

IF GOD IS GREAT

Where Is He in a World of Suffering

Text: Matthew 27:27-46

The Reality of Suffering

Of all the reasons for rejecting the claims of Christianity, none rings so frequently as the one embedded in this question: "If God is so great and good, then where is He in a world filled with so much agony?" As prominent atheist, Victor Stenger puts it: "How [can] an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient God allow so much unnecessary suffering?"¹ Haven't you ever wondered?

When my uncle was murdered by bank-robbers, leaving behind a shattered wife and five young kids... When my cousin was beaten to death at age 24... When my sister's long-awaited daughter turned out to be terminally deformed and my brother's lovely, brilliant fiancée was left disfigured and brain-damaged in a car accident... When travelling through the developing world and seeing the hollow eye-sockets of people dying of disease and malnutrition or living on dust and garbage... When viewing a mountain made of empty shoes once filled by bright-eyed kids who ended up herded through gas chambers and then piled into ovens... When hearing the cry of Jesus from the Cross... I have found it hard not to *respect* the atheist's question. How about you?

I wish I could answer it neatly for you today, eliminating all doubt, dismay, or discomfort. As the great historian, George F. Kennan, once wrote, however: "The truth is sometimes a poor competitor in the marketplace of ideas." It is "complicated, unsatisfying, full of dilemmas, always vulnerable to misinterpretation and abuse."² But this does not stop the truth from being true. Whether we are atheists, agnostics, or devotees of God, we have to face the *reality* of suffering. HOW we do that depends a lot on what we believe about the *reasons* for suffering or about the course of its *redemption*.

The Reasons for Suffering

The Bible says that there are two preeminent reasons for suffering in this world, and the FIRST is neither pleasurable nor popular to consider. *A great deal of the suffering of this world is the result of tragic, wicked, or stupid human choices.* The Book of Romans sounds awfully old-fashioned when it boldly declares, "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... [and] the wages of sin is death.**" But from the savage who beats out the brains of his neighbor to the governor who betrays his covenants... From the consumer who buys another unneeded item instead of investing those resources to feed the hungry or to offer relief to disaster victims... From the companies whose chemicals damage bodies and the environment, to the governments that feather their own nests instead of providing healthcare or digging wells... Sinful

human choices are the most obvious and pervasive cause of disease, destruction, distortion, and premature death.

If human sin could be faced and hearts and minds changed... If self-sacrificing love could become the motivating force and not simply an occasional story on Oprah before the next commercial for the latest idolatry... If we could (as Jesus taught us in Luke 10:27) make our purpose **loving God** and **loving our neighbor as we wish to be loved** ourselves, what percentage of the agonies of this world might go away? How might we also be able to deal more creatively with *the SECOND source of suffering – the necessary downsides of living in a world with dependable and interdependent physical laws.*

The vast majority of the time, we are immensely grateful for cell-growth and gravity, for the action of wind and water, for the way that the shifting of the earth's plates creates mountains, valleys, and plains. But it is impossible to have a world with such overwhelmingly positive forces and not have occasions where they interact in such a way that creates pain. Again, were the sinful heart of humanity to change, however, there would be ways of mitigating this downside considerably. There would be ways of moving people out of famine-prone regions or of not building homes where they are prone to destruction by hurricanes and tsunamis. There would be ways of investing more fully in the suppression of disease in ourselves and others – or in the recovery and care of people caught in the confluence of this world's physical forces.

It is convenient and comfortable to see or experience suffering and rail against the goodness, greatness, or existence of God. But even if we reject God, we are still left with suffering, with the problem of evil, and this reality ought to invite us to ask WHY? Why so much pain in a world of such plenty? What is our part in it? And where will we find the power to change? These questions are at the heart of the Christian worldview.

The Redemption of Suffering

For centuries now, people have come to stand before a Cross and think about that. They have come to face their part in perpetuating the kind of world that would crucify a man whose primary message was "love God and others." The reason people have called this day GOOD Friday is because standing at that Cross they have been awed to find not the rage of God or victimhood that one would think such behavior merits, but the luminous hope of a Love that says: "**Father, forgive them, they know not what they do**" (Luke 23:34). What do we need to be forgiven of today? Maybe it's that we know not what we do. Perhaps it's that we've not realized that WE are called to be part of the answer to someone's suffering. Whatever our need, come find His grace.

It seems to me that there is another good that comes from standing at this Cross. You see, sometimes, there are seasons of suffering where there seems NO good reason for it... or where even GOOD reasons are just not enough to get you through. Maybe

you're at a place where you know you're called to do something significant, to keep a commitment you've made, but it's so unbelievably painful and difficult. You're sweating blood and crying out, "**God, take this cup from me!**" (Mark 14:36) Perhaps you've been betrayed or let down by people you thought you should be able to count on, who promised to be there and you're crying out "**Could you not stay awake for one hour?**" (Matthew 26:40). Maybe you've been "**struck... on the head again and again,**" and "**mocked**" by your enemies (Matthew 27:30-31). Perhaps they've "**divided up**" what used to be yours (Luke 23:34). Maybe you're feeling your physical or spiritual strength ebbing away; you just don't have it in you anymore and you're crying from the depths of your being, "**I thirst**" (John 19:28), but no relief comes. Or maybe you are experiencing the most exquisite agony of all. You thought you had some intimacy with God. But now you are in a place of cosmic pain, and it feels like God has turned his face away from you or isn't even there, and you cry out: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" (Matthew 27:46)

Where is God when it's YOU in a world of suffering? Read the story of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and you'll have the answer. Christ is right there WITH YOU. Sometimes I can't remove your suffering, he says. Sometimes I can't give you the reason for your suffering. Sometimes you have to actually choose (like I did) a way of suffering that leads to a greater good. But this I promise you: I know what you're going through. "**I will never leave you nor forsake you**" (Hebrews 13:5). I will fill your pain with my presence. Can you dare to believe that? Can you dare to trust that somehow even a cross of loss could be gathered up into God's redemptive plan?

In his book, *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller describes a horrible nightmare he had in which everyone in his family had died. "When I awoke my relief was enormous – but there was much more than just relief. My delight in each member of my family was tremendously enriched. I looked at each one and realized how grateful I was for them, how deeply I loved them. Why? [Because] my joy had been greatly magnified by the nightmare. My delight upon awaking took the terror up into itself, as it were, so that in the end my love for them was only greater for having lost them and found them again. This same dynamic is at work when you lose some possession you take for granted. When you find it again (having thought it was gone forever) you cherish and appreciate it in a far deeper way."

The Greek Stoic philosophers, says Keller, had this belief "that history was an endless cycle. Every so often the universe would wind down and burn up in a great conflagration called a *palengenesia* and, being purified, history started over." It is interesting to note that it is this phoenix-like phenomenon that some physicists posit may be the way the universe does work – originating, expanding, winding down, then condensing and going bang again. But Jesus said that beyond the Cross lay a day when HE would bring to pass the one Great Renewal. In **Matthew 19:28**, Jesus said "**I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things...**" (it's the Greek word *palengenesia* he uses) "**the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne.**" The

implication is that all that Jesus lived for on this earth – the love and justice, the goodness and grace, the hope and new life – will now be everywhere, as the Son of Man reigns completely. Christ insisted, says Keller, “that his return will be with such power that the material world and universe will be purged of all decay and brokenness. All will be healed.”³ And the things we thought lost forever will be found again.

In the final book of *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a climactic moment when little Sam Gamgee suddenly discovers that his friend – the great wizard Gandalf – is not dead but alive. Sam cries out: “I thought you were dead! I thought I was dead myself!” And then Sam asks an immensely important question: “*Is everything sad going to come untrue?*”

As Keller declares: “The answer of Christianity to that question is--yes. Everything sad is going to come untrue.” This does not mean that the sad things will not have happened. It does not mean that they will not have hurt terribly. But the assurance of God is that, in the end, the joy “will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost.”⁴ The Apostle Paul once put it this way: “**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed**” (**Romans 8:18**) on the Day when Christ makes all things new.

In the meantime, and in the midst of the troubles which Jesus said (John 16:33) would be an inextricable part of this life, it is helpful for us to stop and ask:

1. “What suffering is going on in this world because of my own sin? Where do I need to ask for forgiveness and for the power to change?”
2. What role would Christ have ME play in helping to address the suffering of others, instead of just cursing the darkness?
3. And can I dare to trust that even in my own pains, I am not alone; Christ is present for the good – and *an even greater good is coming?*⁵

As the writer to the Hebrews once wrote: “**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured [so much] so that you will not grow weary and lose heart**” (**Hebrews 12:2**). May that be so. And may God bless to us this reading of his Holy Word. Thanks be to God.

¹ Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), p. 22.

² George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy: 1900-1950* (New York: Signet Books, 1951), p. 56.

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton Publishing, 2008), p.52.

⁴ Keller, *Ibid*, p.53.

⁵ Thanks to my longtime friend and colleague, Dr. Bob Geelhoed, for making me aware of this wonderful affirmation by the poet George MacDonald. In his novel, *Phantastes* (1858), MacDonald writes: “I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good.”