

# Why is Life Difficult at Times?

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

## Intro

Several years ago, Lee Strobel commissioned a national survey and asked people what question they'd ask if they could only ask God one thing. The number one response was: "*Why is there suffering in the world?*" Incidentally, Strobel found an interesting statistical quirk – people who are married were much more likely to want to know why there's so much suffering.

People go through illness, abuse, broken relationships, betrayal, sorrow, injuries, disappointment, heartache, difficulties and death. And perhaps you've been asking the question, "Why? Why me?" That "why" question goes back thousands of years. It was asked in the Old Testament by Job and the writers of the Psalms, and throughout history.

Unlike some other religious leaders who wrote off pain and suffering as just being illusions, Jesus was honest. He told us the truth. He said in John 16:33, "*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*" Jesus didn't say you might – he said "*you will.*" It is going to happen.

You may ask, "But why?" "Why does God allow suffering to happen?" Personally, I don't know. I don't have God's mind. I don't see with God's eyes. 1 Corinthians 13:12 says, "*Now we see things imperfectly, like dim reflection in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.*"

We won't get the full answer in this world. Someday we'll see with clarity, but for now things are foggy. We can't understand everything from our finite perspective. We need to admit our partial ignorance from our human side. Also in Deuteronomy 29:29 it says, "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.*"

Even though we can't understand everything about why God allows difficulties and suffering, we can understand some things. We may not be able to figure out all the details of why — they may be obscured from our view — but there are some key Biblical truths that can shed light for us.

## **5 Biblical Principles on Suffering**

There are five Biblical principles I would like to share with you that pertain to suffering.

### **1/ God did not create evil and suffering**

You may ask, "Why didn't God merely create a world where tragedy and suffering didn't exist?" The answer is: He did! In Genesis 1:31 it says: "*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*" But if God did not create evil and suffering, where did they come from?

Well, God has existed from eternity past as the Father, Son and Spirit, together in a relationship of perfect love. So love is the highest value in the universe. And when God decided to create human beings, he wanted us to experience love. But to give us the ability to love, God gave us free will to decide whether to love or not. Why? Because love always involves a choice.

But sad to say, we humans have abused our free will by rejecting God, and that has resulted in the introduction of two kinds of evil into the world: moral evil and natural evil.

**Moral evil** is the immorality and pain and suffering and tragedy that come because we choose to be selfish, arrogant, uncaring, hateful and abusive. Romans 3:23 says, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*”

So much of the world’s suffering results from the sinful action or inaction of ourselves and others. For example, people look at a famine and wonder where God is, but the world produces enough food for each person to have at least 3,000 calories a day. It’s humanity’s irresponsibility and self-centeredness that prevents people from getting fed.

Another example: look at your hand. You can choose to use that hand to hold a weapon and kill someone, or you can use it to feed hungry people. It’s your choice. But it’s unfair to kill someone and then blame God for the existence of evil and suffering.

The second kind of evil is called **natural evil**. These are things like diseases, earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes that cause suffering for people. But these, too, are the indirect result of sin being allowed into the world.

The Bible says it’s because of sin that nature was corrupted and “thorns and thistles” entered the world (Gen. 3:17-18). Romans 8:22 says, “*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*” In other words, nature longs for things to be made right and restored to its original balance without evil and chaos.

Therefore God did not create evil and suffering. Now, it’s true that he did create the potential for evil to enter the world, because that was the only way to create the potential for genuine goodness and love. But it was human beings in their free will, who brought that potential evil into the world.

We too mustn’t overlook the presence of evil in every one of us. Some ask, “Why doesn’t God get rid of evil? Why doesn’t he intervene and stomp out war?” If God executed judgment uniformly, not one of us would survive!

## **2/ God can use suffering to accomplish good**

God gives us a promise in Romans 8:28, “*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.*”

Notice that this verse doesn’t say God causes evil and suffering, just that he promises to work for the good. And notice that God doesn’t make this promise to everyone. He makes the pledge that he will take the bad circumstances that come our way and cause good to work out *if we’re committed to following him.*

Ajith Fernando, a Christian leader from Sri Lanka who ministers to the urban poor, writes:

“The church in each culture has its own special challenges—theological blind spots that hinder Christians from growing to full maturity in Christ . . . . I think one of the most serious theological blind spots in the western church is a defective understanding of suffering. There seems to be a lot of reflection on how to avoid suffering and on what to do when we hurt. We have a lot of teaching about escape from suffering and therapy for suffering, but there is inadequate teaching about the theology of suffering . . . .

The “good life,” comfort, convenience, and a painless life have become necessities that people view as basic rights. If they do not have these, they think something has gone wrong . . . . One of the results of this attitude is a severe restriction of spiritual growth, for God intends us to grow through trials.” (Source: Ajith Fernando, *The Call to Joy and Pain*, 2007, pp. 51-5).

God can use our suffering to draw us close to himself, to mold our character, and to influence others for his glory. He can draw something good from our suffering in many ways, if we trust and follow Him.

### **3/ Someday suffering will end and God will judge evil**

The Bible says that a day will come when sickness and pain will be eradicated. Revelation 21:4, *“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.”* Imagine that...a world where all suffering and pain will be gone.

Also someday people will be held accountable for the evil they’ve committed. Justice will be served in a perfect way. We read in Revelation 20:11-12, *“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.”* That day will come when evil will be eradicated.

### **4/ Suffering will pale in comparison to what God has in store for believers in glory**

I don’t want to minimize suffering and pain, but it helps if we take an eternal perspective. The Apostle Paul in Romans 8:18 says, *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

Then in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 Paul says, *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

Look at this passage, and remember it was written by the Apostle Paul, who suffered through beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, imprisonments, rejection, hunger, thirst, homelessness and far more pain than most of us will ever have to endure. These are *his* words: *“For our light and momentary troubles.”* Wait a minute: *light and momentary troubles*? Five different times Paul’s back was shredded when he was flogged 39 lashes with a whip; three times he was beaten to a bloody pulp by rods. But he says, *“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”*

God promises a time when there will be no more tears, no more pain and suffering, when we will be reunited with God in perfect harmony, forever. Let 1 Corinthians 2:9 grip your soul: *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”* That’s absolutely breath-taking and awesome!

### **5/ We can decide whether to turn bitter or turn to God**

We’ve all seen examples of how the same suffering that causes one person to turn bitter, to reject God, to become hard and angry; can cause another person to turn to God, to become more gentle and more loving and willing to reach out compassionately and help other people who are suffering. Some who have lost a child to a drunk driver turn inward in chronic rage and despair; another turns outward to help others by founding Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD).

We make the choice to either run away from God or to run to him.

I started this message with Jesus saying in John 16:33, *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. Take courage! I have overcome the world.”*

Jesus offers us the two very things we need when we’re suffering:

- 1/ Peace to deal with our present and
- 2/ Courage to deal with our future.

How? Because he has overcome or conquered the world! Through his own suffering and death, he has deprived this world of its ultimate power over you. Suffering doesn’t have the last word anymore. Death doesn’t have the last word anymore. God has the last word!

## Conclusion

God's ultimate answer to suffering isn't an explanation; it's the incarnation. Suffering is a personal problem; it demands a personal response. Our God isn't some distant and disinterested deity. He entered into our world and personally experienced our pain. Jesus was not exempt from suffering and pain. He went through it and he identifies with us. Jesus is there in the lowest places of our lives.

Are you broken? He was broken, like bread, for us. Are you despised and rejected? He was despised and rejected. Do you cry out that you can't take any more? He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Did someone betray you? He was betrayed. Jesus suffered greatly and he identifies with us in our suffering.

It's not just that God knows and sympathizes with you in your troubles. After all, any close friend can do that. Any close friend can sit beside you and comfort you and empathize with you. No, Jesus is much closer than your closest friend; because if you've put your trust in Him, then He is in you. And, therefore, your sufferings are His sufferings; your sorrow is His sorrow.

So when suffering comes, as it will; when you're wrestling with pain, as you will – and when you make the choice to run into His arms, here's what you're going to discover: you'll find peace to deal with the present, you'll find courage to deal with your future, and you'll find the incredible promise of eternal life waiting for you in heaven.

British pastor Galvin Reid tells about meeting a young man who had fallen down a flight of stairs as a baby and shattered his back. He had been in and out of hospitals his whole life — and yet he made the astounding comment that he thinks God is fair. Reid asked him, "How old are you?" The boy said, "Seventeen." Reid asked, "How many years have you spend in hospitals?" The boy said, "Thirteen years." The pastor said with astonishment, "And you think that is fair?" And the boy replied: "*Well, God has all eternity to make it up to me.*"

And He will. God promises a time when there will be no more crying, no more tears, no more pain and suffering, when we will be reunited with God in perfect harmony, forever. Let the words of 1 Corinthians 2:9 soak into your soul: "*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.*" That's absolutely breath-taking, isn't it?

Heaven is waiting for us!