

# Why does God allow suffering?

Adrian Chatfield

**'Our instincts are right,' said the preacher, 'sickness is a horrible thing.' When faced with this 'horrible thing' or any suffering, there are two equal and opposite errors that we may fall into. The first is to minimize it; the second to glorify it. The minimizers tell us that things are not as bad as they seem, or even that suffering is an illusion. Positive thinking, they say, will make suffering feel less, or banish it altogether, in the case of Christian Science.**



The second case is more difficult, because there is much in Scripture that recognizes the potential of suffering for growth: the school of life forms us; hard experiences toughen us, and according to St Paul, 'all things work together for good for those who love God' (*Romans 8: 28*). However, Paul nowhere says that all [bad] things are good, and it is only a Job's comforter who can tell someone in pain that suffering is a blessing in itself.

The hard truth that faces us as Christians is that we believe in a good and powerful God, yet live with suffering caused by 'natural' events as well as by human sin. We also see that the consequences of such events and actions are unevenly (and, it is often said, unfairly) distributed, with the weak and marginalized experiencing much more than their 'fair share.' Some conclude in the end that God is truly good, but powerless to deal with evil; others that He is powerful, but not truly good.

This may sound like a counsel of despair or an insoluble paradox. After all, Christian philosophers and theologians have debated for millennia without coming to a common mind. Yet there is much that can be said, and our preamble so far is part of it: as Christians, we need to engage in an honest and hard conversation about suffering. Those who ask us the question 'Why?' will quickly sniff out our clichés, defensive responses or excuses. We don't begin to address the question with a set of clever words but with a Christian stance, in which we offer our questioners our vulnerable, risky, self-emptying life.

The other thing that we offer our questioners is complete respect. Job's comforters undermined him not so much by inadequate theology as by a total lack of respect for his integrity. Job knew how he felt much better than they knew. So the starting point for our response is not to say, 'I know how you feel' because we may not know. Nor have we the right to tell people that they are mistaken about

the depth of their suffering. We need to listen, to hear and to care with the compassion of Jesus himself.

This brings us to the threefold heart of our response: it is at once theological, pastoral and spiritual. Each part of this response is grounded in Biblical principles, and each is crucial in the face of the cries of those who suffer.

## A theological response

Scripture teaches that God is sovereign in all things. There is nothing over which God has no control. The created universe is sustained only by His continuing interest, will and power. We, pinnacle though we are of that creation, made 'in the image and likeness of God', remain creaturely, things of earth, life breathed only because God wills it.

The clue lies in the 'image and likeness'. This is not our rationality, our speech, or some other supposed superior faculty, but the fact that we have been invited to share with God in His character, His purposes, and in the very community of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this invitation lies God's risky choice to allow us a share in the Divine project, and not to act without us. In this lies God's love, our freedom, God's risk and our fall from grace.

Is it worth it? God thought so, and thinks so: He has promised never again to destroy the world through flood. He has sent His only Son, to live and die for us, and raised Him from death as the first-fruits of our resurrection. Peter reminds us that through God's promises we 'may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature' (*2 Peter 1: 4*).

It is not so much that God 'allows' suffering. God risks suffering for the sake of an intimate relationship with us as His people, a relationship almost of equals, in which we are deeply involved in God's saving work as 'the body of Christ.' To this end, we are given freedom of choice and the grace of redemption when we fall.



## A pastoral response

There are a few who need such theology in the midst of their distress. I suspect that it is mostly we – the ones who are questioned – who need to have Biblical theology engraved on our minds and souls. Whether we repeat it to those who struggle must be a matter of deep discernment; and sometimes we must keep our counsel, knowing that God has a broad back and is perfectly capable of defending Himself.

Pastorally, we sometimes sense that our questioner asks 'Why?' out of a sense of isolation and deep loneliness. Evil cuts us off from those whom we have loved, and suffering loses us friends. Many tell of bereavement becoming a living hell not so much in the loss of someone loved, but in the loss of community, when supposed friends cross the road to the other side, not knowing what to say.

The truth is that they need to say nothing; they are simply needed alongside, in silence, in shared incomprehension, in a journey accompanied, in deep friendship.

This is at the heart of the Christian gospel because it is at the heart of what Jesus did. This is the God of whom we ask our question 'Why?' The pastoral answer from God is that 'I was there with you.' Moltmann calls Jesus the crucified God: this is the ultimate 'there with you' from God. The promise is that this will never change: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

## A spiritual response

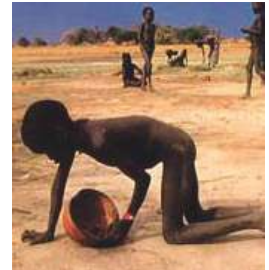
One person that I talked to before writing this said that he could answer in three words or in many thousands! The three words were, 'I'm not God.' More people resolve the issue of suffering through encounter with God than by being offered philosophical answers, even of the most sophisticated kind. Our spiritual response needs to be an invitation: 'Pray with me, and meet the one who is God.'

It is a risky business inviting those who suffer to pray, but it is often all we have and all we need. We ourselves are in a living relationship with a God who, we believe, cares far more deeply than we, but we have no proof to offer in this case. So we offer an invitation instead.

The invitation may lead to violent or bitter words, to recrimination or anguish. But it is here, in the truth of expressed pain, that new life may emerge as the Holy Spirit begins to work.

I once worked with a curate in an abusive relationship with his incumbent, and encouraged him to write an imaginary letter to the man expressing his feelings. When the letter came to me, it began: 'Dear D, s\*\*\*, s\*\*\*, s\*\*\*'. Out of that painful writing began his healing. How much better if we could help others unburden themselves to a compassionate God rather than to a caring counsellor?

In the fire of conversion, or reconversion, the 'why' of suffering is not always answered, but is woven into the fabric of this new life. Chaos and pointlessness begin to be replaced by meaning and direction: God's meaning, and God's direction.



Even where there are no words to be spoken, only silence to be endured, waiting beside the suffering one until God comes gives courage. We who know how to wait contribute persistence; those who struggle bring their pain. Together, by God's grace, persistence in pain may lead into a place of light.

## Afterword

And so I come very quickly to the end of myself, left with the reality of suffering, in often silent contemplation of Christ on the cross, in a time of dereliction. This is the deepest darkness of all, evil blanketing the world and cutting out the sun. It is here that I really want to take all those who suffer, to know a God who has been there, and remains there with those in pain, yet who at this moment gave hope back to the world. There can be new life, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing. There is life after death. We discover these truths for ourselves not in challenging God, but in embracing Him forever.



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