



TOUGH QUESTIONS

Life Changing Answers

Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?

Why is there Suffering?

One of the most difficult questions Christians encounter when speaking with a skeptic is “Why does God allow pain and suffering?” This is a valid question that many people wrestle with in life. You cannot turn on the television without witnessing natural disasters ravage countries, innocent people being murdered on city streets, war ridden countries, and a multitude of people that suffer from starvation and malnutrition.

A few years ago Christian author and teacher Lee Strobel asked the Barna Group to perform a survey of people from all types of backgrounds from extreme skeptics to those of other religions. During this survey the Barna Group asked this one question,

“If you could ask God any question and you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask Him?”

Strobel observed that the number one question that people wanted to ask God was,

Big Question – Why does God allow pain and suffering in this world?

A few years later Mark Mittelberg performed a study where he asked Christians 'What are you afraid of being asked?' One of the top responses of these Christians was similar as they asked,

Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering in this world?¹

This question poses one of the great challenges that many Christians face by skeptics. It is a question that most Christians cannot provide an honest answer to help a skeptic understand the Biblical perspective on the topic of pain and suffering. John Stott recognized this challenge for Christians as he observed,

The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the one of the great challenges to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God's justice and love.²

Stott challenges each Christian to prepare to answer this question before they encounter it. Each of us have been touched by the issue of pain and suffering in this life and to answer the question regarding pain and suffering requires us to first understand three important truths about God.

Truth #1 – God is Sovereign

1 Chronicles 29:11 – Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all.

Truth #2 – God is Good

Matthew 19:16-17 – ¹⁶ And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷ And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what

¹ Alex Murashko, "Lee Strobel: Why Does God Allow Pain, Suffering?" Christian Post, March 11, 2012. Downloaded on April 24, 2014 from <http://www.christianpost.com/news/lee-strobel-why-does-god-allow-pain-suffering-71201/>

² John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 311.

is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.”

Truth #3 – God has a Plan for You

Jeremiah 29:11-13 – ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

These three truths ground each Christian with the understanding that God is still in control and at work in the midst of pain and suffering. We must never lose sight of the fact that even if we do not see the Lord at work in the midst of trials and tragedies, He is still sovereign. John MacArthur observes,

We can rest assured that even if we do not see or understand the reason for a particular instance of adversity and are caught off guard, God is not.³

As we read through the Word of God, we observe that the Lord actually prepares His creation for pain and suffering. Some have the view that He is a vindictive God that causes pain and suffering to hurt people yet the reality is that He strives to give us the tools and the peace to endure suffering. Jesus Christ prepares Christians for suffering and teaches us how to respond to it as He states,

John 16:33 – I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

As we reflect upon this text, we observe that Jesus did not avoid the subject of pain and suffering rather He addressed it by giving us the way to respond to it as we live in this fallen world. Many times it is during the midst of pain and suffering that an individual develops a strong, personal, and vibrant relationship with the Lord. C.S.

³ John MacArthur, *The Power of Suffering*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1995), 16.

Lewis observes that God works mightily in the midst of pain and suffering as he states,

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.⁴

Four Truths About Suffering

There are four truths to understand about pain and suffering according to the Word of God.

Truth #1 – Deception and Sin Brought Suffering into the World

As we wrestle with the truths about pain and suffering then we are forced to answer the question asked by every skeptic,

Where did pain and suffering originate?

As individuals face pain and suffering they want someone to blame. Often God is blamed as the author of pain and suffering but the truth as to the origin of suffering can be found in Genesis.

Genesis 3:6-7a – ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened...

Pain and suffering were never part of God's creation but He loved His creation so much that He gave them the choice to follow His commands and plan for life. Sadly, Adam and Eve chose their pleasure over His plan. Suffering entered into the world through temptation and sin. The Apostle Paul describes the consequences of this event as he states,

Romans 5:12 (NLT) – When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 93.

God loves His creation so much that He does not give up on them and there is hope in the midst of suffering because of the unconditional love of the Lord.

Romans 8:28 – And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Truth #2 – God Refines His People in the Midst of Suffering

We also observe throughout Scripture that God can use suffering to refine His people into a sharper instrument to be used for His glory. The Word of God describes this principle in this manner,

Isaiah 48:10 – Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

1 Peter 5:10 – And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

God brings sufferings, trials, persecutions, and other kinds of adversity as vital events in our spiritual growth. James writes about this principle as he states,

James 1:2-3 – ²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

It is a fact that not every Christian will view pain and suffering as vital to spiritual growth. Some will see it as an opportunity to grow in faith and reliance upon the Lord while others will see it as a curse from God. C.S. Lewis observed the difference of perspectives in this manner,

Imagine a set of people all living in the same building. Half of them think it is a hotel, the other half think it is a prison. Those who think it a hotel might regard it as quite intolerable, and those who thought it was a prison might decide that it was really surprisingly comfortable. So that what seems the ugly doctrine is one that comforts and

strengthens you in the end. The people who try to hold an optimistic view of this world would become pessimists: the people who hold a pretty stern view of it become optimistic.⁵

Truth #3 – God Displays His Glory in the Midst of Suffering

It is also important to recognize that God often displays His glory in the midst of suffering. R.C. Sproul observed,

We tend to be able to see the hand of divine providence in our lives when we pray earnestly for something and God says yes. But when we want something desperately and pray about it intensely, but God answers no, what happens?⁶

It is easy to recognize God's glory in the good times but often His glory is revealed the brightest in the times of trials. The question is whether we are willing to see His glory through eyes filled with tears and sorrow. It is during times of suffering that God shines brightest as He offers strength and peace that surpasses all understanding. The Apostle Paul described the importance of this principle in these words as he states,

Romans 8:17b-18 – We suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. 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.”

2 Corinthians 12:9 - But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

⁵ Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Surprised by Suffering: The Role of Pain and Death in the Christian Life* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2010), 42.

Truth #4 – God Reveals Hope through the Depth of His Love in the Midst of Suffering

Finally, we understand that in the midst of suffering God reveals hope through the depth of His love by sending Christ to die on the cross for your sin and mine.

Romans 5:6-8 – ⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – ⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul reminds every Christian that “Suffering is Temporary but Salvation is Eternal” as he observes that we in the midst of trials and tribulations we must keep our eyes fixed on our sustainer and the one who strengthens us to give us endurance and hope.

2 Corinthians 4:18 – As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Application for Life

God desires for each person to avoid eternal suffering but this can only be done through Jesus Christ. Our temporary suffering will someday be overshadowed by the glory of God as we dwell with Him for eternity. Remind yourself that your responsibility, before the Lord, is to consistently apply the divine principles and truths you have discovered in the presentation of the Word of God. Consider these questions:

- What would you tell a skeptic about why God allows suffering?
- Why must the three truths about God from page 2 be accepted to understand the relationship between God and suffering?
- How can you show God’s love to others in the midst of suffering?

My Personal Thoughts and Notes:

A free download of this booklet can be found at
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