

Where We Stand On Suffering

We must be careful to avoid the temptation of trying to explain more than God has explained in His Word about the reasons for individual suffering. We will never be able to understand all the “whys” of individual cases of suffering. **Isaiah 55:9** “*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*”

Our Savior was a suffering Savior and suffered as no one ever has suffered, because in addition to the physical suffering and pain He endured He took the pain of all the sins of humanity upon Himself. No one has suffered in that manner. So as we take up our cross and follow Him, the narrow road we walk is lined with suffering. While we can know *what* God is doing through our suffering, we must accept the mystery of the *why* and leave that in the hands of a sovereign, omnipotent God who loves us and is always good in all He does.

Job found comfort not in the mystery of suffering revealed, but in the mystery of God’s person unveiled. Basically God’s answer to Job’s desire to understand was, “*Trust Me, I know what I’m doing.*”

The Origin of Suffering

To better understand suffering, we need to focus on the existence of evil in the world. The Bible tells us that in the beginning of God’s creation, there was no evil, no suffering, and no death. Suffering is the result of sin coming into the world. With sin, came more sin, and more suffering, and more sin, etc.

Adam and Eve truly did die when they disobeyed God. Their spirit (that part of mankind that allows us to know and fellowship with God) died immediately. Their soul (mind, will, and emotions) was darkened (**Ephesians 4:18**) which gave them a distorted view of reality, and their body began to age and die.

The Mercy of God and Suffering

A common way the problem of suffering is phrased: “Why do good people suffer?” **Romans 3:12b**: “*...There is none who does good, no, not one.*” There is a harder-hitting question than, “Why do we suffer?” The difficult and real question is, “Given the absolute holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, why is there anything other than suffering?”

The Sovereignty of God in Suffering

The Bible is clear that suffering isn’t random. God is sovereign in all things and suffering falls under that sovereignty. Nothing happens apart from His sovereign will causing or allowing it. There is no fate or bad luck or bad karma. **Ephesians 1:11**: “*...the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.*”

God is sovereign:

- Over the failing of sight (**Exodus 4:11**)
- The giving and taking of life (**1 Samuel 2:6**)
- The loss and gain of money (**1 Samuel 2:7**)
- The persecution of Christians (**Hebrews 12:4-7**)
- The suffering of His saints (**1 Peter 4:19**)
- And even the crucifixion of His Son (**Acts 4:27, 28**)

Some people, in an effort to make God *look good* by man’s false standards, say that God has nothing to do with suffering. They picture Him as a helpless by-stander. An example of this weak view of God is Rabbi Harold Kushner who wrote a bestselling book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kushner states, “*...even God has a hard time keeping chaos in check.*” Rabbi Kushner concludes his book with these words - “*Can you learn to love and forgive Him [God] despite His limitations, as Job does, and as you once learned to forgive and love your parents even though they were not as wise, as strong, or as perfect as you needed them to be?*”

The God revealed in the Bible is omnipotent and sovereign over all. God is in complete control. **Psalms 115:3** “*Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.*” **Romans 8:28** “*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*”

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The Purpose of God through Suffering

The Atheist Scottish philosopher David Hume is known for his famous “*Dilemma*.” Here is a paraphrase of that *Dilemma*

1. If God is loving and gracious and still allows evil and suffering, it is because He is unable to prevent it
2. If God is able to prevent evil and suffering, but doesn't, it is because He is evil. If one rejects both of these alternatives, he must accept Hume's third conclusion.
3. There is no God since evil and suffering run rampant in the world.

Does God have a good purpose for allowing evil and suffering to come into the world? God neither causes nor allows any *purposeless* events or incidents of suffering. Our highest desires tend to be pleasure from things tied to this world, and a comfortable existence free from pain or suffering of any kind. God desires us to find our pleasure and comfort in Him.

Suffering Is Used To Purify Us

God uses episodes of suffering to reveal our maturity level and our depth of commitment to Him. **Job 23:10**: “*But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.*” Gold and silver are purified through fire, **Psalms 66:10**: “*For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.*” In the New Testament we see that same truth in **1 Peter 1:6-7**: “*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” Suffering has the ministry of testing and purifying.

Suffering Is Used To Discipline Us

Sometimes the suffering is the result of our sin, and God uses it to bring us to repentance and obedience. Much of our suffering is simply the working out of the “reaping what we have sown” principle. Suffering is God's corrective discipline, not to make us pay for our sin, but to train us to live in obedience. At other times, suffering, again, is to discipline us and to develop in us endurance for the mission God has planned for us. **2 Timothy 2:3** says: “*Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.*”

Sometimes we never fully understand God's word apart from suffering. **Psalms 119:71**: “*It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.*” All of the suffering that God allows purifies us and disciplines us and in doing so conforms us to Christ's likeness. (**Romans 8:29**) That's why we are told in **James 1:2**: “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*”

Suffering Is Used To Glorify God

Jesus disciples saw a blind man and was asked if he suffered with blindness because of sin, and in **John 9:3**: “*Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God [God's glory] might be displayed in him.'*”

At the end of Job, after all of his suffering, after all his so called friend's mostly worthless advice, after Job's complaining, God parades His glory before Job and shows Job His power, His wisdom, and His providential care. Job is overwhelmed with the glory of God and answers the Lord. **Job 42:1-3**: “*Then Job answered the Lord and said: 'I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.'*”

Job doesn't have to know the answer; God is the answer and in seeing His glory Job is satisfied. **Job 42:5-6** “*I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*”

Romans 8:18 “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*” **Revelation 21:4** “*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.*”