

Recently we have all see dramatic televised stories of suffering in Japan from the earthquake and tsunami, citizens protesting against governments and getting slaughtered by their own governments (Libya, Syria), and of course we are aware of the less sudden or dramatic but devastating effects of famines, droughts, malnutrition and diseases in Africa, and the less visible human slave trade that still plagues the humanity. Yet all that may seem distant and removed from those not immediately affected by such tragedies. The fact is that we will also face various kinds of suffering in our lifetimes, and before those trials come, we should prepare a proper biblical foundation for understanding God's purposes for permitting and even causing suffering.

How can we respond to people who raise the question of about why there is evil and suffering in the world if God is supposedly good and all-powerful? Why doesn't God remove the evil and suffering in the world? The technical theological term for this is *theodicy*.

We experience suffering because we live in a world stained by the fall of Adam and Eve and the resulting curse of God on humanity's work on the earth and on the serpent (Gen 3:14-19; Rom 8:18-39). Sickness, death and disasters are all part of living in a broken world under God's just curse on sin. We face great uncertainty about our own future (James 4:13-16; Eccl 9:11). The consequences for Adam eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are being enforced: 'in the day you eat from it, you shall surely die,' (Gen 2:17). Death and its related sufferings have been with the human race ever since. Further, much suffering is directly caused by human moral evil. Since the sin nature is passed on through Adam, if human hearts are not changed by the Gospel, men will still sin daily in so many different ways that cause great suffering (wars, killing, raping, kidnapping, stealing, adultery, lying, cheating, abuse, etc).

We must realize that that there is a balance in the way God reveals himself—he is both a) justly punishing and b) merciful, patient and comforting. Often historical events reveal both sides of his character to different groups of people. The cross of Christ is a revelation of both the justice of God (Rom 3:25b-26) and the mercy of God (Rom 3:25a; 1 Cor 11:24-5; Matt 26:26-28). We should not compare different attributes of God and try to prove that they contradict each other, such as asking, "If God is good and God is powerful, why is there evil and suffering in the world?" the expected answer implies that either God is not good or he is not all powerful. Instead we see a harmony of God's attributes clustered around God's goal to glorify his own name and change his people into the likeness of Christ. One particular incident in the news actually reveals multiple things about God simultaneously, depending on God's mysterious purposes to either forgive and save or give men up to their lusts. Evil is allowed to exist in this world because God will use it to show the greater clarity of his different aspects of his character. He reveals his *patience* by letting evil continue and uses suffering to harden some people's hearts in further rebellion against God, his people and his commands (Exod 4:21; 7:3; 14:4, 8, 17; Heb 3:8, 15). God reveals his *holiness & justice* by intermittently punishing evil-doers, and reveals his *wrath* by giving men over to their sinful desires (Romans 1:18-25). God reveals his compassionate love by using suffering in non-Christians' lives to lead them to faith in Christ (Luke 23:40-43). He uses suffering in believers to change them into the likeness of Jesus Christ with strong faith while comforting us in the process. God reveals his glory and power by showing the world and the devil that his people serve God, not because we are getting lots of earthly wealth & benefits (Job 1:9-10, 21-22; 2:9-10), but because he is worth serving and a relationship with him is the most important thing we can possess.

Some misunderstand the ultimate proofs of God's love, and attempt to accuse God that he is not loving because of the suffering we or our loved ones experience due to God's unwillingness to heal when we pray for it. This accusation against God results from a failure to start with the ultimate proof of the love of God in salvation (our greatest need) (Romans 5:5-8; 8:28-39). God

may answer our prayers for earthly healing or he may not. Some people imagine that God's goodness and all-powerful nature would necessarily cause him to remove suffering from the world now rather than at a time when he has appointed. His ultimate promise for healing is reserved for the new heaven and the new earth, where all tears and sorrows will be wiped away (Rev 21:4-5). Thus all prayers for the healing of God's people may only be temporarily unanswered, and indeed, will be eternally answered in heaven. Thus we must be patient in enduring under trials until we receive the crown of life (James 1:12).

God did not stop the accusers & torturers of Jesus because he planned Jesus' his death on a cross for his own glory--to show his love and mercy and save those who believe (Rom 5:8; 3:25). God does not enjoy watching us suffer. Creation groans under this suffering (Rom 8:20-23), and the Holy Spirit also groans with us (Rom 8:26). Since Jesus Christ knows what it is like to suffer under evil unjustly, and he is able to comfort those who are suffering in the ways he was comforted (Hebrews 2:13-18; 4:14-16; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11). God is not passively detached from us in our suffering but identifies with us in it through Jesus Christ's earthly experience.

God's goal for us on this earth is not mainly our comfort, but our growing likeness to Jesus Christ and our knowledge of Christ. This will mean likeness to the humble suffering of Jesus and the resurrection power of Jesus (Philippians 2:5-11; 3:10-11; Romans 8:29-30; Heb 5:7-8; 1 Pet 5:6-10). We become like Christ in having purified faith that keeps us focused on heaven and eternity (1 Peter 1:3-8; Deut 8:1-3), patiently trusting in the sovereign compassion of our good God (James 5:7-11; Rom 9:20-23). Faith is only tested when suffering and difficulties come and we need these tests to know the reality of our salvation and the help of God. We need these opportunities of suffering to learn that the grace of God is sufficient to endure unchanging problems (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). We need his fatherly discipline to teach us to hate sin and love holiness more than earthly happiness or health (1 Cor 11:29-30; Heb 12:7-14). Those who are so comforted in this life are more able to comfort others, like Jesus, in times of suffering (2 Cor 1:3-11; James 5:14-16). Even more, God sometimes sends suffering to prevent sins of spiritual pride, as he did with Paul (2 Corinthians 12:7). Psalm 23 is as comfortable talking about the Lord's comforting love and care leading us to security and refreshment (vss. 1-3) as talking about his leading us past the valley of death and the presence of evil (vss. 4-5). The ultimate answer of Psalm 23 is the privilege of dwelling in the house of the Lord forever (v.6).

We could just as easily ask the opposite question from the one that began this article: Why is there any pleasure in the world if God is just and man is sinful? This pushes the debate in the opposite direction, to show that we don't deserve any pleasure, and if God were completely and only just, we would only be punished for our sins immediately. It helps people to see that they usually are reasoning only from the perspective of human comfort rather than God's divine will.

A summary application example: A disaster simultaneously reveals numerous aspects of God's character to different groups of people. A tsunami that kills thousands instantly will reveal aspects of God's just wrath on unrepentant sinners (Luke 13:1-5). Yet it is also a merciful forewarning to the living to flee from the coming wrath revealed when Jesus returns (Matt 3:7-10; Rom 2:5-10). It will also reveal aspects of his patience with his still living enemies through the common grace help through humanitarian and government groups (Rom 9:22). It will also reveal God's comforting hope to living Christians whose beloved Christian brothers and sisters died and are now with Jesus (1 Thess 4:13; Phil 1:23). God will also reveal his generous compassion through the deeds of service and evangelism his people perform in response (2 Cor 8-9). God will have mercy all the living who turn to Christ before, during and after the tragedy and ask him for the help and salvation that he promises to give (James 4:5-10; 2 Cor 12:9-10).

I conclude with a confession of Faith I wrote for use in church that summarizes the kinds of suffering we experience, what the effects are on us as believers and how God promises to help us in suffering.

Because of his sin in the garden of Eden, we believe that the curse on Adam, as representative head of the human race, means that every one of his descendants is under the curse of sin and they all could justly be punished by God for this *original sin** as well as for their own sins. Through the sin of man, God reveals his grace, mercy, love, patience, power, justice and wrath and commands us to be humbled because of our many offenses against God, repent and seek God's grace and mercy. We believe we experience the effects of the curse daily by our own sin, other's sins against us, sickness, sorrow, deprivation, disaster, not knowing the best time to act for successful results, and death. These effects of the curse will never be completely removed until the Second Coming of Christ and often lead us to cry out, "Meaningless!" Until then, the normal result of the curse in the lives of believers is reversed. Formerly, as unbelievers, we experienced the effects of the curse confirming our separation from God. Now, as believers, the effects of God's curse draw us closer to God and help us imitate Christ during his earthly ministry. Christ our *High Priest** ministers grace and mercy to us because of what he already learned through suffering: *sending* his comforting presence by the Holy Spirit, *sending* elect angels to help us, *giving grace* to continue to witness for God in physical weakness, *strengthening faith* in God's promises as we are tested by persecution and loneliness and deprivation, *increasing our desire* to glorify and worship God, *helping us gladly submit* to God's will while suffering, *helping us repent and hate sin* more than suffering, *leading us* to diligent use of the means of grace (the Bible, prayer, sacraments, fellowship, fatherly discipline of suffering), *reminding us* of Christ's own sufferings, *delivering us* from evil (physical affliction, mental deception and pleasurable temptations), *strengthening patience*, *enabling us* to entrust our enemies to God's just judgment and rejoice when they are justly punished, *assuring us* of God's love and of our pure faith, and *fixing our hope* on God-centered joy as our inheritance, on our heavenly ministry as kings and priests, and on the complete removal of the curse and its effects. As Christ's sufferings flow over into our lives, so the comfort of the Father of all compassion comforts us. In the process, we are able to comfort others with the comfort we have received from God. Gen 2:16-17; 3:1-19; Hosea 6:7; Rom 3:10-18, 23; 5:12-19; 8:20; 1 Cor 15:56; Heb 9:27; Rom 3:25-6; 5:8; 9:14-23; 1 Tim 1:12-17; Titus 2:11; James 4:6-10; Ecclesiastes; Rom 8:18-39; Heb 4:14-16; 2:17; 5:7-10; John 14:16-18; Heb 1:13; Luke 22:43; 2 Cor 12:7-10; James 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:3-9; John 16:32; John 17:1-5; Matt 26:42; Heb 12:2-4; 2 Cor 8:9; 2 Tim 4:17-18; Matt 6:13; Rom 5:1-5; 1 Pet 2:23; Rev 18:20; 19:1-3; Rom 8:39; Rev 20:4-6; 2:26; 3:21; 21:3-7; 22:3; Phil 3:10-11; 2 Cor 1:3-11

Good references for further reading:

How Long O Lord: Reflections on Suffering and Evil by D.A. Carson

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