

REFLECTIONS ON SUFFERING

The world can be a terrifying and tragic place. Suffering and pain are part and parcel of being human, filling our lives with grief and leaving us with haunting questions. Why did it happen? What does it all mean? Where now? And a question that can lead us into very dark, confusing and fearful places: Why did God let it happen?

Sometimes we can see a clear and direct link between actions and their consequences. The cannabis user develops mental health problems. The smoker gets lung cancer. Sometimes we suffer as a result of the consequences of other's actions. We lose a parent after they were struck by a drunk driver. A financial scam wipes out our pension just before we retire. Sometimes there seem to be no clear reasons for the suffering. A teenager contracts a terrible disease; a community is destroyed by a natural disaster.

In the face of suffering violent emotions rage in our hearts and demand to be worked through. Anger and confusion are normal parts of the grieving process and need to be faced and expressed. In due time there are different ways we can bring all of this to God.

We can come as judge, trying him for his failure to intervene as we would have wished. Or we can come to him as a Father asking for help, healing and hope. The route we finally settle on comes down to our view of God's character and whether or not we can trust him with huge things we don't understand. Will our circumstances shape how we see God or will how we see God shape our circumstances?

The route of accusing God is very understandable and the one most often chosen, as much within the pages of the Bible as anywhere else. Our experience confronts us with realities that we can't deal with and that don't make sense. Our fear and pain find expression as anger towards the one we believed could have intervened and chose not to; God. Whilst this response is a realistic place to visit, it isn't a great destination.

We can trace out the classical Biblical understanding of suffering. God entrusted stewardship of the Earth to humanity. We were seduced by evil and, by rejecting God, severed our relationship with him and disastrously broke the created order. That brokenness marks our human interactions but also mysteriously extends to the whole of the natural order. Creation has been broken by evil resulting in suffering and death.

But that's only a general answer and doesn't help us with the specific "why?" questions. In his healing ministry to broken people, Jesus was very clear that we can't assume our specific suffering is always an indication of our specific sin. Jesus did not believe in karma. Often we have no idea of the cause and effect chains that resulted in a specific incidence of suffering and we're confronted with the limitations of what we can know. Even if we could trace the intricate lines of cause and effect, would that help us? That would not, in itself, prove God guilty or innocent of our charges.



The Bible does not answer all the questions we want to ask about suffering, and that's not a bad thing. Philosophising in the face of grief and trauma can be simply cruel as the famous and sobering account of Job's counsellors reminds us. But the Bible does offer us answers to some important questions. If we ask "Is God aloof and distant?" the answer is the incarnation, God stepping into our broken world in the person of Jesus. If we ask "Does God care?" the answer is Jesus' life of sacrificial love and his torture and execution on a cross. If we ask "Can God do anything and is there hope?" then the answer is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. As simply ideas these seem abstract and irrelevant, but as living realities they can change everything.

In Jesus, the Bible teaches that God has stepped into human history. God is no stranger to suffering. Jesus was born into poverty, as a baby his family had to flee into exile to avoid an assassination attempt. He grew up in obscurity in an occupied country. During his brief and sacrificial ministry of teaching and healing he repeatedly faced opposition and accusation. He was betrayed, arrested, falsely accused, condemned for political expediency, abandoned by his closest friends and horrifically and humiliatingly tortured to death. God understands suffering in the most personal way. When his friend Lazarus died, he entered fully into the grief of those around him and wept with them, even though he went on to raise him from the dead. When he rode into Jerusalem, the fate he foresaw for the city caused him to burst into tears. Jesus was not at all impassive to the suffering of others or himself, he gets it.

The Bible claims that through this suffering, which Jesus willingly embraced, God has overcome the stranglehold that evil and death had over humanity. In his resurrection, Jesus showed that death, the ultimate end of evil and suffering, will not get the last word. In his resurrection he has given us a foretaste of what he will one day do for the whole of creation, raising it, and us, from suffering, decay and death.

Clearly this doesn't answer the "why?" questions that we still want to ask about our experiences of suffering. What it does offer us are some very significant reasons that we might choose to trust God in spite of our unanswered questions. This allows us to open up our life to his help and healing. It also gives us an assurance that a day is coming when God will again act in Jesus to finally put an end to suffering, evil and death. If Jesus can overcome death, then death loses its veto on the meaning, significance and destiny of our lives. That doesn't mean that we'll be exempt from suffering in the meantime, but it does mean that our suffering, decay and death will not get the last word. This gives us hope that enables us to be defined by the future and released from the chains of bitterness and disappointed expectations. We will all taste death, but through Jesus, death can be overcome.

