



BACKGROUND STORY

It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, and Tom and Tami were enjoying the outdoor setting. Earlier in the week, when Tom had asked her to meet him at their favorite booth at the restaurant, Tami suggested they move their "God Talks" to the nearby park where she and some of her friends were planning to hang out for the afternoon. While the others played a game of Ultimate Frisbee, they sat at a park bench and continued their month-long discussion.

Tom was especially concerned about why a good and loving God would allow suffering and evil. "That just doesn't seem right," Tom said. Reversing roles for a moment, Tami asked Tom a question. "Why does God allow free choice?" "What?!" Tom quickly replied. "What's that got to do with it?" Tom was growing impatient. "I'm angry that God would create a world where there is so much evil and suffering. Why would he do that? That really bothers me."

Tom poured out his heart in sharing all the hurt he'd experienced losing his dad to Parkinson's disease. It was the most difficult loss he had ever gone through, and the wounds were still raw and painful. How could God allow that? It seems so unfair, so cruel, and so wrong. Tami listened intently, and it appeared as if she was grieving his loss too, even though she had never met Tom's father.

"You must have loved your dad very much, Tom." He could only nod. No words sufficed. After several minutes, Tami whispered her question once again. "But why does God allow free choice?" Her concern for his distress gave him the motivation to hear her out. "What do you mean, Tami?"

"Tom, the many disappointments in my life once made me so angry at God that I promised myself I would never believe in him, even if he did exist. But then I stumbled on this concept: Real love always involves a choice. It's not possible to truly love without the freedom not to love. And that freedom also means that bad choices are possible as well. Tom, the ability to really love your dad wasn't possible unless you truly had the choice not to love him. The same is true in our relationship with God. God gave us the freedom that was necessary for us to love him. But that same freedom also made it possible for us to reject him and not love him. It has resulted in terrible evil and suffering in our world."

Tom turned to watch one of Tami's friends make a daring catch to win that round of Ultimate. He'd never thought about it this way before, but her words were starting to

make sense. Maybe God really does allow us the freedom to make bad choices—so that we'll be able to make good ones as well. And maybe this is a clue to why the world is such a messed up place.

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” – C. S. Lewis

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe a time when you or a friend experienced what seemed like an unfair tragedy or suffering. Why did it feel unfair? How did you or your friend deal with that difficulty?
2. What would you say if a friend asked you, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Ultimately, what do you think is the primary reason behind the hardship and evil we see in our world?
3. Do you agree with the claim that real love requires freedom? Is there such a thing as “forced love”? Why or why not? How does this relate to the issue of God and the reality of suffering and evil?

*“The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it.”
– Albert Einstein*

4. Some propose that evil and suffering are in the world because God created people with the freedom to choose good or evil. This freedom eventually led to *moral evil* because of evil free choices. But it also led to much *natural evil* because nature itself was corrupted as a consequence (see Romans 8:19–22), and humanity was forced to face suffering and death (Genesis 3:16–19; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22). How do you react to this line of thought? Give some reasons for your response.

“When we human beings told God to shove off, he partially honored our request. Nature began to revolt. The earth was cursed. Genetic breakdown and disease began. Pain and death became part of the human experience. The good creation was mangled. We live in an unjust world. We are born into a world made chaotic and unfair by a humanity in revolt against its Creator.” – Cliffe Knechtle, Give Me an Answer That Satisfies My Heart and Mind

"For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

5. "While God gave humans freedom, which has led to great amounts of evil, he is not the 'creator' or the 'cause' of evil." Discuss this claim. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
6. To what extent do you think we can *fully* understand the reasons behind the pain and suffering in this world? To what extent are you content to have a *limited* understanding of those reasons? How do your views affect how you view God and the reality of evil?
7. To what extent can you find comfort, encouragement, and hope in the claim that God can use suffering to accomplish good, even in this life? Give reasons for your response. (For background, see Romans 8:28, 35-39; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.)
8. To what extent are you (or have you been) willing and able to allow the suffering you endure in your life to drive you closer to God/Jesus (as opposed to becoming angry or bitter at God)? Elaborate.
9. Christians teach and the Bible affirms that during times of suffering, faith in Jesus can still produce a sense of peace for the moment, courage to deal with the future, and hope that God will someday "wipe away every tear." To what extent can you find encouragement in this? (For background, see Romans 8:18, 23; 1 Peter 1:3-9.)

Discovering meaning in the midst of our suffering can bolster our sense of hope. If we see something good emerge from our pain, we may find some relief and comfort. If we believe God is at work bringing something new and beneficial out of our suffering, we can perhaps endure it a little easier. "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" (Romans 8:28).

"Philosophers and theologians can help us deal with the problem of evil, but the ultimate answer will come only when 'God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes' (Revelation 7:17)." - Harold O. J. Brown

10. What does it look like to turn to Jesus during times of tragedy and suffering? Can you share a story of someone who inspired you by the way he or she turned to God in the midst of struggle or pain?

*"You may never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have."
- Connie Ten Boom"*

FINAL THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS

Suffering is inevitable for all of us. May we be willing to “bless those who persecute” us and learn to “rejoice with those who rejoice” and “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:14–15). May we receive, and may we give, comfort when it is needed and find our ultimate comfort in God who has himself suffered on our behalf (Isaiah 53:4–6).

This week, identify particular individuals or families who are suffering or experiencing tragedy. Take some action to offer them encouragement (e.g. a call, a card, an email, a text, a prayer). If *you* are suffering or facing hardship, ask God to help you see signs of his love and signs of his work in the actions of others.

This discussion guide was compiled by Garry Poole in partnership with the *Room For Doubt* leadership team at Lincoln Christian University in Lincoln, Illinois. Copyright 2016, all rights reserved. Visit www.roomfordoubt.com for more resources on this topic.