

The Problem of Suffering

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“Somewhere in the world a man has abducted a little girl. Soon he will rape, torture, and kill her. If an atrocity of this kind not occurring at precisely this moment, it will happen in a few hours, or days at most. Such is the confidence we can draw from the statistical laws that govern the lives of six billion human beings. The same statistics also suggest that this girl’s parents believe—*at this very moment*—that an all-powerful and all-loving God is watching over them and their family. Are they right to believe this? Is it *good* that they believe this?

“No.”¹

So argues atheist Sam Harris. Maybe he has posed the problem in a horrifying way, reflecting human perversity. But it’s THE question when it comes to God—why doesn’t he stop it? Why do we suffer anyway? And if God is God, can’t he intervene? Suffering is the real stumbling-block to faith in a loving, caring God. It’s also the most popular argument for atheism. So it surely deserves our urgent attention.

In the words of John Stott, “The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore, unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God’s justice and love.”²

For if God is truly the Almighty, then he could easily take care of all the pain and suffering, the sin and evil, the violence and death that plagues our planet. So why is there suffering if God is love?

Take a look online and you’ll find the question asked in a whole multitude of ways. (In fact a Barna poll identified the most pressing “God-question” as “Why is there so much suffering in the world?”) You’ll also find many, many “answers.” Answers that miss so much, and the questions become more and more insistent. Not that these are modern questions. They’ve been around since anyone can remember. The Greek philosopher Epicurus stated the problem this way:

“Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to; or he cannot and does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, and does not want to, he is wicked. But, if God both can and wants to abolish evil, then how come there is evil in the world?”

Many conclude there is no God. “The biblical God is a fiction. . . . Only the atheist is compassionate enough to take the profundity of the world’s suffering at face value.”³

“Believing there is no God means the suffering I’ve seen in my family, and indeed all the suffering in the world, isn’t caused by an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent force that isn’t

bothered to help or is just testing us, but rather something we all may be able to help others with in the future. No God means the possibility of less suffering in the future.”⁴

“According to the two most popular religions, Islam (which means “submission”) and Christianity suffering is God’s will.... Suffering is integral to the human condition. But only fools or sadists welcome it in the name of a mythical deity.”⁵

“You’re always letting us humans down
The wars you bring, the babes you drown,
Those lost at sea and never found, and
It’s the same the whole world round.
The hurt I see helps to compound
That Father, Son and Holy Ghost
Is just someone’s unholy hoax.

“If you’re up there you’d perceive
That my heart’s here upon my sleeve:
If there’s one thing I don’t believe in,
It’s you - dear God.”⁶

“God is a mean kid sitting on an anthill with a magnifying glass, and I’m the ant. He could fix my life in five minutes if He wanted to, but he’d rather burn off my feelers and watch me squirm.”⁷

So what’s the answer? Is God responsible for suffering—or at least not preventing it? Christians have suggested several reasons. The first is that the answer is unknowable—at least for the moment. That God does things that we do not, even cannot, understand. So we simply have to trust—that there may be a good reason. Or maybe not. We just don’t know. Hardly a convincing argument to those who suffer. Additionally, since you can give no answer to the question of why there is suffering, then there may be no answer at all, and no reason why a good God permits it.

The second answer relates to our free will. In order for us to have free will, then God has to allow the possibility of evil and suffering. Such an answer is at least a partial response, since it does emphasize suffering as a result of our choices. Of course, the fact that the innocent suffer with the guilty is another problem that relates back to the goodness and fairness of God. So much suffering seems to be gratuitous that it also raises the question of how much freedom does God have to allow in order for us to have choice.

A third response is that experiencing suffering builds character. That may be partially true in a limited scenario, as a learning experience. And we do need to learn from suffering. But it does not resolve the larger questions—how much do babies drowned in the tsunami (or the Flood) actually learn? How were their characters built? While survivors may learn, what of the victims of suffering who do not?

Most responses are variations or combinations of the above. While there may be elements of truth, they are generally unsatisfying, because the fundamental question remains unanswered. If God is truly good, why does he not stop the suffering?

Consequently God is either abandoned or ignored—or cursed and forgotten. Those who cling to their belief in God may simply conclude that the alternative—agnosticism or atheism—is worse. But God still does not look good.

But there is another answer. An answer that looks into the nature of this world and its suffering and sin, and sees that God neither created the situation nor plans to continue it. If God is good, and is also all-powerful, then the only possible reason for the existence of suffering is that God permits it for some greater objective. Now that objective must be sufficiently important to be balanced against all the pain and agony suffered.

The answer is that God himself is under attack, and over the most important issues—his nature and character. He is accused of being a divine tyrant, a punitive dictator—uncaring, unloving, untruthful. In allowing freedom, he is then charged with causing all that has gone wrong.

In order to answer, God has to allow freedom—freedom to experience the consequences of choices, freedom to see where sin and evil lead, freedom to see where suffering really comes from. God did not create a suffering world—it is the result of the work of the Enemy. And God temporarily permits this to continue so that all can see, and experience, and understand. Not just to vindicate himself, but to show what really happens when free beings make evil choices. So that the whole universe will see and know and decide—for truth and right. In this suffering is inevitable, and God, because of his granting of choice, cannot end it until the demonstration is over.

“The discord which his own course had caused in heaven, Satan charged upon the government of God. All evil he declared to be the result of the divine administration. He claimed that it was his own object to improve upon the statutes of Jehovah. Therefore God permitted him to demonstrate the nature of his claims, to show the working out of his proposed changes in the divine law. His own work must condemn him. Satan had claimed from the first that he was not in rebellion. The whole universe must see the deceiver unmasked.

“Even when he was cast out of heaven. Infinite Wisdom did not destroy Satan. Since only the service of love can be acceptable to God, the allegiance of His creatures must rest upon a conviction of His justice and benevolence. The inhabitants of heaven and of the worlds, being unprepared to comprehend the nature or consequences of sin, could not then have seen the justice of God in the destruction of Satan. Had he been immediately blotted out of existence, some would have served God from fear rather than from love. The influence of the deceiver would not have been fully destroyed, nor would the spirit of rebellion have been utterly eradicated. For the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages, he must more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen in their true light by all created beings, and that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might be forever placed beyond all question.

“Satan’s rebellion was to be a lesson to the universe through all coming ages--a perpetual testimony to the nature of sin and its terrible results. The working out of Satan’s rule, its effects upon both men and angels, would show what must be the fruit of setting aside the divine authority. It would testify that with the existence of God’s government is bound up the well-being of all the creatures He has made. Thus the history of this terrible experiment of rebellion was to be a perpetual safeguard to all holy beings, to prevent them from being deceived as to the nature of transgression, to save them from committing sin, and suffering its penalty.”⁸

The attack on God is straight at his principles of truth, right, and love. Satan the accuser condemns God for all the evil he himself has caused. God is not the cause of suffering, but that’s exactly what Satan charges him with.

“Satan has charged injustice upon God...” “Satan has ascribed to God all the evils to which the flesh is heir. He has represented him as a God who delights in the sufferings of his creatures, who is revengeful and implacable.” “God is dishonored, his character is misinterpreted by Satan, and he is represented as a stern judge who causes suffering to come upon the creatures he has made. This misrepresentation of God’s character is made to appear as truth, and thus through the temptation of the enemy, men’s hearts are hardened against God. Satan charges upon God the very evil he himself has caused men to commit by withholding their means from the suffering. He attributes to God his own characteristics.”⁹

That’s the cosmic situation that God is dealing with. And we come with our question, “Why, God? Why is there so much pain and suffering?”

God replies something like this: “Not because I cannot prevent it, or do not wish to prevent it. Not because I do not care, or that I am unmoved by so much pain. I weep with you, and every second this evil world continues is agony to me. But I wait before I end it for a supremely important reason.

“I wait so that all may see what evil really means and where selfishness leads. I wait so that all can see the Devil in his true character. I wait so that all who will may come to me for salvation, salvation into the arms of a Father God who loves them with an undying love.

“If you want to know the answer to your question, ‘Why God?’ go to the Cross. There you will see me as I really am, two arms outstretched to save, bleeding and dying for all the suffering, misery and pain in the world.”

Just like Jesus who wept while on this earth, God weeps. Not as a powerless being, but precisely because he has the power. His heart aches to heal this world of evil, to wipe away every tear from every eye, to be with his people and be their God, face to face.¹⁰ But because he is God, and he wants all to understand him and love him without compulsion, he waits. “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”¹¹

Why is there evil and suffering? Because the Devil chose this way, which is the opposite of God. How can we say that God is uncaring, that he willingly allows sin and suffering? So often we or the Devil cause evil, and then all of us blame God!

We have bought into the Devil's way, and experience the consequences of trying to go our own way. Not under the punitive hostility of God, but because choosing wrong instead of right has its own natural results. Tragically, such a viewpoint does lead to death, just as God said it would. Not as some imposed penalty by a divine dictator, but the inevitable result foreseen by a loving Creator.

Think for a moment. What is the alternative? For God to intervene in every situation? To stop the car crashing, to prevent the earthquake, to defuse the terrorist's bomb? The result would be a world in which evil is never seen for what it truly is, for it never has its diabolical consequences. A world where God by his intervening power takes care of every problem; a world of eternal evil that can have no end.

Only as the conflict is resolved through the unmasking of evil's real face, only as God is demonstrated to be the loving, compassionate Being he says he is, only as all his creation agrees with him that he was right all along—only then can God bring this rebellion to a close. Those who have chosen the Devil's way will be allowed their choice of final non-existence in the end-time destruction. And then, and only then, can God create a new heaven and a new earth, a place where righteousness dwells and the goodness of God reigns supreme.¹²

"Everybody is going to suffer," comments Deborah Bowen. "We have no choice about that. But there is a choice we do have: to suffer alone or to suffer in the hands of a God who is all-powerful, and all-loving—and whose hands are forever scarred by his own suffering."¹³

The most convincing proof of truth is demonstration. What is true is most clearly seen in action—in the way what is good and right are revealed in each changing situation. We see God as he truly is only in the person of Jesus. He tells us that if we have seen him, we have seen the Father. And he promises the day when he will wipe away our tears, and there will be no more death or crying or suffering. But this can only happen when he can say, "It is done!"

Only when the questions in the cosmic conflict are answered, only when the charges are met, only when the lies of the accuser are completely revealed—only then can suffering come to an end. Only then can the universe be restored, and all its inhabitants live eternally in peace and joy and love, with no more pain or evil or death. Only then—because of what we know, because of what we have experienced, and because of what we choose—forever!

Notes:

1. Sam Harris, "There is No God (and You Know It)." http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/there-is-no-god-and-you-_b_8459.html

2. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p.311.

3. Sam Harris, op. cit.

4. Penn Jillete, "There is No God."

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5015557>

5. Martin Foreman, "Pain and Loss."

<http://www.godwouldbeanatheist.com/cols2007/070429.htm>

6. XTC, lyrics to "Dear God."

7. Movie, Bruce Almighty
8. Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, pp.42-3.
9. Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, October 22, 1895; Review and Herald, November 17, 1891; Review and Herald, June 26, 1894.
10. See Revelation 21 and 22.
11. 2 Peter 3:9 NIV.
12. See 2 Peter 3:13.
13. individual.utoronto.ca/johnbowen/dare/suffer.html
14. John 14:9; Revelation 21:4; Revelation 21:6.

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