



human suffering - biblical perspectives

By Pete Moore

No sane person enjoys suffering. It limits our capabilities and is often accompanied by physical pain or emotional distress. The Bible gives a rich insight into the variety of causes of, and responses to, suffering, but also declares that only God knows the answers to many of our questions about why particular individuals suffer.

A woman lies in a hospital bed. The cancer that started in her breast has spread. Her vertebrae and bones are now riddled with disease and she requires high doses of pain killing drugs to numb her senses. Her three-year-old daughter stands silently, gently holding Mummy's hand – confused about why she is so different from just a few weeks ago.

In another scene a soldier pulls the trigger of a gun, blowing a hole through a young child's head while his parents watch in desperate helplessness.

Human suffering exists. For people who hold no belief in a god it is just one of the hallmarks of this purposeless and often cruel universe. For people who believe in many gods it is an indication that some are good and others bad – get on the wrong side of an evil god and you are in trouble.

But for Christians suffering poses a problem. How can an all-powerful, all-loving God allow suffering? Why did he set the universe up in such a way that suffering is possible, and why doesn't he intervene when suffering gets out of hand?

Throughout the Bible many people experience different forms of suffering that arises for a wide variety of reasons and people respond to it in many different ways. By looking at some of them we can gain insights into God's attitude towards suffering, whilst recognising that there will always remain elements of mystery and that we will never fully know his mind.

God, suffering and evil

Any Christian understanding of human suffering draws from a Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation. In the opening chapters of Genesis God presides over creation and repeatedly says that what he has made is 'good', even 'very good'.¹ Many Christians believe that this shows that when God initially created the universe there was no suffering in it. Many believe that human suffering began in the Garden of Eden.² Others say that for God, creation was good not because it was free from suffering, but because it had set up a system that served a purpose. That purpose was to develop a physical and living entity that would worship him.

The exact timing and process whereby suffering entered the world is controversial amongst Christians and tied up with different views on the age of the earth and evolution. All agree that the Bible describes how suffering increases when created beings decide to disobey God and ignore his advice. Indeed the further people stray from a proper relationship with God, the more they can expect the entire system to dysfunction and for that dysfunction to bring about suffering.³ Human suffering, then is not surprising as an overall concept, though none-the-less difficult to make sense of in individual circumstances.

Biblical examples

Within the Bible suffering is seen to have a number of very different causes. Equally, there are a variety of responses that people make to each situation.

Consequence of go it alone attitude

As we have seen already, much suffering is a consequence of humanity's desire to 'go it alone' and ignore God. In Proverbs the teacher talks of the inevitability of suffering that will come from adultery. 'Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?'⁴ The reality of this cause and effect can be seen in the link between promiscuity and sexual disease and infertility. It can also be seen in the suffering caused as family units break apart when one of the partners becomes involved with a third party.

This ability to 'go it alone' is also recognised in the Christian understanding of the way that God gave people 'free will'. When he created human beings, God gave us the ability to choose rather than setting us up as pre-determined robots. If as beings with free will we choose to follow and worship him, that worship will be genuine. Free will does however leave open the possibility of deciding not to follow or worship God – a route that will lead quickly to some form of suffering.

The way we all too often use our free will is to pursue selfish goals. We don't share economic wealth, and consequently people starve and die. We are afraid of others, so we attack them. We spend our money on weapons rather than education, agriculture or medicine. We build

cities in flood plains and straddling earthquake faults, because there is the potential of making short-term economic gain, or because conflict has driven people there from safer parts. Indeed many Christians say that the vast majority of suffering in the world has its roots in the poor and self-centred decisions that we make, and that comes from our decision to ignore God.

Suffering as discipline

While it is currently unfashionable to mention it, a frequent theme in the Bible is that suffering is part of a process of discipline. In the book of Jeremiah, for example, God becomes displeased that his people are turning to other man-made gods and adopting life-styles that are contrary to his commands. His response is severe. 'I will take away their harvest, declares the LORD. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them.'⁵

The idea of discipline, however, is greater than just vindictive punishment or retribution. When God punishes he does so as a craftsman who uses a blast furnace to refine the metal he is working with. 'See, I will refine and test them, for what else can I do.'⁶ In human language it is the actions of a loving father who wants to see his children grow to maturity. When God tells the prophet Nathan to inform David that he has been chosen to become a King and great leader, God says, 'I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him'.⁷

The New Testament shows how suffering can bring about remarkable spiritual maturity in individuals. The writer of Hebrews says that 'our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness'.⁸ The writer then points out that discipline is seldom enjoyed when it is practised;

'no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.'⁹

In addition, suffering can be a life-preserving warning system. C.S. Lewis famously referred to pain as God's megaphone, enabling him to attract attention above the chaotic noise of everyday living.¹⁰ Medically speaking, losing the ability to feel pain is a severe disability. This loss of sensation is one of the reasons why people with leprosy pick up so many debilitating injuries.

Revealing God's glory

The Bible also gives another positive aspect to a world that includes suffering. On occasions it can be used to show God's power and majesty, but in these situations the revelation occurs not through the suffering itself, but as God relieves it.

In one example, John records an encounter between Jesus and a man who had been born blind. His disciples immediately looked for some rational cause to this suffering. 'Rabbi,' they asked, 'who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus, however, presented a different view, saying, that neither this man nor his parents sinned, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life'.¹¹

Jesus went on to explain that he had come to bring light to the world, and he then healed that man. The transformation was so extreme that many people didn't recognise him, and the man then became a living walking testifying illustration of the way that bringing spiritual light to people can transform their lives.

Similarly in the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul claims that the persecution and suffering that the Christians are suffering is all part of the process of revealing Jesus. 'We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of

Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.'¹²

Later in the same letter Paul points out that it is when individuals are weak and incapable of doing things for themselves, their reliance on a powerful God is more apparent; 'But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'¹³

Characters in the Old Testament also went through deeply unpleasant experiences in order that when they came out from them people would see God's power. In the book of Daniel, three people who insisted on keeping God's commands are thrown into a fiery furnace. When they survived, King Nebuchadnezzar changed the laws of the land so that they respected God.

Demonic action

The Bible sees the devil and demons as real personal entities who can disrupt people's lives. When writing to Christians living in the Turkish city of Ephesus, Paul says that 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark work and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms'.¹⁴

There are certainly a number of people that Jesus encountered, and healed, whom Jesus said had been unwell because they had been possessed by one or more demons. On one occasion the demon-possessed man was living naked among tombs, before Jesus released a 'legion' of demons from him in order to restore his health.¹⁵

The New Testament, however, makes it clear that discerning whether someone has a demon, and then driving it out, is not simple. On one

occasion a man brought his son to Jesus' disciples, asking that they drive out the spirit. Jesus drives out the demon, before telling his disciples that 'this kind can come out only by prayer';¹⁶ the implication being that they had been trying to do this by themselves.

School for compassion

While there is no reason for believing that suffering should be welcomed, the Bible does show how it can offer opportunities for growth. The Old Testament frequently shows how God's people are marked as those who show compassion for the weak and vulnerable in society – the very people who are most prone to physical suffering.¹⁷

In addition, in the New Testament, Jesus says that when we serve people who are in need, then we are serving him. Again, it is not the suffering itself that is beneficial, but the loving reaction to suffering that is brought out in people who serve others' needs.

In one parable, Jesus talks of a king who separates people into two groups, one he terms sheep, the others goats. The sheep are those who have lived righteous lives – and we are told that the mark of this upright living was that they fed those in different forms of need or cast out of society.¹⁸ More than just looking after people, Jesus says that in working to alleviate various forms of suffering, they were serving him.

There are also numerous examples of families and communities that have found a new sense of strength and purpose as they are pulled together to support members who were suffering from disease or disaster. As such, suffering, and caring for those who are suffering, become features that bind a Christian community together. As James (probably Jesus' brother) says, 'Religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself from being polluted by the world'.¹⁹

God's compassion

At the heart of the problem of suffering are questions about the nature of God. Christians believe that the best way of addressing this question is to look at Jesus, the person who was both man and God, as Jesus said, 'if you want to see the father, look at me'.²⁰

Reviewing Jesus' life show a person who was born in poverty, started his childhood as a refugee, grieved when family members suffered, and was ultimately executed by the most gruesome means then available. A consistent theme through the Bible is that God has a particular concern for the outcast, the marginalized, the weak – in short he cares most for those that are suffering most.

While Jesus was prepared to suffer hardships and physical assault, he opposed suffering in other people whenever he encountered it. When a man with leprosy knelt before him, Jesus broke social taboos and reached out and touched the diseased man saying 'be clean!' and Matthew records that he was immediately healed.²¹

Indeed on each of the nearly 30 occasions recorded in the four Gospels that Jesus meets people who are unwell, he acts to relieve their suffering physically by restoring their health. While it can be argued that he did this to demonstrate the power of the new kingdom, it is also apparent that the 'new heaven and new earth' which Jesus will usher in when he returns is a place where people will not suffer.²²

After Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers continued to extend God's provision for healing to those who were suffering. When entering a temple, Peter and John brought Christ's healing to one lame man,²³ and while in Lystra, Paul acts in Jesus' name to heal another man who had been unable to walk from birth.²⁴

As well as removing ill health, Jesus acts against other forms of suffering. On a couple of occasions when a

massive crowd had gathered in a remote place to hear Jesus speak, he realised that the people were hungry. Rather than sending them away, he had compassion and solved their suffering by providing them with food.²⁵

Part of growing to be Christ-like is that Christians start to be able to extend the compassion that Jesus showed to the people that we encounter; 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.'²⁶

Gethsemane example

No Christian exploration of suffering would be complete without reviewing Christ's own personal experience of suffering. When explaining the previous few day's events to a couple of perplexed travellers on the road to Emmaus just after his resurrection, Jesus said, 'Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?'²⁷ Implicit in this is the idea that suffering was part of God's plan – a critical component of the process that restored humanity's relationship with God.

It's worth noting, however, that even Jesus found this hard to go through. In the garden of Gethsemane on the night that he was arrested he prayed three times, on each occasion asking God not to make him go through the suffering that he knew was about to occur. Each time, however, he concluded that it was not his will, but God's that needed to be fulfilled – and if that included a requirement to suffer for a period, then Jesus was prepared to go through with it.²⁸ The issue for Jesus was whether his life would glorify the Father.

Handling uncertainty

Surveying the various potential causes of, and responses to, suffering is interesting in itself,

but the crunch comes with the question, what about me – what about my suffering? Is it God’s discipline, demonic interference or the consequence of disobedience? Or, why, for example, did the Boxing Day 2004 Tsunami wave kill some, orphan others, maim many more, but leave many unscathed?

Jesus was faced with similar questions, when some people came to him asking questions about some people living in Galilee who were caught up in atrocities or the victims of a building disaster. His response was ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.’²⁹ His message is that people may never know why suffering happens in any given case. It should, however, serve as a reminder that human beings are mortal and will face judgement for the way they have lived.

The Bible’s answer then, is that the answer is often not ours to know – it is a mystery. The book of Job, gives an angel-eye view of the cosmic battle that was going on at the time between God and the devil, and gives a measure of understanding of the reasons for Job’s suffering. But Job went through it without that insight. He lived to glorify God, but the process, for him, defied rational explanation.

A reading of the Psalms shows that God does not appear to be offended when people shout and complain about suffering (eg Psalm 77), and there is a rightness in expressing our anger when suffering encroaches. We do not need to assume a false piety. But our hope should be that we will eventually see how God is working within the situation.³⁰

At the same time we need to recognise the smallness of our minds when set against the vast knowing capability of God. This is expressed poetically in Isaiah when God states; “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,”

declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”³¹

Part of Christian hope is also set in the future, a time when ‘he will wipe every tear from their eyes [and] there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’³² At the present time ‘the whole creation (is) groaning’ but the day is coming when ‘the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.’³³ Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was the beginning of this new creation. In the same way in the ‘new creation’,³⁴ we too will have new resurrected bodies that neither suffer nor die,³⁵ and the whole creation will be restored into full harmony with God.

At the heart of the Christian faith is a God who went through suffering so that a greater good would result - creation being eventually restored to its former glory. It is quite possible to generate clever arguments about how God may have organised things differently, but it would seem that God is not afraid of suffering and does not always remove it, but has a greater purpose that he is working out through history.

This may seem deeply unsatisfactory for post-enlightenment minds, but part of the answer to suffering is that it is a mystery, but one that we will understand better when we meet God face to face - ‘Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known’.³⁶

References

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- 7 2 Samuel 7:14-15a
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- 11 John 9:1-5
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- 14 Ephesians 6:12
- 15 Luke 8:26-35
- 16 Mark 9:29
- 17 Isaiah 58:6-10
- 18 Matthew 25:35-36
- 19 James 1:27
- 20 John 14: 8-11
- 21 Matthew 8:3-4
- 22 Revelation 21:1-4
- 23 Acts 3:1-10
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- 25 Matthew 14:13-21
- 26 2 Corinthians 1:3-5
- 27 Luke 24:26
- 28 Mark 14:32-42
- 29 Luke 13:2-5
- 30 Romans 8:28
- 31 Isaiah 55:8-9
- 32 Revelation 21:4
- 33 Romans 8:18-25
- 34 2 Peter 3:11-13
- 35 Philippians 3:21
- 36 1 Corinthians 13:12

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