

Contemporary Religious Questions

Q: “IF THERE IS A GOD, WHY DOES HE ALLOW SO MUCH SUFFERING?”

A: In Peru, the earth shrugged and thousands died, buried under collapsing mud. In Mexico, an earthquake killed thousands. In East Pakistan, a cyclonic wind and sea swamped villages and killed hundreds of thousands. In Vietnam, innocent women and children died in the atrocities of war. In Australia, eight-year-old Vicki disappeared, and more than a year later her decomposed body was found; she had been assaulted and murdered, sacrificed to another human’s inhuman lust.

If there is a God, why does He allow so much suffering in the world? Thoughtful people see the suffering of a child, the horror of war, and conclude: “Surely there is no God. If there were, he would not allow such suffering.”

The Bible deals with the question. The book of Job asks the question: “Why do the righteous suffer?” In Psalm 73 the Psalmist noted the prosperity of the wicked and concluded that it was useless to try to live righteously (vv. 3, 12, 13). Habakkuk asked how God could be silent “when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they” (Habakkuk 1:13). Or, as someone put it, “Why is God silent while evil rages?”

In the New Testament, Jesus was asked about a man born blind: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” (John 9:2). When misfortune strikes we often ask, “Who sinned?”

What is the answer? Why should a man be born blind? Why would God allow a wicked nation to overthrow a more righteous nation? Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the righteous suffer?

We do not know all the answers. We must ultimately learn to accept God’s will by faith and

to admit that His ways are past finding out.

Although we do not know all the answers, there are some answers that should strengthen our faith.

WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?

The real problem is understanding why the innocent suffer. We do not complain when evil people suffer. I have never heard anyone say: “If there’s a God, why did He allow Hitler to suffer?”

The problem of the suffering of the innocent is different. We think in terms of justice, and it seems unjust that the innocent are punished. Why do the righteous suffer? Many factors are involved.

First, the innocent may suffer because there is some value in suffering. The Psalmist wrote, “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes” (Psalms 119:71; cf. Hebrews 12:11). Sickness may be better for us than health and pain better than pleasure. Suffering can develop character, induce sympathy, reduce materialism, and drive us to God. We have heard of some of the great things the handicapped have accomplished *in spite of* their handicaps. Perhaps we ought to think of the great things they accomplished as being *because of* their handicaps. Maybe Helen Keller became one of the most inspirational figures of this century not *in spite of* being blind and deaf, but *because of* these handicaps. Suffering should be regarded as a doorway to a better character.

Second, they may suffer as an effect of sin. Suffering came into the world because of sin, and suffering continues to plague mankind because of sin. In Job 4:8, Eliphaz stated a general truth

when he said, "According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it." The New Testament agrees: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked: for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). The wicked suffer, if not in this life, then in the next, because of their sins (Romans 6:23).

The tragedy of sin is that the innocent suffer along with the guilty! God spoke of the chain reaction of sin in Deuteronomy 5:9 when He said that He would visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their children to the third and fourth generation. Consider these examples: First, a father is a drunkard and he rears children in an atmosphere of intemperance and depravity. How many generations will suffer because of his sin? Sickness, poverty, early death, and mental illness may plague his children and grandchildren. Second, in Abilene, Texas, a teenager ran over and killed three people, including a lovely young woman who had served as a missionary in France. The boy, who had been drinking, was driving too fast, and he did not even have a driver's license. Why did those innocent people suffer? Because of that boy's sin! Third, in war, the innocent suffer along with the guilty.

Sin causes suffering—the suffering of the innocent as well as the guilty.

Third, the innocent may suffer because of man's fallibility and frailty. Sin always causes suffering, but not all suffering is the result of sin. Jesus explained this when He replied to the question about the blind man: "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). The Jews had the mistaken idea that all suffering was the result of sin, but Jesus said it was not.

Some suffering results from man's fallible judgment. He misjudges how far he can swim and drowns as a result. No sin is involved—just human fallibility that leads to human suffering. A train wreck in Australia killed nine people. "Human error" was blamed for the accident. Human fallibility caused the accident, and the innocent suffered because of the mistake.

As long as we live in a world peopled by imperfect, accident-prone human beings, we can expect mistakes that will hurt the innocent as well as the guilty.

Fourth, the innocent may suffer because they come into conflict with the laws of nature. Actually, we do not break the laws of nature; when we disobey them, they break us! Break the law of gravity, and you will be broken!

But why do the innocent suffer—as do those who are hurt or killed in earthquakes and typhoons—when they have not, apparently, broken any laws of nature?

Picture our universe as a giant machine. Its wheels and cogs move relentlessly. There are controlled explosions, pistons pumping at fantastic speeds, cooling and heating systems. Unbelievable power is being generated, relayed, used, and dissipated. All is happening according to laws, some of which we know and some we do not know.

Here we are, walking, not around, nor on top of, but *through* this machine! We know some of the rules, some of the laws, a few of the hazards, so we can avoid this changing of gears or that pounding piston. *But we do not know them all, and we cannot avoid all the hazards!* Eventually, we will get in the way of one of those great spinning flywheels or step unknowingly into one of those cogs or find ourselves in the middle of one of those explosions. When that happens, what have we done wrong? *Nothing—except to get in the way of the operation of the universe!*

That is the only "error" people killed in an earthquake make. Some giant inner force compulsively shakes the earth, and they die simply because their presence puts them in the way of the operation of the forces of nature.

Have we any right at such times to say, "Stop the world. I want to get off"? Can we call off the storm until we are safe? The laws of nature continue to operate, whether we are in the way or not. Consequently, men, including the innocent, continue to suffer.

WHY DOES GOD NOT INTERVENE?

Few will disagree with what has just been said. The innocent do suffer, and they suffer for the reasons given. But then the question becomes: "If there is a God, why doesn't He prevent suffering?" Why does He not keep the wicked from hurting the innocent? Why does He not keep good men from making mistakes and innocent men from being hurt by others' mistakes? Why does He not so control the universe

that the innocent will not be injured through the forces of nature? Consider two possible answers.

God does not intervene because He must respect the nature of man. Man is a free moral agent. His actions are up to him; his choices are not predetermined. Man is free to make the wrong choices, to hurt himself, and to hurt others. If God is to allow man to be fully man, He must allow man that freedom.

God allows man such freedom *for man's own good*. Would you prefer to be a robot, a puppet? He allows this freedom *for the good of others*. Our freedom means we are free to sacrifice, to love, and to serve others. He also allows this freedom *for God's glory*. He made man to glorify Himself, but there is no glory in man's serving his Creator if man has no alternative.

God does not intervene because He must respect the nature of the universe. God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). Thus, the wicked profit from nature just as do the righteous, and the righteous suffer from the forces of nature just as do the wicked.

Why does God allow nature to bless and curse both alike? First, because we live in a universe governed by law. If God arbitrarily set aside the laws of the universe, just to favor the righteous, chaos would result. We would have a universe governed, not by law, but by whim. Would we like that?

Second, God allows nature to bless and curse both alike because His sparing pain to the few might mean bringing pain to the many. The same flood which causes death to people upstream makes possible the watering of crops which feed thousands downstream. If God saved the few from the flood, He would cause the thousands to starve in the resultant famine.

Third, God allows nature to bless and curse both alike because favoring the righteous materially might cause many to serve Him from the wrong motives. If only the wicked suffered, and the righteous always prospered, who would serve the Lord? Possibly everyone! But why? Solely for the "loaves and fishes." God wants people to serve and glorify Him from the right motives.

God must respect the nature of the universe He has created—a universe governed by laws laid down by Him that He does not override just to protect the innocent.

Why did God make such a universe? Why

not make a world in which no natural disasters ever happened? There are several answers to that question, but one is this: "If you know so much about how to create a universe, why don't you create one of your own?" Until we can do what God can do, and know what God can know, we should not criticize what God has done.

Another answer to the question, "Why doesn't God intervene?" is this: *God has intervened, and God does intervene!*

God *has* intervened by sending His Son to teach men to love one another. He helps heal the hurts of mankind by acting through those who follow Christ's teaching. God *does intervene* because of the prayers of His children. Remember that Hezekiah, when he knew He was going to die, prayed to God, and God gave him another fifteen years of life (2 Kings 20:1-6). God does not today respond with miracles, as He did in the New Testament times, when we pray. But He does help those who pray to Him. How many times He has answered our prayers only eternity will reveal. God has not left the universe to run itself. It is still being upheld by Christ. God still answers prayer!

Why does God not answer every prayer? Because it is not always *His* will. Sometimes it may be best for His purposes for a loved one *not* to get well. Therefore, we pray, as Jesus did, "Not My will but Thine be done," believing that God will indeed do what is best to accomplish His purposes.

But a third question comes to our lips: Since so much senseless suffering surrounds us, and since God does not seem to care sometimes, we ask . . .

WHY SHOULD WE BELIEVE IN GOD?

We should believe in God *because there is no better alternative!*

Without God there is no satisfactory explanation for all the suffering in the world. The atheist must believe that suffering is the result of the blind forces of nature, of the law of the jungle, of an existence in which meaninglessness is to be expected. But this explanation does not satisfy! Even those who have rejected the idea of God keep looking for answers, for meaning.

In addition, without God there is no explanation at all for the blessings in the world. Sydney Harris put it this way:

A favourite argument of those who object to the idea of a purposeful God is to point to all the evil in the world. "How can a benevolent God," they ask, "permit so much badness to exist and flourish?"

I have always preferred to answer this question by turning it inside out and confronting these people with what I call "the problem of good." How do they account for the existence of so much good in the world? How is it that man . . . has risen to the heights of love, unselfishness and self-sacrifice? Why should he lay down his life for his friend? Why should he sacrifice his welfare for others? Why has the history of humanity been so illuminated by heroes and martyrs who have willingly died for an idea greater than themselves?

We tend to take for granted the virtues of mankind and excoriate its vices. But why should mankind have any virtues at all beyond those of the scorpion or the spider? We have far more cause for rejoicing at God's goodness than for reviling man's imperfection.

Is that not true? Is there not so much good in the world that we should be amazed? In fact, the only thing that makes us able to identify suffering is the fact that we experience so many blessings! You could not identify darkness as darkness if you had never known light. You would not know that pain is pain if that was all you had ever experienced. You could not know that you were sick if you had never experienced health. In fact, it is only *because* we have been blessed so abundantly that we complain about suffering.

The question is: Where did all these blessings come from? From a meaningless universe, by

chance? Hardly! They must have come from God! I submit that the atheist has a more difficult problem to solve than Christians do. He asks us, "If there is a God, then why is there so much suffering?" We ask him, "If there is no God, then why are there so many blessings? In fact, why is there any good in the world at all?"

Of course, for the Christian there is always a final answer to the question we are considering: We may not know now, but we will know eventually. *Someday we will understand!* We believe that God knows best. We believe that He is working all things together for the ultimate good of His cause (Romans 8:28). Through faith we are able to endure the good and the bad of life.

CONCLUSION

The Christian's faith has made him stronger in the face of life's trials, disappointments, and suffering. What has your lack of faith done for you? Has doubt sustained you? Has disbelief enabled you to live more abundantly and victoriously in the midst of life's trouble?

Is it not time for you to give up, give in, and give yourself over to God? Cast yourself on Him in faith and obedience, and He will care for you. You can then have the assurance that all things will work together for good . . . that, whatever you suffer, you will receive a home with God in eternal life . . . and that one day He will make all clear!

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