

The problem of suffering



The Christadelphians

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THE WORLD IS FULL OF SUFFERING

We have only to open our local newspaper to see how the world around us is full of suffering. A house fire started by a frying pan leaves a family with nowhere to live. A car crash kills a young man, and leaves his girlfriend's heart torn apart by grief. Cancer slowly eats away the beautiful body of a vivacious young woman and her marriage ends in ruins and her children have no income when she dies. These are ordinary people like you and me. It seems so unfair that they have to suffer, when there are really evil people in the world who live to a ripe old age surrounded by luxury. And sometimes innocent children suffer through accident or disease or war, before they have even had a chance to taste what life is like.

Switch on the international news, and there is suffering on a huge scale. Civil war in Africa continues for years with children driven from their homes and

dying from starvation. Suicide bombers kill fifty innocent people at a time and maim hundreds of others. Serious flooding in India leaves a million people homeless. A tsunami in the Pacific destroys half a million people in a few hours. Why, we ask, if God is a God of love, does He allow such things to go on year after year? It is a good question. It deserves a reasoned answer.

WHERE DOES SUFFERING COME FROM?

The first point is that a lot of suffering is of human origin. The frying pan fire was caused by forgetfulness. The car crash was due to pride – the young lad trying to reach the crossroads before his mate. What about the cancer that killed the young mother? The scientists would say the body has built-in mechanisms for eliminating rogue cells created during the cell divisions that are essential to cell replacement and repair. But sometimes



these are overwhelmed by a huge challenge, as when we eat or touch carcinogenic compounds. Can we blame God because our bodies fail to cope with man-made chemicals? Some people deliberately take drugs like heroin and cocaine. These plant-based products are a medical blessing when used to reduce pain at the end of life. But for the addicts, they are a gateway to self-destruction. The civil wars in Africa are the result of strife between tribal groups. Suicide bombers are driven by hatred. The flooding in India is increased by de-forestation and people building houses in high-risk flood plains. What about calamities such as earthquakes which come randomly upon us, like the one that caused the tsunami on Boxing Day 2004? The geologists would say they are the result of a slow creeping of tectonic plates in the earth's crust, building up pressures to a point where they must move to relieve the strains. Should God stop the movements of the earth's crust, and if so what would happen to the stresses and strains?

The point, then, is that it is not fair to blame God for most of the suffering that blights human existence. But there is another question. Even if God does not directly cause human suffering, surely if He has all power He ought to be able to prevent it? Why does He not ring a bell to remind the busy mother she has left the gas on under the frying pan? Or stretch out His hand and stop the car before it hits the lamp post? Obviously, He **could**. But He does not. And more soberingly still,



when His own Son was dying in agony on the cross, He did not stretch out His hand either. He allowed him to suffer, more than any of us do.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

To address the whole problem of why God allows suffering, we need to go back to the beginning. The Bible says in the very beginning there was no suffering. Man lived in a Paradise. Food was in easy reach, the climate was perfect, and the animals had no fear of man. God the Creator and man His greatest creation, were in perfect harmony.

The problems began when Adam and his wife broke the commandments of God.



They had been warned of the penalty for disobedience, but they went ahead and disobeyed anyway. The Bible has a word for human rebellion against God. It calls it 'sin'. Called before the Creator for judgement, the two sinners found themselves driven out of the Paradise, and condemned to experience suffering in its various forms.

"To the woman he said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'.

And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I

commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return'" (Genesis 3:16-19).¹

Eve would taste sorrow from her role as mother. Adam would feel the sting of thorns and thistles as he perspired, growing food for his family. And all mankind would eventually spiral downhill into the grave, where we return to dust. Death is the ultimate cause of sadness, whether it comes by accident, by human hand, or by disease or old age.

From this point onwards we begin to read of human traits that led to violence and tears. Cain murdered Abel, and left his parents with broken hearts. In chapter six of Genesis the earth was full of violence because nobody cared about God's way any more. Men built great cities, and then started wars so they could take away someone else's cities and turn the people into slaves. Wars led to famines, and famines bred disease, and the tears rained down in floods. Maybe it was merciful that God ensured criminals are eventually cut

¹ Genesis 3:16-19 means Genesis chapter 3 verses 16 to 19. Quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV)

off by death. A world of immortal sinners would be frightful to contemplate.

SUFFERING IS NOT FOR EVER

If this kind of world was to be the state of mankind from Adam to eternity, the prospects would be grim. Man himself is unable to eradicate suffering. Certainly scientists have reduced infant mortality, and made it easier for people to travel and to communicate with each other. But the growing population, the direct result of lower infant mortality, vaccinations and antibiotics, has increased the pressure on resources. The rich get richer, but the poor get poorer. The fuel needed for travel is emptying the oil wells, and filling the roads with queues of traffic and the air with greenhouse gases. The age at death is increasing in Western countries, but the extra years seem to be spent in the emptiness of care homes because families are too busy to look after grandparents. And war, the greatest scourge, is no nearer being eradicated than ever before. In many ways, things are getting worse, not better.

Happily, things are not going to continue in this way forever. God the Creator has planned a time when Paradise will be restored, and death, the penalty for sin, will be taken away for ever. This great work revolves around his son, Jesus the saviour. God sent Jesus into the world to conquer sin, which is the root cause of suffering. He defeated sin in himself, by his complete obedience to God's ideals. That experience qualifies him to bring to

GOD SENT JESUS INTO THE WORLD TO CONQUER SIN, THE ROOT CAUSE OF SUFFERING

an end sin in the entire world, which he will do at his second coming.

This is how the apostle Paul puts it, contrasting Adam with Jesus:

“For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous ... so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:19,21).

Jesus conquered suffering in a small way at his first coming by healing the sick and feeding the hungry. But he will do so on a world-wide scale when he comes again. The Bible calls this time the Kingdom of God, when everyone will acknowledge God as their King and obey His laws. This will bring permanent happiness. At the end of the Kingdom of God, death itself will be eradicated from the globe, and Jesus will hand over the kingdom to his Father as a place of eternal beauty and peace.

Here are some Bible pictures of the Kingdom of God – little videos of how life will be:

“For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak

and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight” (Psalm 72:12-14).

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9).

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man

WHY DO GOOD PEOPLE SUFFER JUST AS MUCH AS BAD PEOPLE?

leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy ... and the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 35:5,6,10).



The amazing thing is, God offers us the chance to be there, and to enjoy the peaceful reign of Jesus. He calls us out to be His sons and daughters, and to inherit these great promises.

So, suffering came into the world because of man’s rebellion against God. Much of it is of human origin. But this state is temporary. God is going to send His Son Jesus to bring justice and peace to the world, and to curb the effects of human sin.

SUFFERING IS PART OF THE CURSE

Now we need to go back to our question. Why has God allowed suffering to continue for 6000 years? Why do good people often seem to suffer just as much as evil people? Why should innocent babies die when they have done no wrong? Well, we need to remember that suffering came into the world in the first place because our first parents rebelled against God. Disease, accidents, old age and death continue because they are part of what the Bible calls “The Curse”. We all live in this environment, and whether we are good or bad we are subject to its rules.

But remember, Jesus came into the world to take away the curse. The Bible finishes with a picture of the Garden of Eden restored, and trees of life bringing healing to all nations, and then it says there will be no more curse (Revelation 22:1-3).

SUFFERING CAN BE A GOOD THING

Here we need to introduce an idea that may seem strange at first. That is, that God allows suffering to continue relatively unchecked during the 6000 years or so of man's history because the background of suffering actually produces character in those that are exercised by it.

How, you might say, can suffering be a good thing? It depends, of course, on your attitude to it. Some will rant and rave when things go wrong in their lives, and become permanently bitter. But others will accept suffering as an experience that brings them closer to God. It teaches them patience, and dependence on God, and a willingness to leave the future in His hands.

The most obvious example is that of Jesus. Although he was God's very dear son, God allowed him to experience weariness, hunger, fear and serious pain without intervention. Why? The Bible says that it was to make him perfect.

"Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8,9).

"For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering" (Hebrews 2:10).

So Jesus was a better person after his sufferings than before. He tasted all the sorrows that afflict us. As Isaiah puts it "he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Now he is in a better position to provide help and strength to those who believe in him, because he knows what it feels like.

"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:17,18).

Let's take another example. The book of Genesis has a long biography of a man called **Jacob**. Forced to run away from home by his big brother, Jacob falls in love with a girl called Rachel. Her father insists he must work seven years to pay off the dowry, which he cheerfully does. But at the last minute he substitutes another daughter, and makes him work seven more years for Rachel. He now has two wives, who endlessly quarrel, but no money. He goes on working for six more years, but his cheating employer keeps changing his wages. At last he runs away again, and returns to his own country. He comes



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to Bethel, the house of God, and offers sacrifices there to thank God for delivering him from all his enemies. A few days later his beloved Rachel dies in childbirth. Then her son, his favourite child, is apparently torn to pieces by wild animals. Can you imagine his suffering? 22 years later still, he discovers his beloved son Joseph is not dead after all, but alive in Egypt and waiting to welcome him into his arms. How did Jacob look back on all his toil and grief? Was he bitter? Had he given up believing in a God who allows suffering? Not at all. See how he speaks of his life in this passage:

“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth” (Genesis 48:15,16).

He has learned to put his trust in God, to relax in His arms, and trust in Him.

SUFFERING IS A TESTING GROUND

Speak to people you know who have gone through deep suffering, and they will tell you that although it was traumatic at the time, looking back, it has made them better people than they were. Character is shaped by facing up to troubles. If a child is shielded from all pain by an over-protective mother, it becomes insipid and spoilt. If you want to produce a competent soldier, you force him to do long marches, to endure heat and cold, to go hungry and still keep fighting. Life is a testing ground, and suffering is the anvil on which our characters are beaten out. God allows suffering, to make us better people.

This is the lesson of the book of Job, a man who overnight lost his children and most of his possessions. His friends thought he must have committed some secret sin, and that God was punishing him. It seemed obvious to them – if we are rich and prosperous, they said, it is because we are good people. If we suffer, it is because we are bad. But that is not true. As Job himself pointed out, the wicked often **prosper**. At the end of the book of Job it is clear that God allowed Job to suffer to test his faith, and to remind us all that possessions and health are gifts of God. We must trust Him, and wait for his salvation.

There is too the important point that suffering in others can bring out in those around the sufferer the qualities of compassion and self-sacrifice. These were

sadly missing in the case of Job's three friends, but all of us who have suffered have been grateful for the love shown by others.

THE LESSON FROM DISASTERS

What about those terrible accidents that carry away apparently innocent people, like aeroplane crashes or tsunamis?

Jesus has a very important statement to make. His friends told him about a tower that had recently collapsed in Jerusalem, crushing 18 people to death. "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?" he said. "No, I tell you", he went on, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4,5). He is saying that for the victims of that disaster there was now no more opportunity to repent and make peace with God. They had perished. We cannot put off seeking salvation. None of us knows the day of our death.

TEARS WILL BE DRIED

The fruit of all suffering will be reaped in the Kingdom of God. As Paul says, when the Kingdom comes the present days of weeping will be like a dream that is forgotten. See Romans 8:16-21:

"The Spirit ... bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing



with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God".

These are comforting words. For the humanist, life can only deteriorate, as he sinks into the weakness and frustration of old age. But for the Christian, the future gets better. Isaiah 25:7-9 tells us that if we wait, we shall receive the blessing of endless life in a new and better world:

"And he (God) will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save

us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation”.

A SHARED YOKE

One last point. Jesus suffered like we do, more than we do. He promises to share our suffering:

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus is speaking of a double yoke, where a farmer sets an old ox alongside a young one to teach it how to pull.

Jesus knows how we feel, but he offers to take the burden and halve it. It takes faith to believe he means what he says, but faith is what the Christian life is all about. Jesus is the key to God’s great plan. One day he will chase all evil from the earth. But now from heaven he watches and weeps over our sufferings and wills us to succeed. And when the day of his return comes, and the dead are raised, and we see his face, all the troubles of the present will vanish away.

– David M. Pearce

For further reading see our choice of booklets on the next page.

Published by The Christadelphians, Freepost THE CHRISTADELPHIANS

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