestic holiness. It was the way which required the gift of His Son to die on the cross.

If, then, God suffered, and if, in obedience to the Father, Christ suffered even to death, the whole problem of man’s suffering is raised to a new level. Without faith in God, suffering is an evil to be endured. With faith, and the example of the Son of God, suffering may purify and ennoble, and be a means by which God brings the sufferer nearer to Himself. It can be truly a divine education, the chastening of the Lord.

“All things new”

If God’s Son suffered, can men expect to escape? But beyond the suffering was resurrection, and beyond resurrection will come the kingdom of God when Christ will come to reign, taking to himself those who have already committed themselves as his followers.

This time for the kingdom to be set up is very close. But the Lord’s own words and many other prophecies make it plain that the coming of Christ will be preceded by great tribulation for the world, and no doubt also for his disciples:

“For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened.” (Matthew 24:21,22)

But when the Lord Jesus Christ appears, he will cleanse the earth of all evil, put down all sin and selfishness, eliminate disease ó and ultimately death. He will reign for God and remove suffering for ever. Then shall be fulfilled the words heard by the Apostle John on Patmos:

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. (Revelation 21:3-5)

For those who answer the call of God's love, the way of suffering may be the way of life, and that is the ultimate purpose of the existence of suffering in the world. The call is still going out; there is still opportunity for all who are looking for hope beyond this present evil world, to find it in the good news of the Gospel.

Adapted from a pamphlet entitled *The Gospel and Suffering*, by L. G. Sargent.

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