

822 Does God Care that we suffer?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

Today we're asking the question, "Does God Care that we suffer?" Why must evil, suffering, and even death exist in the world today? Often the question is asked, "Why are the evil blessed?" "Why do the innocent suffer?" Why is it that a baby, born full of innocence and purity, has its life snuffed out as it is growing up? Why is it that thousands of innocent people are killed in wars? We wonder how it is that God, Who loves men so much, should allow suffering to come into our lives. For many people the problem of suffering leads them to reject God, but does it have to. There may be more to this discussion.

Suffering - according to the dictionary - means something that causes us pain, distress or loss. That is clear enough. But pain and suffering are slightly different. Patrick Flanagan, our youth minister, for example, must have felt a lot of pain in running the marathon down in the Florida Keys a few weeks ago. But you wouldn't say he was suffering; the pain he endured was something he wanted or expected to endure as a part of the race. He was striving to achieve a goal. The pain was understood as a part of the marathon. For him this is not suffering. Suffering is pain that is not wanted or not understood. Only a human can suffer; an animal simply feels pain.

A Christian must approach the problem of human suffering neither by denying the reality of suffering nor by trying to offer an "easy" way of escape. The world was created by God, yet evil is real. It surrounds us every day and, according to the Christian view, man, the creature made in God's image, is involved in this terrible and very real conflict. The problems found are intense and deep. The question is asked, "Why doesn't God do something?" The answer is: God has done something, and is doing something. God has given us the ability to heal from disease, the ability to comfort and be comforted, and the ability to find something good even in the worst of life.

God has also done something about the problem of evil. He has done the most dramatic, costly, and effective thing possible by giving His Son to die for evil man. It is possible for man to escape God's inevitable judgment on sin and evil. It is also possible to have its power broken by entering into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel has been turning evil men into righteous for hundreds and hundreds of years. The ultimate answer to the problem of evil, at the person level, is found in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ and in the gospel. The call to repentance out of love is not some small thing. It affects many, many lives.

The Bible says in James 1:2-4, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." We should welcome difficulties as we would an old and dear friend. Think of an old friend you haven't seen for years. Think of meeting him/her again. Would your face be sad when you saw them? Would you offer them bitterness, anger, and a pouting attitude? No! You would receive them into your home, delighted that they had come to visit. You would open your heart to them and receive them with joy! Count it all joy, when you face trials.

When something terrible happens to us, it is very easy to become bitter and angry at God. I've known people who quit believing in God because of a disease or a death in the family. They seemed to think that their faith is somehow a guarantee that they won't face some challenge in life. Christians face every disease, every struggle, every pain, and every injustice that others face. God doesn't promise us that we will never suffer; what He promises is that He will walk with us through every valley of life and not abandon us at times of suffering.

God is deeply pained by our suffering. Just as we are shocked, grieved, and mystified by the suffering of our family and friends, so God too is pained and shocked. That is the other half of the story, and it too must be told. It is natural that our attention should be fixed on what we experience and feel here and now. But faith gives us reason to raise our sights and look ahead to what lies ahead. We may suffer as we journey on earth, but where are we going after this life is over? What lies ahead? If all we see is this life with its pain and misery, we have missed something great and wonderful.

Why should we consider the trials in our lives with all joy? Well, we should because we know what trials accomplish in us. We are being tested so that we might look more like Christ in patience and endurance. We are being tested so we might become mature and complete. We go through testing so that we might not lack anything! God allows these struggles and trials to mold and shape our lives into the kind of people we wish we could be. We frankly have to trust God to know what He is doing in shaping our lives. Sometimes the end result isn't clear while the process is going on. But the times comes when we see how God has wisely shaped us into the people He wants us to be so that we can accomplish His will.

Everybody is going to suffer. We have no choice about that. But there is a choice we do have: to suffer alone or to suffer in the hands of a God who is all-powerful, and all-loving and whose hands are forever scarred by his own suffering. The answer to the problem of suffering is not a formula or an intellectual argument, but a relationship, a relationship with a Lord who is all-powerful, and all-loving, but who has suffered and does still suffer with his creatures. Jesus is just such a Lord. He knows what it is to suffer unjustly and knows how to comfort those who are hurting in any way.

Jesus' death assures us that suffering in God's will always leads to glory. Suffering itself does not lead to glory, but suffering "in the will of God" and depending on the grace of God will lead to glory. The death of Jesus transforms suffering into love and glory. The rugged cross symbolized shame, but Jesus transformed the instrument of death into a message of love. No one wears a piece of jewelry in the shape of an electric chair, a hangman's rope, or a guillotine; but people wear a cross, which is just as deadly. They don't wear it because it caused death; they wear it because it demonstrates how much Jesus loves us.

Jesus' death on the cross also teaches us that suffering doesn't last forever, and death is not the end of everything. When God's people suffer, the Father is near them, sharing their pain, and holding them in His hands. Whether a Christian lives or dies, he never leaves the love of a caring Father in Heaven. The Bible says in Romans 8:37-39, "But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I love to point those who grieve to this Bible promise in Romans 14:7-9, "For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living." For the faithful Christian, death is not the worst possible thing to happen, because the faithful know they will go and be with the Lord forever and free from all the pain and hurt of this present world. Paul said in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." He is so right.

The moment of pain often blinds us to a larger picture, one only time can paint. What seems cruel today may be perceived very differently in time, because God's plan is not finished. It is an assumption that ease and happiness are the greatest good in life. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 7:2-

4, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Suffering gives us insight into our lives, so that we are not so focused on "now" and on our pleasures. Suffering helps us to see something bigger and better.

Paul said in Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Not all things are good, but God can take evil and painful things and make good from them. Neither Katrina nor 911 was good. Innocent people died, lives were ruined, and the pain was great. But God mattered at such a time! It was the goodness of God and the power of the cross that opened people's hearts to act with compassion. Americans in the name of Christ gave hundreds of millions of dollars to ease the pain, to repair the broken lives, and to comfort the mourning. The argument that a good God cannot co-exist with suffering fails if one realizes that God can make good out of suffering or there is value to suffering. If all one sees is the pain in suffering, one may miss the rest of the story.

Are there values to pain and suffering? Of course there are; one can find value even in the hardest circumstance. For instance, some "good things" can only be brought about in our character by suffering. Athletics abuse their bodies through persistent practice in order to improve them. No pain, no gain. The same discipline is found in every college and university. Without the painful discipline of study, we would have no scholars.

In the same way suffering can bless people. Suffering can help a person know his inner strength and what his character is. One can really begin to know what a person is like when things get tough. In counseling couples who want to get married, I always ask them to spend a couple of hours doing something they don't like. Couples often dress up for dates and only see each other at their best. They also need to see each other when things aren't so good. Hard times show the good and the bad in a person. Some go through tough times and are stronger for it, while others are allowed suffering to weaken them. How we react to suffering is a measure of our character.

Our own suffering can open our eyes to the plight of others and what we can do to bless the lives of others. No one is more helpful than a person who understands what we are going through. The hurting person often makes the best minister to those who suffer the same way. Paul praised God in 2 Corinthians 1:4-6, "who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer."

We need to remember: the God of the Bible is the God of the cross. Jesus Christ knows what it is to suffer in many forms: pain, injury, insult, punishment, rejection, prejudice, jealousy, hatred, hunger, weakness. He suffered through no fault or sin of His own. He suffered for other people's sins and weaknesses. No one can accuse Jesus of not understanding suffering. The God of heaven is the same God who became vulnerable to all the pain people face. Jesus, as the suffering Messiah, was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3). His suffering on the cross forcefully argues that love and suffering are not incompatible. Jesus never once questioned his Father's love. When He found that he could not escape the cross, Jesus prayed the will of the Father be done (Luke 22:42). God's love in the sacrifice of His Son and the love of Christ are dramatically shown through His suffering and crucifixion. No one can accuse God of not caring for men. No one can say that He doesn't understand or care that humans suffer. John Stott said, "I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche ridiculed as God on the cross That is the God for me! "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

We each must learn to trust God through the struggles we face. God will help us through the struggles and make us better people because of it. But the blessing comes when we are united to the Lord and love Him with our whole heart and soul and strength. To unite with Christ, faith or trust in Jesus as the Christ is absolutely necessary. Without faith we cannot please God. That trust must be coupled with repentance, the willingness to leave sin and live for the Lord. Out of love and faith and with repentance we must confess Christ and be baptized into Christ. In baptism our sins are washed away and we are united with Christ. Baptism is the time when we are born again into the family of God. My friend, I hope and pray that you'll obey the gospel this very day. This is most important; don't delay.

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