

Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?

Luke 13:1-5

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A college friend of mine is a psychologist and the clinical director of a hospital in Florida. He emailed me a few years ago with the question, "What in the world is God doing?" He was referring to situations where it seemed that God needed to intervene and apparently didn't. I replied to him with some general ideas and a copy of a sermon on why bad things happen (very similar to this sermon). He responded:

Why did I think you would just give me "the" answer?

I have experienced what I thought was some direct intervention by God so I try to recall those events to bolster my faith, although he seems to be not very talkative for quite some time. ...I work with infants who have been sexually abused. I had a lady I worked with who put a gun in her mouth and killed herself with her children in the house. A lady who married the man who killed her husband. ...This freedom God has given us is not a good thing. In my business, these are all the things I constantly deal with. I get to the point where I think God should just poke a hole in the heavenly dam again and flush this world clean. ...I can wait and ask God later but if He created this earth where we can touch, taste, see and feel, why can't He have even a stronger presence to get the world's attention? But instead we do experience the worst.

How would you respond? I wrote back: "Wow. It's easy for me to think about evil and suffering in general. But you deal with it very specifically—and I need to be reminded of how real it is. I don't know if anything I have to say helps or matters much (I hope it does anyway)." I made some other suggestions for dealing with this stuff.

I saw him some time later at a college reunion and he was doing better. But his questions hit us all. Just recent news reports tell us about domestic violence, thousands of deaths from Ebola, war in Syria and Iraq

and all over the Middle East, human trafficking. There are earthquakes and tsunamis and tornadoes. We remember the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01—and others.

All of us have either suffered ourselves or we know someone who has suffered debilitating disease or loss of loved ones in a tragedy. We know emotional pain, broken relationships and many other forms of suffering.

We talked last week about reasons for believing in God. Now we come to what many people see as a reason not to believe in God. For many people, the question of evil or the problem of pain counts decisively against belief in God.

Philosophers sum up the problem in three statements:

1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is perfectly good.
3. Evil exists.

The claim is that all three of those statements can't be true. Hardly anyone will say that evil doesn't exist, so the argument goes that the all-powerful and good God Christians believe in doesn't exist.

Some try to defend God's existence in the face of evil by denying that God is all-powerful. They conclude that God can't do anything about much of the suffering and evil people endure. Most Jews and Christians don't want to say that.

What options do believers in God have when faced with this problem and the claim that the problem of evil rules out belief in God?

We can speak of *moral evil* and *natural evil*. Moral evil is the evil that people choose to do. It includes theft, assault, murder and all the bad choices people make. The best explanation for moral evil is that God created beings who have some freedom. God decided that a relationship of love with his creation is worth the risk of freedom. And freedom is necessary for genuine loving relationships. But the free choice of love requires the free choice of hate. God created beings who were free to act against God's will. The misuse of that freedom is the source of much of the

evil and suffering in the world. If we're going to be free, we have to accept the consequences of how other people use their freedom.

The other category of evil is natural evil. This includes the devastation caused by hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, some disease, and other pain and suffering that comes from natural causes. This one is tougher to explain. Some Christians just extend the free will defense to say that devastation and disease are punishment for sin. I might go along with that if we say that some devastation and disease are *consequences* of sin. That is, that by introducing sin into human experience, humans also opened the door to various kinds of evil and suffering. We have to be careful, though, not to blame a person's particular suffering on some specific sin.

Another way some Christians extend the free will defense to account for natural evil is to claim that the devil and other evil angels are the cause of natural disasters and disease. Philosophers don't like this because they can't prove or disprove it, so it doesn't help in making a case for belief in God in answer to skeptics. The Bible does indicate that some devastation and some illnesses are caused by the devil or demons. Jesus certainly spoke and acted like some of the conditions he confronted and healed had their cause in devilish power.

We shouldn't neglect the existence of "the evil one" that Jesus spoke of. God allowed freedom not only to humans but also to spiritual beings (angels) that he created. Some of them reject and resist God's rule and seek to lead humans astray (this accounts for some aspects of moral evil) and to devastate God's good creation (this accounts for some incidents of natural evil).

There is another approach to explaining how the presence of natural evil in the world can be consistent with the existence of God. This is to try to show that God could have a good reason for creating a world like this—a world that includes "natural laws" and that is not simply a trouble-free paradise. One reason some have suggested is that God made a world where humans have an environment that is appropriate for spiritual growth. Natural evil gives us opportunities to choose how we'll react and what kind of character we'll develop (William Abraham, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* 69). Paul Brand and Philip Yancey have shown that even pain has

a positive role in this life. Pain is like an alarm system that warns us something is wrong. And it protects us from danger. Without pain, we could stick our hands in fire and damage ourselves without realizing it (see *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*).

Putting all this together, we can say that the argument from evil does not necessarily prove that God does not exist. We can still hold to belief in God in the face of evil in the world. But is that enough? We surely want to go farther than just deciding that an argument against God's existence is not conclusive. We still have to face and deal with the evil and suffering that come into our lives and the lives of those we love. Can we do that and can we still trust that God is good and loving and powerful?

C. S. Lewis wrote that when we bear pain, "...a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all" (*The Problem of Pain* 10).

Even when we believe in God, our response to suffering may result in a distorted view of God. We come up with strange ideas of how God works in the world and what God's character is like. Even believing in God as all-powerful can lead us to jump to some wrong conclusions. We may need to adjust our idea of power. When we say that God is all-powerful we're saying that God is able to do whatever is possible, whatever makes sense. God can't make 2+2 equal 5 and God can't make a square circle. "Nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God" (Lewis 28).

Some people talk about God's being all-powerful as if that means that God is all-controlling or that God causes all things that happen. But God created the world to operate in a certain way. God gave some freedom to angels and humans and, possibly, to nature. So God put some limits on himself and on how he'll act in the world. It may seem uncomfortable to think that God doesn't exercise total control over everything that happens because this puts some responsibility on us. And we don't always want to accept it. But that seems to be how God has chosen for this world to be. God doesn't cause or manipulate every act and event. Some things happen that are not God's will. He allows the world to be like that for now. Often, someone's response to pain or a bad event is to say, "Everything happens

for a reason." That may be true, but it doesn't mean that God has a reason for every thing that happens. And, even if we know the reason, does that take away the pain?

Sometimes things just happen. After Nancy's folks lost their home in the May 1999 tornado, someone asked her dad why God did that. He said that God didn't do it. Atmospheric conditions were right and a storm cell formed that created the tornado. In trying to affirm that God is a powerful Ruler let's not blame God for every bad thing that happens.

Along the lines of God controlling everything, including us and our decisions, what if God punished sin immediately every time we sinned—by giving us an electric shock or something? Then we would avoid sin simply to avoid pain and God would have us trained. We'd be on God's leash, not in a loving relationship with God. What if God protected believers every time they got into a dangerous situation—suspending the law of gravity when they fall, for instance? Then people would believe in order to get that benefit, rather than because they want to know God.

If we want to know God, we need to focus on Jesus. He is God with us. He shows us the Father. What Jesus teaches helps us understand something of how to deal with suffering.

In the passage we read from Luke, Jesus has been talking about judgment that is coming. Some people bring up what they think is an example of God's judgment. Pontius Pilate had some Galilean Jews killed and their blood mingled with the sacrifices they were offering. The prevailing view in that time was that bad things happen to bad people. Suffering is punishment for specific wrongdoing. Jesus denies that way of thinking. He asks, "Do you think those people were worse sinners because they suffered that way?" That's exactly what they thought. But Jesus says no to that idea. And he tells the people listening to him that they must repent or likewise perish. Then Jesus brings up another tragedy. He mentions eighteen people who died when a tower fell on them. Were those eighteen more guilty than the other people living in Jerusalem? Again, that's what many people thought, but Jesus says no. Then he repeats, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

In context, Jesus has been talking about being watchful and alert in the face of God's coming kingdom and judgment. There is judgment—choosing evil does have consequences. But it's not up to us to pronounce judgment on any other person. We can't assume that God is punishing someone who is having a hard time. Having heard this, the people listening to Jesus are now called upon to change their hearts and lives so that they may live fruitful lives and escape judgment (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary).

Not only in his teaching, but also in his life and his death, Jesus shows us God. The New Testament affirms that Christ is the perfect image and exact imprint of God (John 1:1; Colossians 1:15, 19; Hebrews 1:1-3). And the central place Jesus shows God to us is the cross. Greg Boyd writes,

Christ himself is God, and he voluntarily took our sin and its just punishment upon himself. Hence his sacrifice does not appease God's wrath; it reveals God's love. Even in—especially in—his agonizing death on the cross, Jesus is the exact imprint and perfect reflection of God. In the crucified Christ the truth about God, about us and about the world is most perfectly revealed. For the cross is where reconciliation between God and the world is accomplished (*Is God to Blame?* 35).

God has not left us alone in our suffering. God has come to be with us and to be one of us. Jesus, who is God with us, knew what it was to suffer and to die. He is able to sympathize with us in our sufferings because he has entered fully into human life in this world. And we see in Jesus that good people can expect to suffer in this world. Jesus was as good as can be and they crucified him.

But he doesn't just suffer and feel sorry for us. He shows us how suffering can be redeemed, how through suffering we can be transformed and experience God's glory. The book of Hebrews talks a lot about this (see 2:10, 14-18; 4:14-16; 12:1-3).

He did not bear the cross—he used it. There at the cross was the deepest injustice ever done, and Jesus turns it all into a healing of injustice and sin. There men were at their worst, and through it Jesus reveals God at his best. There hate was bitterest and there Love met it, and conquered it by taking it into His own heart and transforming it. The darkest hour of history becomes the lightest! The cross becomes a throne! The end—a new beginning! (E. Stanley Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering* 81)

Even more than an example, Jesus is with us now. In Romans 8, Paul writes about the suffering we endure that makes us groan. He even says that all creation groans under the curse brought by human sin. But he says that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. God is with us here and now. God is with us in all situations to help us. The Spirit of God even prays for us with groans that words cannot express.

Paul also shows another aspect of dealing with evil and suffering—and that is that it will someday end. We will enter into God's glory and that will far surpass the suffering we now experience. God intends to restore creation, to fulfill creation, heal it and put it right, to make a new heaven and new earth. Heaven is not just "pie in the sky." It's the reality of being in God's direct presence, dwelling in God's glory and splendor and love forever. And that far outweighs our suffering in this life. Emil Brunner, a Swiss theologian, once said that the church's answer to evil and suffering, is the promise of God's kingdom and the hope of eternity with God (The quote is, "Faith knows no other theodicy than the Eschatological Hope." *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation* 268).

The resurrection of Jesus shows that evil, suffering and death do not have the last word. God has the last word—and God's word is life and love and grace. God shows his faithfulness and keeps his promises in raising Jesus from the dead. And he promises us who are in Christ a resurrection like his someday. Until then, the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is with us in the Holy Spirit to help us and heal us and redeem our suffering, and to transform us more and more into his own image.