

# WHERE IS GOD WHEN LIFE HURTS?

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*These notes are not intended to be a comprehensive discussion of what is a difficult and complex topic, but they lie behind the points that I made in the dialogue with Ian Hickingbotham at North Ringwood Uniting Church on 3rd April 2011. They may help anyone interested in thinking further about this important issue.*

This is a world with tragic death, third world suffering and lingering, painful illness. And so people ask questions like:

1. Why do good, innocent people suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people?
2. Why do the wicked prosper?
3. What about accidental death and suffering? Why does this happen to some and not others?
4. Is this God's judgment for sin?
5. Is it persecution for being a Christian?
6. Why doesn't God prevent 'natural' disasters like tsunamis?

*Well, the first thing to do is to remember that for every difficult and complex problem there is a simple solution..... that is wrong! The problem of evil and suffering is difficult and complex and no one ever said there had to be a single solution for all suffering. Trying to explain human accidents, perfectly natural events (like dying), natural disasters and deliberate suffering all with one simple explanation is probably impossible.*

This means we have to *think* things through; *pray* through it; study *scripture*. There is a great need for people to *be prepared*: to think through their attitude to pain, death and suffering ahead of time is essential. And as well as the questions noted above there are other questions that *should* be asked, but usually aren't:

1. Why *shouldn't* these things happen?
2. Why do good things happen to bad people? And why do good things happen to good people? etc
3. OK some people don't "deserve" to have that happen, but what would happen if everyone got exactly what they deserved?
4. Isn't pain good? Not only in a physical sense, as a warning about a problem in our body, but isn't, for example, the pain felt from a justified rebuke good for us? C. S. Lewis said, "God whispers in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience and shouts in our pain."

## **Why do we find this so hard to deal with?**

*Perhaps there should be no surprise that the question of pain and suffering is one that people find very difficult today because, as a society, we are very pain averse! As a modern scientifically and technologically literate society we have done a lot to get rid of the pain and suffering that people previously had no way of dealing with. While questions about pain and suffering have always been around I think they are particularly sharp today. I think in previous eras pain and death, even tragic and early death, was accepted with a much higher degree of equanimity. Today it is an affront to our egotistic belief that we can control life!*

As a contrast, note that in the 17th century Jeremy Taylor's two books *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying* were hugely popular. With the latter being the big seller! It was instruction on how to

use every day to prepare for suffering and death. Live every moment in readiness for your death! Be ready for the death of others; use your time wisely to be ready for suffering. I am sure that they had a very different attitude to us.

### **The first step is the affirmation is that God is good - a theology of providence**

Providence is the outworking of God's sovereignty by which his purposes are achieved in and through all events even despite any apparent or real opposition to his will and purposes. It refers to all of God's gracious actions in the world – food, rain, clothing, seasons; and the general care through government, social institutions, family, friends. It can include conscience; morality; intelligence. *Providence asserts that God is good and loving.*

- Genesis 1-2 God made the world 'good'
- Psalm 136:25 ("his steadfast love endures forever");

Providence is an assertion of meaning in life. The doctrine of providence is contrary to

- Deism (the idea that God is not involved in the world)
- Fatalism (the idea that nothing can be avoided and that everything just happens)
- Chance (the idea that everything is random)
- Eternal dualism (the idea that there is an eternal conflict between God and evil that has no end).

The greatest good, of course, is Christ: We must resist the temptation to think of providence – or suffering - independently, that is separately from that which makes a Christian doctrine of providence truly Christian, which is Christ (Ephesian 1:4ff). In the end it is true that "Jesus is the answer"!

At this point though, the problem of providence remains: if God is so good why is there still evil? And to some extent the answer is, *controversially, because he's good!* This is, of course, a statement of *faith*, though we can *begin* to understand it if we continue to think it through!

The reality is that this world is good, but it is *not* "the best of all possible worlds" but it is *the best, the only way to get to the best of all possible worlds*. That "best of all possible worlds" is yet to come. It is the New Creation where there is no pain and no suffering. *"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 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."* (Rev. 21:4)

So if that is the ultimate aim, a world with no pain, then why does not God arrange it so that we go straight there? And the answer is that some things are just impossible. A round square; a married bachelor. More seriously some very important things cannot be done, except in certain ways, as we shall see.....

### **The second step: the freewill explanation of evil and suffering**

Much, though not all, of the evil and tragedy of the world can be seen as *the result of human sin*: we drive too fast and cause accidents; we don't share food and medical resources; we hurt others. We could do otherwise, but we don't. As human beings we have the free-will to be able to choose and this means we can choose badly. And the point is that God *cannot* make a *person* without free-will. If you make a person who is able to love, then they will be able to hate. If you let someone have the freedom to choose, then they will sometimes choose the wrong thing.

In short, you can make an *animal* or a *robot* without free-will but you cannot make a *person* without free will. God does not like the bad choices we make and he weeps over them too. But in order to achieve the greater good of people in communion with God the possibility of evil has to enter the world.

Of course, this does not explain all suffering! But bear in mind what I said about there not being one, simple answer for something as complex as this! There is more.

### **The third step: the greater good explanation**

This part of the explanation says that although tragic suffering is, in one sense, definitely evil (it would be foolish, even scandalous to suggest that suffering was not a terrible thing), in another sense it is a positive good because *without it we could never be the people that God wants us to be*.

To take a simple example: how does one learn patience? Only by being kept waiting. How does one learn to be joyful? Only by being confronted with times are difficult. If nothing is ever a problem then you can never learn to overcome it. How do you learn to love? Only by dealing with the possibility of not loving!

It might take some time for you to think through this, and the implications of a world where no one is ever kept waiting, hurt, disappointed, frustrated, or has to deal with anger, offense, loss or the unexpected. The only way that human, emotional, spiritual growth can take place is in the face of adversity. And so, without denying the evil, it can be turned into good. This is the nature of God who is able to turn around that which is meant for evil and use it for good.

I would never be too quick to suggest to people who have suffered that "Oh, this is for your good!" Bad things are bad things and in the first instance we have to empathize and deal with that fact. But, ultimately, the worst evil - the death of Christ for instance - can be turned around for good.

The Scripture speaks frequently of the way that suffering, of various kinds, can be used for good:

#### ***1. Suffering reveals the nature of God***

2 Cor 4:7-18 - it shows the power of God; reveals the life of Jesus; and encourages us

#### ***2. Suffering shows the faith of believers***

1 Peter 1 v.7 - trials shows the genuineness of faith

James 1:12 - temptation reveals faith

#### ***3. Suffering produces perseverance***

2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 - it leads to perseverance and faith

#### ***4. Suffering can be a means to encourage others***

2 Corinthians 1:3-11 - believers are consoled so they can console others and so they will learn to rely on God

#### ***5. Suffering shows the power of God***

2 Corinthians 11:22-30 - it shows our weakness and God's power

**6. *Suffering can lead to repentance***

2 Cor 7:5-13 - Godly grief that led to repentance

**7. *Suffering can be a discipline***

Hebrews 12:3-11 - the pain of discipline; suffering that produces righteousness  
John 15:2 Pruning branches that bear no fruit

**8. *Suffering can lead to maturity***

James 1 v.3 - testing produces endurance and maturity

**9. *Suffering can lead to blessing and reward***

Matthew 5:10-12 - persecution (leads to) reward  
1 Peter 3:13-18 - suffering for doing right brings blessing

**10. *Suffering is a way to be like Christ***

Philippians 3:10 - Paul desires to know the sufferings of Christ to become like him  
Colossians 1:24-2 we should rejoice in suffering because this means 'completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body'

**11. *Suffering enables witness to non-Christians***

2 Cor 6:1-10 - suffering commends the gospel  
Philippians 1:12-18 - helps the spread of the gospel  
2 Timothy 2:1-1 - join in suffering for the witness of the gospel

But despite all this talk of positive benefits I can well imagine people still thinking that it would be good if God would just get rid of *the worst* pain and suffering. People complain, "Why not do something about this or that, that's terrible!" Well let us consider what would happen if God took away the worst suffering and evil that there is in the world. It's simply the case that if the worst imaginable evil disappeared from this *world then something else will become the worst imaginable evil* and people would complain about that, "why should that happen, that's terrible!" The fact is that if you're going to get rid of evil you have to get rid of all of it. And that takes us to the final answer....

**The final step is to remember that the problem has been solved!**

People ask, "Why doesn't God do something about it?" The answer is that *he has!* In the death of Christ on the cross he has borne the pain and suffering, the sin and evil of the world. The way to heaven - where there is no more pain and suffering - is open.

It is true that we live in an interim period - after the death of Christ and the salvation of the world, but before the final consummation of all things. And in this interim period pain and suffering continues. But this is also itself a time of great grace and love, because this is the time of opportunity for people to turn to Christ and be saved.