

How can God allow suffering?

Barring the intervention of some currently unimaginable catastrophe, millions of people will remember where they were at 2pm British Summer Time on Tuesday 11th September 2001.

The Economist described the events of that day as an "unspeakable crime." Most British newspapers the following day described it as "terror in America" or "war."

The tragedy was so enormous that, nearly twelve months later it has still not been given a name. It has become known simply as 9/11.

Thousands of people died in the terrorist attacks of that September morning and the repercussions continue around the world, and in Afghanistan in particular to this day.

The attacks on September 11th 2001 were not only supremely brutal but also highly televised. Millions witnessed what it looked like for thousands of people to die in a couple of minutes.

But today, and every day, hundreds of thousands of people will die. Many from heart attacks, cancers and other "natural" causes. But many others will die in car accidents, wars and famines.

There is no doubt the destruction of the World Trade Centre was an act of almost incomprehensible wickedness. But if you went and asked people who live and work in sub-Saharan Africa, where all of the 24 least developed nations on earth are located, you could discover how many children die every day from preventable diseases or malnutrition. If you add to these deaths those caused by earthquakes and floods and volcanoes you end up with an overwhelming catalogue of human misery.

Whether it is bereavement, illness, disaster, depression or death itself, you only have to live long enough and you will suffer.

It all just seems so desperately unfair. Some suffering is so awful that we wonder how anybody could possibly face it, let alone introduce children into such awfulness.

Suffering is, perhaps, felt most acutely when it is individualised. Joseph Stalin, who arguably caused more suffering than any other person in the history of the world, said, "a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic."

In the face of all this suffering many people conclude that there can be no God. Or that if there is a God either he loves us but is somehow unable to stop the suffering, or he is able to stop the suffering but doesn't want to. God must be either not powerful or

not good. We would not let a dog go through some of the things humans go through – so how can there be a good God in the face of suffering?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga describes this as "the only argument against God that deserves to be taken seriously."

Thinking Christians have always taken these arguments very seriously indeed. Christians hold that God exists and that he is both powerful or loving and, consequently, have a responsibility to set out our understanding of how this can match up with the universal human experience of suffering.

1 Atheism does not have all the answers

In the last hundred years, particularly in Western Europe, a common response to the problem of suffering has been to conclude that there is no God.

That is, perhaps, not surprising in the face of the most wealthy, technologically advanced and bloody hundred years that the world has ever seen. The last century has brought us the trenches of World War I, Auschwitz, Stalin's death camps, the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the killing fields of Cambodia and genocide in Rwanda to name just a few of many tragedies.

For many people the presence of such suffering has itself become an argument against the existence of God.

It needs to be acknowledged that Christians too sometimes find it difficult to believe in a good God in the face of the suffering we see all around us. And Christians have no neat and complete solution to the problem of suffering that leads to intellectual and emotional satisfaction. It is however important not to be labouring under the illusion that getting rid of God somehow solves the problem of suffering.

Because, brutally put, if there is no God then the universe is nothing more than a meaningless collection of atoms in space destined only for decay.

If there is no God then pain is ultimately nothing more than nerve signals, grief nothing more than chemicals in the brain. If there is no God there is nothing to get angry about, nothing to grieve over. If there is no God we live, we reproduce, we die. End of story. One author puts it like this:

"If our lives and death are just the waste products of evolution, the chance bumping of atomic and subatomic particles, what rational person should feel outrage before evils at all?"

Getting rid of god does not solve the problem of suffering because the logical conclusion of the atheist is that life is all simply meaningless. So, rationally, we should not be bothered by suffering at all.

Many atheists who do seek to apply the logical conclusions of atheism consistently and say that in the end "good" and "evil" are concepts as illusory as meaning and purpose. The eminent Oxford biologist Professor Richard Dawkins has written that we live in a universe where there is "no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference."

However in a recent debate over the teaching of Biology in schools he said that people who teach children that God made the world are "wicked," a concept which, in theory, has no place in his universe.

In real life we all talk about and believe in concepts and categories such as good and bad, evil and virtue, honour and cowardice. The universal existence of those concepts does not suggest the absence of God; rather it suggests that there is good and evil, that there is a Lawmaker in the universe, that there is a God.

Christians may not understand everything about the problem suffering. But attempting to remove God makes the problem worse.

2 The Bible is not a textbook of philosophy

There are many learned tomes in libraries all over the world that deal with the philosophy of suffering and evil. They consider in extensive details questions such as the origin of evil. The book by which Christians live, the Bible, is not one of them.

Although there parts of the Bible that deal in a more reflective way with questions about suffering and evil (such as the book of Job) it is intensely practical about the whole issue of suffering. It is not so much concerned with high-minded discussions, as in down-to-earth advice about what we should do in the face of suffering.

Jesus himself was questioned on the issue of suffering and his response is recorded for us in one of the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life that Christians call the gospels.

¹Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?" ³I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they

were more evil than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Luke 13:1-5 (New International Version)

Some people came to Jesus with a question concerning some Galileans (people from the Northern part of first century Israel). They had travelled to Jerusalem to perform their religious duty under Jewish law by offering sacrifices to God. As they were making their sacrifices Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the country, had these worshippers murdered. This was a horrific event in which people were executed in cold blood in a place of worship.

Jesus does not respond by philosophising on the nature of evil and its origins. He does not even use the opportunity to condemn the undoubtedly depraved act of a totalitarian government. Jesus sees the event as a call to a different kind of action. For him the principal issue is this: "Unless you too repent you too will all perish." (v3).

It is important to be clear that Jesus is not a heartless or insensitive person. As far as we can tell he is not here talking to bereaved relatives.

In other parts of the eyewitness accounts of his life we see Jesus acting with incredible tenderness and compassion to the outcast and despised in his society. Just a few paragraphs after this incident we see him lament over Jerusalem (Luke 13:31-35) and John records Jesus' tears for a dead friend (John 11:1-44). Jesus was the most loving man who ever lived.

Here he is addressing people who have a moral question about the place of God in a suffering world and his response is not to see suffering primarily as something to weep over but, as C S Lewis put it, God's megaphone shouting to a deaf world.

The Bible is much more interested in our response to suffering than in an abstract philosophy of suffering.

3 Jesus is adamant that suffering is caused by sin

Looking more closely at the incident where Jesus is challenged about the outrage of the slaughter in the temple it is possible to detect both the presuppositions of the questioners and Jesus' own perspective:

"Do you think that these Galileans were worse than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?" Jesus asks. "I tell you no! But unless you repent you too will all perish."

Jesus goes on to say something very similar about an incident a tower collapsed causing the deaths of eighteen people.

The presupposition behind the initial question is that the victims in these incidents were somehow worse than other people. That they deserved to die and, by implication, that others deserve to live. In his response Jesus is abundantly clear that these people were no worse than anyone else.

But he does not say they did not deserve it. Instead he says, to everybody else, that "unless you repent you too will all perish." In other words from Jesus perspective we all deserve to die.

As you read through this account of Jesus' life and other parts of the Bible the reason for this surprising perspective becomes clear. The reason that people deserve to die is sin. The essence of sin, as defined in the Bible, is rebellion against God. As human beings we have turned our backs on the God who made us. That is why Jesus says that people need to repent, to turn around so that we are no longer standing with our backs to God.

One of the main reasons why so many people struggle to understand suffering and death is that they make fundamentally wrong assumptions about what we are like and what God is like. Some years ago a very popular book was published called "Why bad things happen to good people." And that is how we tend to think of the issue of suffering.

When we hear about terrible tragedies and violent or premature deaths we ask, "why should those people die? What had they done to deserve it?" Our assumption is often that people are fundamentally good and deserve to live. One survivor of the shootings in a high school in Erfurt, Germany in April 2002 put it like this:

"Even if I believed in God, I would not believe in him anymore. How could he let something like this happen?"

Jesus turns that assumption on its head and reminds us that we are fundamentally rebellious. That we too deserve to die and, that unless we turn around, we all will.

Some suffering is obviously caused by sin. If I selfishly decide to rob a bank and get shot by the police in the process it is self-evident that my suffering is caused by my rebellion against God's laws. After all God has clearly said not to steal.

There is suffering caused by the sin of other people. A woman who is raped suffers because of the rapist's sin. He sins and she suffers.

Some suffering as a result of others' sin is unintended. If the rapist, rightly, gets sent to prison his family may suffer as well as their husband and father is locked up. He may not have intended them to be victims but they too suffer through his sin.

The vast majority of human suffering in its many forms is caused, directly or indirectly, by human selfishness, greed or negligence.

But what of leukaemia in children? What of volcanoes? Well the Bible's contention is that these too are the result of sin. Not of course in the sense that people killed by volcanoes are worse than those who escape and live to a ripe old age. Suffering is caused by sin in the sense that the imperfections of the world we live in are all a direct result of our rebellion against the God who created us.

Now of course in any given instance the victim of suffering may not "deserve" it. If I am walking home and am paralysed in a road accident caused by a drunk driver I do not "deserve" that suffering; I am innocent, I did not cause it by any of my actions.

But I am not innocent on an absolute scale. I may be innocent in that circumstance or more or less innocent relative to other people, but I am not absolutely innocent. I am a rebel against God who deserves to die, just like everyone else.

All suffering, ultimately, is caused by sin. If human beings had never sinned, if we had never turned our backs on God then there would be no suffering.

It is not that people who suffer are worse than other people. God introduced death and suffering as a just punishment on a world that has turned its back on him who made it. It is only because of God's mercy that any of us are here at all.

From Jesus' perspective the question is not so much "why me?" as "why not me?" If Jesus had written that book it would have been called "Why good things happen to bad people" for that is what we are.

People often say what we want from God is justice. But actually that is a very dangerous thing to want, because if we got justice from God then we would all be wiped out instantly by his just anger at our sin. We have committed the most serious wrong there can be; we have turned our backs on God and decided to be god of our own lives instead.

What we need from God is not justice but mercy.

4 God loves us – so there is hope

There is one final, and vital, element in the incident recorded for us in Luke 13:1-5.

Having made it clear that all people; those killed by the Romans, those killed by a freak accident and those still alive and listening, deserve to die, Jesus provides a way out:

“Unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

The implication of this is clearly that if you do repent, if you turn around you will not perish.

The whole plotline of the Bible is focussed on showing how Jesus came to make that a possibility. For Jesus Christ is the only person who has ever suffered and died who did not deserve to. He was the perfect person, the only person who had never rebelled against God, who had always done his Father's will.

Jesus was not simply a perfect man – he is the Perfect One – God himself. When he died on the cross God took upon himself the judgement and death that we deserve. Human rebellion was punished to maintain God's justice; Jesus took the punishment so that mercy could be extended to human beings who deserve to suffer and be judged.

One important consequence of that is that Christians know a God who has suffered, a God who understands and empathises with our pain, grief and sorrow from the inside out.

God does not want suffering to turn us further away from him but to make us look at Jesus, the one person who suffered and did not deserve it. He suffered and died so that those who repent, who turn back to God, do not need to perish.

Of course Christians still suffer here and now. There were many Christians in the World Trade Centre on September 11th. Christians get run over, die in train crashes, have heart attacks and die of cancer. We live in a broken and decaying world that is spoiled by sin. That affects those who have repented and turned back to God as well as those who haven't.

But when Jesus said that those who repent will not perish he is talking about something of a different order. For the Christian death has lost its "sting". It is significant in that it is still real but it is no longer definitive or lasting and it holds no ultimate threat. Death is a moment not an eternity.

That is not to make light of the reality of suffering. These things are not are pleasant or trivial but painful, awful and, sometimes, seemingly unbearable. But the problem of pain and suffering will not go away just because we bury our heads in the sand, or if we deny that God exists. Jesus Christ claims to offer real answers and real hope in the face of suffering.

They are not answers that are always easy to swallow. Jesus says some very unflattering things about us. He says that we all deserve to die, however good or relatively innocent we may feel we are compared to others. He says that suffering is inevitable for everybody in a world that has turned its back on God.

Most importantly, he says there is hope. If we turn around and trust in him, recognising that he is the God-man who suffered on a cross so that we could be brought back to God, then there is a promise of eternity. An eternity with God without pain, tears, suffering or death.

Jesus does not offer any quick fix solutions to the problem of suffering. But he does offer an explanation and hope and issues us with a call to repent and put our trust in him.

*A paper by Andrew Evans
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