

Suffering; Why Would a Good God Allow Evil and Pain?

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PREFACE

This booklet is an excerpt from *Life's Tough Questions*, which is available for free download at www.webtheology.com or from www.westcliffbiblechurch.org. It has been used in such crises as Katrina, the Sago mine disaster, the Virginia Tech shootings, and by military chaplains. Of course, a need for crisis counseling arises in every church's ministry.

Pages 5-11 simply list Bible texts giving 16 possibilities for good coming from suffering. Those unfamiliar with Biblical language will still be able to grasp the main point taught by these verses. These applicable Bible verses are far more important than the writings of any human author.

Pages 11-18 present my own additional thoughts on why God has allowed evil and pain in this world. Human nature is such that we usually are not interested in this topic when life is going smoothly. It is also hard to give deep attention to complex questions during times of deepest anguish. Still, something brief must be done about these needs at these times!

We must all go to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with our needs and place faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. My ultimate goal is to draw readers to the Lord Jesus and to the great wisdom of Scripture. To the degree that a human leader can help, I welcome contacts from anyone in need.

Steven Waterhouse

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Why would a Good God Allow Evil and Pain?

Introduction

The Old Testament Book of Job illustrates that even if we do not know why God permits a given case of suffering, we know how to endure (Job 13:15). Job trusted God even when he did not understand following the pattern given in Proverbs 3:5,6: “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight*”.

In helping others who suffer, it is best if counselors remain silent about mysterious aspects (Job 13:5). However, unlike Job’s friends, counselors today have the complete Scriptures. We may not know all the secrets about God’s ways (Isa. 55:8, 9), and caution is in order in categorically diagnosing God’s purpose for another’s hardships, but the Bible gives possible reasons and benefits for suffering. “Seeing in a mirror darkly” is an improvement over total darkness.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, BUT...(Psa. 34:19).

Sixteen points suggest answers as to why God continues to allow suffering.

1. Suffering destroys the illusion of self-sufficiency and keeps us totally dependent upon God.

• **He humbled you** and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, **that He might make you understand that man does not live**

by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord [Deut. 8:3].

- And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, **to keep me from exalting myself**, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me - to keep me from exalting myself....And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” [2 Cor. 12:7, 9].
- When I am afraid, I will put my trust in Thee [Psa. 56:3].
- Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life” [John 6:68].

2. Suffering teaches us to pray.

- Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them....So Peter was kept in the prison, but **prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God** [Acts 12:1 and 5].
- And He went a little beyond them, and **fell on His face and prayed**, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt” [Matt. 26:39].

3. Suffering causes us to study the Bible.

- It is good for me that I **was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes** [Psa. 119:71].
- My soul cleaves to the dust; **revive me according to Thy word**.... My soul weeps because of grief; **strengthen me according to Thy word** [Psa. 119:25 and 28].

4. Suffering makes us sympathetic and gives us credibility in ministry to others needs.

- ...the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so **that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction** with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God [2 Cor. 1:3-4].

5. Suffering draws families and friends together.

- ...weep with those who weep [Rom. 12:15].
- That there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it...1 Cor. 12: 25-26a].

6. Suffering corrects priorities causing us to distinguish the eternal from the transitory, the important from the non-essential.

- For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal [2 Cor. 4:17-18].

- For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever [1 John 2:16-17].

7. Suffering enables us to glorify God by increased witness to believers and unbelievers alike.

- Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was **so that the works of God might be displayed in him**” [John 9:3].

- But when Jesus heard it, He said, “**This sickness** is not unto death, but **for the glory of God**, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it” [John 11:4].

- But the chief priests took counsel that they might put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away, and were believing in Jesus [John 12:10-11].

8. Suffering can lead to salvation for the afflicted or for others who would not listen to the gospel any other way.

- And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But **when he came to his senses....I will get up and go to my father** [Luke 15:16-18].

Personal suffering drives many to the decision to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. He paid for our sins on the cross and rose again. He asks us to put our faith in Him as Savior.

Sometimes it is another person’s suffering that causes one to realize his own spiritual need or to listen to the gospel message.

9. Suffering deepens our understanding of God’s character.

- Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me...[Matt. 11:29].

10. The chronic suffering of those with hardships teaches us the sanctity of human life.

- The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me” [Matt. 25:40 (by application)]

11. Suffering causes us a greater appreciation of blessings by contrast.

- Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and **forget none of His benefits**; Who pardons all your iniquities; Who heals all your diseases; Who redeems your life from the pit...[Psa. 103:1-4a].

12. Suffering tests our loyalty and faith (we understand keeping a covenant).

- And the Lord said to Satan, “**Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil**”. Then Satan answered the Lord, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Hast Thou not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Thy hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse Thee to Thy face.” Then the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him”. So Satan departed from the presence of the Lord [Job 1:8-12].

- Though He slay me, I will hope in Him [Job 13:15a].

- But He knows the way I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold [Job 23:10].

• [T]hat the proof of **your faith**, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though **tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor** at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls [1 Pet. 1:7-9].

13. Suffering can correct our sins to bring us back to God.

•...Behold, you have become well; **do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you** [John 5:14b].

•...**for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines**...It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?...All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness [Heb. 12:6a,7,11].

14. Suffering causes us to appreciate God's strength and wisdom by contrast to our own limitations.

• **Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God"? Do you not know?** Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. **He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power.** Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary [Isa. 40:27-31].

15. Suffering creates greater endurance.

- Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials; knowing that **the testing of your faith produces endurance** [James 1:2-3].

16. Suffering is a part of the mysterious process toward Christ-likeness as He also first suffered and then entered into glory (See also: Luke 24:26; Rom. 8:18; 1 Pet. 2:20-21, 5:1 and Heb. 2:10).

- [B]ut to the degree that **you share the sufferings of Christ**, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation [1 Pet. 4:13].
- After you have **suffered** for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal **glory** in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you [1 Pet. 5:10].

The above truths give the Bible's own partial answer to why God might allow suffering or what good can come from suffering.

A full answer is never given as to why evil or pain exists. Why did God create a world that He knew would involve evil and pain? One might also ask why doesn't God finish the devil and end all sin and suffering? We wonder why God does not intervene to end man's inhumanity to fellow man (wars, crimes). Why does not God stop all accidents or natural disasters? Why does not God take a believer to heaven the moment a person trusts in Christ as Savior?

Christian philosophers suggest God allowed evil so He can destroy evil. In other words, if there had never been sin;

then sin would have remained a hypothetical possibility for eternity. By allowing sin to become a reality, God could destroy it forever.

Another common answer to the problem of evil is that God wanted to create a human race with a will to choose. God didn't want to force us to love Him. By creating humans with a choice, God knew many would choose to reject good. Yet, this tragedy is outweighed by the value of the many who do choose to trust and obey.

These two answers have some value, but they are in reality speculations. Permitting sin just to destroy it seems to make God the author of spiritual war games. Allowing evil has brought great pain. Also, human free will can help explain wars and crimes, but it does not explain weather-related tragedies, diseases, or accidents. We can blame these on Satan... (see Job 1-2; Luke 13:11,16), but then we are back to the starting point. Why did God create an anointed cherub knowing he would rebel? Why does not God stop Satan now?

Point 16 asserted that suffering makes us like Christ. The Bible repeats the pattern of suffering and glory in Christ's life.

- Was it not necessary for the Christ to **suffer** these things and to enter into His **glory**? [Luke 24:26].
- (S)eeing to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the **sufferings** of Christ and the **glories** to follow [1 Peter 1:11].

He endured suffering which led to glory, the cross then the crown. The above verses show this is the pattern God intends for a believer.

Suffering makes us more like the Lord Jesus Christ. We may also say suffering makes us more like all three Persons of the One God.

Heb. 2:9 gives the pattern of the Lord Jesus as suffering and glory:

- But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the **suffering** of death crowned with **glory** and honor, that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone [Heb. 2:9].

Heb. 2:10 explains that He suffered “to perfect the author of their salvation through suffering.” The sinless Lord Jesus Christ could not undergo any moral improvement. Yet, suffering **improved Him** in terms of spiritual experience. There were experiences, virtues and character traits that Jesus experienced by suffering that would not have been experienced any other way. Apparently, God also allows us to suffer to bring us depth of experience and spiritual improvement.

The same passage in Hebrews compares angels and humans. Hebrews chapter one asserts Jesus is superior to angels but that He voluntarily submitted to weakness. In His human nature (He is also divine) He was lower than angels for a time. However, now He is crowned with glory and honor. The glorified human nature of Jesus has surpassed the angels. Furthermore, the Lord Jesus Christ is bringing believers through a process in which we will also surpass angels.

- Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life? [1 Cor. 6:3].

Evidently, the process of suffering in this world deepens and improves the character and spiritual experience of human beings so that believers ultimately surpass angels. By

our suffering we will deserve to pass them. By living in a world of evil and pain we will have gained a depth of spiritual experience angels can never possess. By suffering we will have lived out virtues that angels never experience.

Mercy means pity for the hurting. Mercy would be forever theoretical without the existence of evil and suffering. With the existence of pain and the experience of suffering, we can experience mercy. We can also give mercy. Permitting pain to enter the universe allowed for the expression of mercy.

Longsuffering means the withholding of punishment from those who deserve it. The experience of forbearance cannot take place in moral neutrality. There is no longsuffering unless one is patient with sin. Permitting sin to enter the universe allows for the expression of longsuffering.

Grace is not just the withholding of punishment from those who deserve it. Grace is the granting of favor and kindness to those who do not deserve it. Angels have no personal experience with grace. Those who trust in Christ as Savior know God's grace. Living in a fallen world enables us to become gracious to others. Rom. 5:21 teaches, "as sin reigned in death even so grace must reign in righteousness... through Jesus Christ our Lord." If there had not been sin, could there be grace? If we had never experienced evil, could we display grace?

Love is a commitment to do what is best for another even if it hurts. True love is unconditional. Love toward those who do not love in return is supernatural, but how could this wonderful virtue ever be experienced without the existence of sin? The sin of the world caused God to display His greatest love by giving His Son to die for our sin. Those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ experience the same sacrificial love, but could we extend sacrificial love to others unless we also at

times love those who do not deserve it? How could this ever happen unless God had allowed sin so that we could love even when it hurts, even when it costs?

Forgiveness is yet another virtue that does not exist in the absence of evil. Forgiveness is a costly but a noble action. The human experience of God's forgiveness and human granting of forgiveness to others presume evil as a reality.

We can best experience and share many of God's virtues such as mercy, long-suffering, grace, and love within a world that involves evil and suffering. The theme of the entire Old Testament is that God keeps His covenants.

- The Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and **abounding in lovingkindness** and truth; **who keeps lovingkindness for thousands**, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation [Ex. 34:6-7].

The Hebrew word that refers to "keeping a covenant" is difficult to contain within one English word. The Old King James Bible translates "loving-kindness". Another phrase that communicates the idea is "loyal-love." God is loyal in His relationship to believers. He keeps His Word and promises. In many respects this world, sinful and painful, enables the practice of loyal-love to a covenant relationship. God shows His loyalty to believers by loving us despite our sin. An evil world full of pain gives us abundant opportunities to express loyalty back to God despite the test. Few things are more wonderful than complete devotion. Unless the Lord Jesus comes back in our lifetime, we are all called to give total loyalty to a God and a Savior we have never seen.

• Jesus said to him, “because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed”....for we walk by faith, not by sight....and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory [John 20:29; 2 Cor 5:7 and 1 Peter 1:8].

God has total loyal-love. He enjoys seeing it in us.

Only a fallen world enables us also to share in God’s experience of giving loyal-love to other fallen creatures who sometimes cause us pain. It must give God joy to see His children keep covenants and remain in loyal-love despite the pain of a fallen and unfair world. Keeping a covenant is best experienced within marriage and family. This may explain why God ordained the home.

Angels neither marry nor are given in marriage. Why didn’t God create an entire human race at once as He did angels? Because angels have no family, they can never experience God’s character in keeping a covenant (loyal-love) as fully as humans can. Neither do angels experience God’s love as a Creator like a good mother and father experience love for a baby they have “created.” In families we practice keeping a vow and loyalty despite the test of living in a sinful world. Parents can also empathize with the example of God the Father sacrificing His Son in ways that angels can never understand. In reality, one need not be a parent to understand such pain. The loss of any beloved family member or friend causes us to understand better the idea of giving up a beloved person. Humans not angels understand the value of life and the pain of a sacrificial death. The phrase, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” is better understood by those who have lived in family units in a fallen and painful world.

There are few things more beautiful in life than loyalty despite all pain and costs. Without the full test of suffering, there cannot be the full measure of loyal-love. Without battle we cannot become heroic. Without experiencing evil and pain, we cannot share in the experience of God's greatest virtues.

Only a world of sin and pain followed by eternal glory allows believers to experience God fully. Angels will never share God's character traits and experience His virtues in the same way and with the same depth as humans. Therefore, in glory believers not only will surpass angels; we will deserve to surpass them. We will have become spiritually deeper and superior by our pain. Without a fallen world, many of God's great character traits would remain forever hypothetical. In a sinful and painful world, God's character has become known and shared by us. Suffering leads to glory. In eternal glory believers in the Lord Jesus Christ will forget the pain of this world but remember our present experiences of mercy, longsuffering, grace, love, forgiveness, loyalty to a covenant and a thousand other lessons that cannot be taught in a lecture but must be experienced the hard way.

An Invitation ...

If you have never placed your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, then one of God's purposes in allowing suffering in your life would be the experience of needing God's help. Ultimately, everyone runs out of answers and must look upon God for deliverance.

Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is reasonable because He is trustworthy. He would never mislead us. In the Bible He claims to be God the Son who died for our sins on the cross and rose again. By dying on the cross, He paid the penalty for our sins. He calls us to personal faith in Him promising to give forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus Himself said, "For this is the

will of my Father that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I myself will raise Him up on the last day” (John 6:40). He also made the bold assertion, “I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father but by Me” (John 14:6).

Please respond to Jesus’ offer by placing your faith in Him as Savior. You can best do this in a prayer that expresses faith in Him and His death on the cross. “Whosoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13).