

A Good God Wouldn't Allow All the Suffering in the World

A passenger ferry capsizes in the harbor of Port au Prince, Haiti, drowning scores of innocent people. An AIDS epidemic goes through central Africa taking the lives of tens of thousands of adults but also condemning children to death from the day they are born. A young mother is diagnosed with inoperable cancer and is shaken, not so much by the prospects of the disease and death, but by the realization that she won't be there for her children and the fear that when they grow up they won't even remember her. TWA flight 800 inexplicably explodes just off the coast of Long Island, taking hundreds of lives and leaving grieving people in France, the United States and elsewhere who have lost their very best friends, their loved ones, their closest relatives. A godly woman whose one great desire in life is to be a mother sits in the physician's office and is told that she is infertile and she will never bear children.

The list goes on like the names in a big city phone book. Global calamities and personal private tragedies are everywhere. In every generation every person suffers, some sooner, some later, some lesser, some more, but no one's exempt; no one is excluded. Pain and suffering are part of every life.

Where is God when we hurt so much? If it is true that God is great and that God is good you would think that he would not allow there to be such difficulty in our world. Why doesn't he use his goodness and his power to call a halt to all of the maladies of our world? Why doesn't he just step in and make the huge difference that he is capable of making? Doesn't it sometimes seem as if, at best, God is underqualified for his job? Or that he is, at worst, some type of celestial sadist who takes actual pleasure in the problems that we ordinary people face? It really is no wonder that some people object to believing in such a God — to become a Christian seems to them like joining the wrong team. To believe in God seems to them to compromise the most basic convictions of goodness, justice and mercy.

The question of how a good God could allow so much suffering in the world is a very real objection, a genuine concern, a reason why people choose not to become Christians. It is such a serious problem that to be completely honest, it is difficult to answer to everyone's satisfaction. Maybe it is difficult to fully

answer to anyone's satisfaction, but as a Christian I'd like to try.

To give an explanation that is acceptable and reasonable, perhaps the place to start is with an honest admission. It's true that God allows great suffering in our world. How could that be hidden? All you need to do is look around. It raises a pair of questions. First, the why question. Why does God allow suffering? And then in some ways the more important question is, what does God do about this suffering? The question of why is there such great suffering in our world is not a question that is limited to Christianity. It's a question that needs to be addressed by every religion, by every philosophy that is within the world. The person who says, "I'm not going to become a Christian because I don't want to believe in a God who allows so much suffering in our world" has not ended the issue. You can reject Christianity but you still haven't answered the question of why there is so much pain and suffering. Why is there such injustice? What's your reason, your explanation? Where did it come from? Why isn't our world automatically good? Why isn't it pain free?

Do you like the conclusion of the Hindus who say that everything ill that we suffer within this life is a consequence of sin in our previous lives? If an individual has "bad karma" from a previous life there isn't anything to do about it except fatalistically wait until he dies and somehow hope for a better chance the next time around.

What if you choose to become an atheist and don't believe that God exists? How do you explain pain and suffering and injustice? It just is? It just exists? All the problems of this world and this life lead to death and when it's over there's nothing more?

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Christian answers are not necessarily simple. They can be complex. Actually, there can be multiple answers. I suppose you could say it is like going up to

someone and saying, "Why do people go to emergency rooms?" There are a lot of reasons. Some people go because of gun shot wounds. Other people go because they're expecting a baby and they have begun labor. There are others who are there because of asthma or a heart attack or because of kidney stones, but there are other people that go there because that's

where they work or maybe they are visiting someone they know who has been taken to the emergency room.

Just as there are many reasons why somebody might go to an emergency room, there are many reasons that could explain why God allows suffering in our world. I won't suggest that this is a complete list, but let's start with three possible reasons.

The first of those reasons has to do with the teaching that God has created us with human responsibility. True responsibility always comes with consequences. God could have done it differently. He could have made us into robots where we would be programmed to worship him. We'd be programmed to keep the Ten Commandments, to always say the right thing at the right time. He'd just push the button.

As human parents we would rather have a real live baby than a doll that says, "I love you," when you pull the string. Real babies don't always giggle when you want them to giggle; they don't always say, "I love you," when you want them to say "I love you." They don't always do what you had expected them to do when they grow up. But that's the way we want it to be. We don't want our children to love us just because they were programmed to love us, and we don't want our friends to be our friends just because they were made to be our friends.

So it is that God gave to us human choices. We were given the responsibility to love God or to hate God. We were given the responsibility to choose our mates, to manage our environment. We were given the responsibility to make these various choices because God wanted us to choose what was good and right, and not just be controlled.

Our ancestors made some very bad choices. They chose against God and they chose for sin. By so doing, they contaminated our whole race and our whole world. The consequences have been awful: wars, diseases, broken relationships.

When I was in the eighth grade we all had to do projects for math class. One of them was related to ratios and the practical use of them. A girl in the class baked a cake using ratios to alter the recipe to be large enough to adequately serve everyone in the class. She brought this big cake to class, explained how she had used ratios to make it and said we could eat it, which we thought was great. The teacher, Mrs. Cass, asked, "How are we going to divide the cake into 17 equal parts?" A boy in the class raised his hand and said, "I can do it; I know how!" The teacher said, "I don't think you can." He was absolutely sure he could and went up to the front of the classroom. He took this big knife and began to cut up the cake. The more he tried, the worse it got, until he finally looked at her

and said, "You're right — I can't cut it into 17 equal parts." What he did was wreck the cake. It was a total mess and everyone in the class did not get a fair share — just globs and pieces. It wasn't fair what he did to the project, and it wasn't fair what each one of us got.

That's a whole lot like what's happened to the world. We humans were given choices and we have cut up God's creation in all types of combinations that has left the world a rather unfair place with a lot of inequalities, a lot of things that are not the way they originally were intended to be. We were so sure we could do better than God that we proceeded until we ruined the whole project.

We're all in this together. What one of us does tends to affect all of us. Just as one person can contaminate a public water system for everyone, the evil behavior of other humans can and does impact us all.

The Bible sums it up in Romans 5:12 which says that "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned." What this is really saying is that the responsibility for sin and evil and suffering and pain in our world is ultimately ours, not God's.

Although our responsibility is a primary factor, there are some other factors as well. One of them is that God is engaged in a great battle against his arch enemy, Satan or the devil. Satan's story is woven throughout the Bible (and throughout our own experiences). A classic example of it is the Old Testament story of Job who was attacked by Satan in an attempt to discredit and displease God. Satan took the lives of all of Job's children, stole his wealth and caused disease in Job's body. I Peter 5:8 says that "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." He devoured Job's life (and he's out to get us, too).

That is not to say that all of the suffering in our world is because of Satan. The truth of it is that if Satan never existed, our human sin would be sufficient to cause all of the misery that we could ever imagine. But the reality is that God is involved in this great conflict. There is a spiritual war between God and Satan. It is good against evil and we are on the battlefield, often wounded by what happens in this conflict. It is a real war. It's as real as the Persian Gulf War or Vietnam or Korea or World War II.

Wars not only have casualties but they have lingering effects. It's been almost a century and a half since the Civil War and in America we still have lingering effects of that war, even though those who fought it have long been gone. In the same way the spiritual battle in our world between God and Satan

has continued to leave a terrible set of consequences. It's a battle that is stronger, more serious and has eternal effects. The pain and suffering that has been inflicted by God's enemy is horrendous.

A third reason to consider for the source of suffering in our world involves God's divine purposes. Sometimes God either allows or causes pain and suffering in our world and in our lives in order to accomplish good purposes that wouldn't otherwise happen. It may be to get our attention or to stop us from doing something that is wrong. I think we all know that many times unless difficulty comes our way we may pursue a course that is inappropriate. Sometimes God has to bring us up short. Or, he may use pain to discipline us for sin.

The Bible has many stories of individuals whose lives were interrupted by the intervention of God in painful ways so that he could stop the evil that they were doing. It may be that God would cause us to lose a job that we very much want because he knows that in a future course that job might lead to criminal activity. Or he may allow us to suffer a painful broken relationship rather than marry the wrong person. It could be that God is touching a nation with financial reverses or even with diseases or famine in order to accomplish his greater purposes within that country.

Hebrews 12:6 says "The Lord disciplines those he loves" — just like a parent. That may in part explain some of the suffering that is in our world. However, all of the explanations eventually one way or another go back to the primary concept that we have been given responsibility by God and responsibility leads to consequences.

Even if we don't completely understand why God allows suffering, the most practical question for us is, "What does God do about suffering?" Most of all, God knows and he cares. Isaiah 53:3 describes Jesus as "a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering." In Luke 19 there is a story of Jesus looking over the whole city of Jerusalem and being so gripped by the difficulties of the people that he wept. Or in the book of John we're told how Jesus was summoned to come to the side of his friend Lazarus who was terminally ill. Jesus didn't get there until Lazarus had died. When he got the news of Lazarus' death, he was so overcome with grief that we have the shortest verse in the English Bible, John 11:35, simply stating that "Jesus wept." He was touched by human pain and sorrow. So never think that God doesn't care. He does care.

William Barclay was a Scottish journalist and a

New Testament scholar whose heart was broken by a tragic event. His daughter, who was just about to be married, went out sailing one day with her fiancé in the North Sea off the coast of Scotland and, in a terrible boating accident, both of them were killed. To add extra suffering to the pain, their bodies were never recovered. In the midst of his grief someone came to William Barclay and asked him, "What do you think God thinks about what happened to your daughter?" And his answer was, "I think that God is weeping in

heaven over the death of my daughter as we grieve for her here on earth." God knows and he cares.

God cares enough that he has used his power to limit evil.

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In one sense that's actually saying that God puts restraints on how far our responsibility and freedom of choice can and will go. For if he didn't, if he let sin and evil run its full course, we would be destroyed. We would destroy our world.

Have you ever wondered how we made it through the Cold War without a nuclear holocaust? There are historians of war that say that every weapon that man has ever invented for human destruction has been used to its fullest potential. It was that historical analysis that led to the conclusion during the Cold War that there would be holocaust. We went through a long period of time, which we may have too easily forgotten, where almost every day we were reminded through news stories and books and films of the Soviet missiles with nuclear warheads aimed at us, as well as our missiles with nuclear warheads aimed at Moscow and the rest of the Soviet Union. The expectation was that, either because of some political decision or somebody's mistake, one of those missiles would be launched and it would lead to retaliation and a nuclear war of mutual annihilation. Why didn't it happen? I would contend that God limited the evil — that God said there is a point beyond which I'm simply not going to let you go. I'm not going to let you destroy humankind that I have created. I'm not going to let you destroy the world that I have made.

There's a little book in the Old Testament called Lamentations and it is the lament of Jewish people in hard times. Lamentations 3:22-23 says, "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning." The assumption is that if human evil could run its full course, we'd be consumed by it. We would

destroy ourselves.

Some people will say, "If God can apply limits, why doesn't he fix it so that by noon tomorrow all sin and evil would just be obliterated off the face of the earth?" Wouldn't that be great? But wait a minute. We have all sinned. We're all guilty of evil — not just what other people do to us. It's inside of us and it's what we do to others as well. If that's the case, then by noon tomorrow we would all be obliterated. You see, the good news is that God cares enough to give us responsibilities and consequences but He does put an outer limit on what could be. I think that if somehow we were able to step back and get a far broader eternal perspective what would amaze us is not how much suffering and pain there is in the world, but how comparatively little there is because of the grace of God and the limits that he has placed. God has stopped the very worst. He has limited evil.

But the greatest act of God in answer to human suffering is that he sent his Son. It is all summed up in John 3:16-17.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

God made the ultimate intervention when he sent his son to die for human sin so that we could have an immediate change within our lives — to be transformed so that we can choose good instead of do wrong — but also that we would have the ultimate benefit of eternal life in heaven. There's a sense in which it is a blatant offense to God to say, "God, why don't you do something?" when he's already done it. He's done the greatest thing that he could ever do — he gave his own son to come to die on the cross to deal with the problem of human sin and human evil.

The good news just keeps getting better. In the very last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 21, God gave a preview of history to St. John which he recorded so that we can anticipate what is to come. Revelation 21:1-4 says,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, pre-

pared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. And he will wipe away 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."

As we observe and experience the very real suffering and pain in our world and in our lives, there are three choices we can make. We can reject God.

We can resent God. Or we can trust God. Those who reject God have nothing left. They have no good explanation for what's happening in our world and, worst of all, no hope.

A far more common response is to resent God. Something goes terribly wrong. Someone you love has awful pain or a tragic death. You experience harsh disappointment and say, "Where were you, God? You could have done something. You could have stepped in and I resent you for not using your power for my benefit." Resentment turns a person bitter and angry, often alienating that person from the very love of God that can cause the healing that's needed.

You can reject God or resent God, or trust God. Trusting God is believing that he is good and wise even when we cannot adequately ad fully explain all that is going on around us. Even though we are in the midst of pain and suffering that we hate, we have absolute confidence that God knows what he's about and is trustworthy — no matter what.

We each have a choice. That's the way God made us, to have a choice. We can even choose what to do with God. Reject or resent or trust him. The choice is yours.

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