

MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERING

At times of disaster, lots of people ask the question – “Where is God in all this suffering? Why does He allow it?”

We’ve answered that question in the past, but as we go through trials and problems personally, the question keeps on coming up from time to time, and we continue to wrestle with it. So let’s notice a few things the Bible says about trials and suffering...

In Exodus 5, God commanded Moses to appeal to Pharaoh for the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Moses did what he was told, but the Pharaoh angrily increased his oppression of the people, beating them and forcing them to work even harder. The Israelite leaders came to Moses:

Exodus 5:21 “and they said, “May the LORD look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

Moses didn’t realise what God was doing. He reacted as we would.

Exodus 5:22-23 “Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? ²³ Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.”

The fact is that the Bible has hundreds of examples of trials and suffering. All of the writers of the Bible, including the great giants of the faith, went through real hardships.

Consider the experience of Joseph who was hated by his brothers, who tried to kill him, sold him as a slave, where he was falsely imprisoned, accused of rape and threatened with execution. He didn’t know how the pieces would eventually fit together – he had to continue to trust God even though the situation around him didn’t make sense – God didn’t seem to be answering his prayers.

What about David, the man after God’s own heart? He experienced plenty of trials and suffering. Notice what he said in Psalms 13:1-2 “How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”

Then there was poor old Jeremiah. Look what happened to him!

Jer. 38:6 “So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king’s son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.”

Moving over to the New Testament, John the Baptist, of whom Jesus said there was no greater man born of woman, found himself in Herod’s stinking dungeon. There an evil woman named Herodias had him beheaded in revenge because he had condemned her immoral conduct.

There is no record that an angel visited John’s cell to explain the meaning of the persecution he was going through. He went through the same confusing experiences as we do. It’s comforting to know he responded in a very human way.

Matt. 11:2-3 "When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples³ to ask Him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" He really suffered. God didn't jump to his aid in every situation.

Then we have the martyrdom of Stephen, stoned to death for proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ. And most of the 12 disciples suffered agonising deaths.

Of course we read about it in Hebrews 11. Here are just a couple of verses talking about the great men and women of God.

Heb.11:36-37 "Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated."

People say "How could a loving God allow earthquakes to happen?"

Well the plain fact is that God allows a lot of suffering! The fact that there is suffering doesn't disprove God's existence!

God didn't cause this suffering. He allowed it to happen. Here is a quote from the March 7,2011 edition of "Challenge Weekly":

"This is not an act of God; this is the earth doing what it does. The act of God is in the love and compassion that people are sharing among each other." (The words of the Rt Rev Peter Beck, Dean of the destroyed Christchurch Cathedral, after the earthquake in February 2011.)

God allowed the earthquake to happen because the city was built on a fault line, and He didn't intervene to stop the regular, normal moving of the tectonic plates of the earth. In fact the Bible prophesies there will be earthquakes in different places.

It is a pity the Japanese built nuclear reactors on a fault line. But God didn't cause the earthquake and tsunami in early 2011. They were regular consequences of the moving of the earth's surface, with heat bubbling up from the centre of the earth.

If you were to jump off the roof of this building, you would be injured – because of the law of gravity. God doesn't intervene every time that happens, and God didn't cause you to jump off the building and be injured. He didn't cause your injuries, just as He didn't cause the earthquakes. Just as He didn't cause Jeremiah to be thrown in the dungeon or Stephen to be stoned. But He allowed these trials and sufferings to happen.

Of course, He can and does perform miracles! Many of these are recorded in the Bible. Sometimes He steps in to rescue His people from suffering. But not always!

Some Christians teach that God will give us everything we want and remove all our trials. "Name it, claim it" theology. But that's not biblical. Sometimes He allows His people to suffer, and simply says – "Trust Me".

John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Jesus promised we would have trouble.

1 Peter 4:12 is one verse we wish wasn't in the Bible. "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."

But 1 Peter 3:12 is also there, a page earlier. "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

So God loves us, yet He allows us to suffer. He knows we are suffering. Therefore there must be something profitable about it, even though we don't see that. There must be a higher purpose for suffering, even though we don't see it that way, yet. So we have to have faith – faith that it is going to work out, even though we can't understand why we are suffering now. This is the main reason we suffer trials, to develop faith.

If we didn't have trials, there would be no need for faith!

If God did everything we asked for, answered every prayer, we would never have toothache, or headaches, or kidney stones, or glasses to wear. We wouldn't die, so after a while it would be noticed that no Christians would be dying, whereas other people would be suffering all sorts of illnesses and dying as usual.

Besides that, all Christians' businesses would be succeeding, they would have beautiful homes, lots of money, etc. What would happen? People would seek friendship with God in order to gain the fringe benefits, rather than having love and repentance.

The entire basis for the relationship between God and man would be undermined.

If God was to give us everything we asked for, where would the need be for faith?

Romans 8:24 "For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?"

Heb. 11:1 "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."
The definition of faith – the evidence of things not seen.

Jesus wants us to accept Him in the absence of proof! John 20:29 "Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Abraham was an example of someone who did this – believed even when there was no reason to; the visible signs were all against it.

Romans 4:18-21 ¹⁸"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. ²⁰Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised."

That's why he is called the Father of the Faithful. The facts said it was impossible. But Abraham believed God, even when it didn't make sense!

Job put it this way: Job 13:15 (KJV) "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him: but I will maintain mine own ways before Him."

This is similar to what the 3 men said in Daniel 3:17-18 ¹⁷ “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and He will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if He does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

“If not, we’ll still serve Him anyway”. That’s the attitude a true Christian has – we don’t understand why we are going through a trial, but we know God is there and loves us, we still believe Him and know it will all work out in the end.

And He does help us! Remember when Nebuchadnezzar looked into the blazing furnace and saw 4 men instead of 3, and the 4th looked like the Son of God? Jesus Christ is there with us, comforting and encouraging us as we go through our fiery trials.

Of course He became a man, and He suffered trials too! He had that same attitude that He would have faith in God the Father even if God didn’t rescue Him from His trials. He asked the Father to remove the cup of suffering, but if it wasn’t possible, may your will be done.

Matt. 26:42 “He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

Hebrews 5:8 “Son though He was, He learned obedience from what He suffered.”
Jesus learned from His suffering, and so we learn from our trials.

1 Peter 1:6-7 “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

The reason we go through trials is to develop our faith. I believe that is the main reason, but there are other reasons too.

When you think of it, the people of the world who go through suffering like in the recent earthquakes and tsunami aren’t building much faith – if they don’t believe in God!

So we look on suffering differently from them. We understand God’s ways are higher than ours, and even though we don’t understand the specific reason for the trial or disaster or problem, we still believe and trust in God.

Other people don’t see it that way, so trials don’t develop their faith. They’ll have to wait until God calls them to see the spiritual aspects of life. But there are still benefits for them – people get out and help each other, pull together and rally round in wonderful ways, showing the virtues of true love, self-sacrifice, courage and determination. These are godly characteristics that are hammered out on the anvil of tribulation.

So when we are faced with trials and suffering, let’s remember this is common to man, this is part of human existence in a physical and fallen world. God doesn’t always intervene to take away the problem, and often we don’t understand why it has happened, and it just isn’t fair. But that is an opportunity to develop more faith – knowing God is there even though things don’t make sense. That is the way we feel when we have built up a relationship with God over the years.

Let's always remember it will be worth it in the end!

Romans 8:18-19, 21 "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed....that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."

The time will come when there will be no more earthquakes and tsunamis or anything like that. God speed that day!