

HOW CAN GOD BE GOOD WHEN THERE IS SO MUCH SUFFERING?



There are two types of question people ask about suffering. Firstly there's the general question: If God is good why does he allow so much suffering, or to put it another way, why does he allow the world to remain in such a mess? Secondly there's the much more complex questions that arise from personal experiences of suffering. In this article I'll briefly address both questions.

GENERAL SUFFERING

The Bible makes clear that God doesn't like suffering. He's not a cosmic sadist like many of the gods of ancient religion. God loves people more than we can begin to imagine and hates to see them suffer. Suffering was not a part of the world as God created it and it will not be a part of the world when he renews it. So why does he permit suffering at all?

When God created the world he didn't create us as robots but as people with the freedom to make choices. As a parent could keep their teenage child safe by locking them in a padded cell, God could keep us safe, but only at the price of our freedom. That would not be much of a life. As humanity we've abused our freedom; rejecting the loving direction of our creator, embracing evil and running our lives apart from him. Because of this the world is profoundly broken.

Suffering is a result of that brokenness which resulted from humanity abusing our freedom and embracing evil. The evil in the world reflects not God's heart but ours. We're free to love, protect, affirm, encourage, build up, cherish and create. But we have the capacity to exploit the developing nations, pump carcinogens into the atmosphere, build tower blocks in earthquake zones, abuse, hurt, lie, break commitments, insult, fight and destroy. The contradictions in the human heart can clearly be seen in any school playground.

God created a good world. It was our choice to reject him that ruined it. However, God longs to rescue anyone who'll reject evil and embrace him, suffering is temporary for all who'll turn to Jesus. One day he'll come back to banish evil and renew the world so now we face a choice. Will we turn back to God and live his way or will we continue to reject him and his directions?

SPECIFIC SUFFERING

People with personal experience of suffering have much less abstract questions. An impersonal article is far from a full answer to the extremely painful and complex questions raised, but here are a few reflections which may offer some hope. When we experience suffering we tend to ask 'why'? This is a natural question but it doesn't often get us far because the cause and effect processes that go on in the world are extremely complicated.





In Jesus' day people thought that all suffering was an affliction from God as a punishment for personal or family sin, Jesus was very quick to reject that idea. Whilst the reasons for suffering in a particular situation may be impossible to discern, Jesus made it very clear that we're not to conclude that God loves us any less when we suffer. He singles out widows, foreigners and orphans in the Bible for special protection. God cares passionately about broken, hurting people.

Another point of hope is that God understands our suffering in the most real way possible. In Jesus, God became a man and entered our suffering world. He didn't receive a warm welcome. He was born in poverty in an animal shelter. While he was still a baby his family had to flee into exile to avoid the murderous attentions of the king. He spent much of his life as an unknown carpenter. He was misunderstood by his family, rejected in his hometown and betrayed and let down by his friends. He lived a sacrificial life of love and service. His short public ministry abruptly ended when he was falsely accused, tortured and executed as a blasphemer by one of the most tortuous and agonising methods devised by man. God is not naive about suffering.

Because he loves us, God longs to meet us in the midst of suffering. He can bring comfort, perspective and spiritual nourishment even when there's no physical relief, if we'll allow our suffering to turn us to him. No-one would wish for suffering but if we're willing, we can learn and grow through our experiences. God is working out his purposes in world history in mysterious ways of which sometimes we catch glimpses but often we're wholly ignorant. However if we'll reach out to him, he can bring meaning and dignity into our suffering.

Whether or not we understand how things are working out, God can bring great and eternally significant things out of very dark situations. Thus we're freed from the tyranny of empty, wholly destructive and meaningless pain. God's offer of forgiveness and new life for the world was brought out of the death of his son on a cross, bitterness, rejection, hurt and death being swallowed up by love, reconciliation, resurrection and life.

Finally God offers the sure hope to all who respond to his love and forgiveness that through death is the possibility of being a part of God's renewed world, free from suffering and pain. If this life is all there is then suffering can become unbearable. However, if we'll receive a new, incorruptible body and an eternal place in God's community of perfect love, then this life comes into a very different perspective. God has an unimaginably glorious future for all who will embrace him. This is a vision of heaven recorded at the end of the Bible:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, ... 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. 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." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" **Revelation 21:1-5 NIV**

