

# How could a good God allow suffering?

Mark Hood. Hard Questions series #3. 1-Aug-10. 6pm. St Mark's Camberwell.

## Why, God?

A plane crashes in Pakistan, killing all 152 people on board. 152 families along with a whole nation mourn.

Why, God?

A baby boy is born with a massive deformity with his head and his brain, meaning that he lives for 30 mins after birth, dying in his parents arms.

Why, God?

A young woman is curled up in the foetal position, with her head in her hands, battling with feelings of self worth because of childhood abuse, fighting the temptation to inflict self harm, as waves of depression sweep over her.

Why, God?

The mourners crowd around as a man in the prime of life is buried, his body wasted with cancer.

Why, God?

Why so much suffering? Why doesn't God do something? If God is powerful to act, why such pain and anguish? Is He actually good? Is he actually powerful to save?

Of all the hard questions in this series, this is the hardest. Its hardest because suffering is real and it really hurts.

I don't pretend to be an expert in suffering. I don't pretend to have a neat little answer for suffering. The fact is, sometimes suffering is totally inexplicable.

My aim tonight is to show you from God the truth of how we are to understand suffering, and in understanding it how we're to persevere with God through suffering.

## To do this we'll ask two questions:

1. Suffering – why and where?
2. Suffering – what is God doing about it?

## But before we get into this, I need to make a couple of comments:

- a. I'm working tonight from the assumption that you are **not presently in the pit of suffering**, but are in a place where you are ready and able to think about this very tough question. I would take a diff course if I knew you were in the eye of the storm. Instead of lots of words, I would probably aim to just sit with you quietly, just to be with you.
- b. And next,  
Right up front, I want to be very clear: God does not promise to keep anyone free from suffering. He doesn't ever say, "I will keep you **from** suffering". But what God does say, very clearly, is "I will keep you **through** suffering".

[eg Letter of 1 Peter, Romans 8 and many other places]

This means our main response to suffering should be to draw near to God, and trust his promise to keep his children. but more of this later.

### **Suffering: Why and Where?**

Lots of people believe and live as though suffering comes because of some universal tally sheet of good vs evil, some kind of karma, where really bad things happen, in order to balance really good things.

Others think, "It's just the natural world conspiring against me".

Still others say, "Suffering is just an illusion, and to be free of it, you have separate your spirit/soul from your physical experience".

But none of these will do.

None of these square with our experience – when wicked people prosper, and when seemingly good and excellent people are struck down.

None of these explanations of suffering come to terms with the goodness of God and his creation, or with the reality and real anguish of pain and distress.

The brutal reality is: If you live long enough, you will bleed. You will hurt, You will come face to face with real suffering, with real anguish.

Here in Melbourne, our wealth often shelter's us from the pain and sorrow that the majority of the world experiences daily. But not even our dollars will shield us from death. You will bleed.

How will you understand it? How will you live in the light of understanding it?

In God's world, which we only understand through God's word, God teaches us that at the heart of suffering is evil. It is evil that leads to suffering. Suffering is caused by evil.

8 babies are found dead, because a woman *who seems fine* with the idea of getting pregnant, *is not fine* with the idea of raising children. So she murders them, in cold blood. Well that's not just selfish, its evil, and it was in the news this past week.

An extreme case, yes. Thankfully most of us are not as bad as we could be.

But how could such a thing happen in a world governed by God who is good?

That God is good, is a given for us.  
Jesus himself says this: 'God alone is good'.

And that the world he made is good, is also a given.  
Genesis 1+2 sing about this truth. "it was good"

And that the good God made his good creation for his glory and our good, that's also a given.  
God didn't make an evil world. God made a good world, that we could enjoy, and praise him for his goodness.

All these are givens.

So where did things go wrong? How did evil enter the world?

God answers: The evil came through human distrust and rebellion.

It's common these days to see Adam and Eve having a good time with the serpent. Like on the Simpsons, where the serpent ends up being friends with Homer, and being the hero of the story, so we end up cheering on the serpent.

But this is not how God sees it.

Instead, the eating of the fruit in the garden, was fundamentally **a turning away** from the good life God intended, it showed **a complete distrust** in God who promised them, it was **open rebellion** by the creature against the creator. "God get lost, we're going our own way."

Such rebellion leads to disastrous consequences:

Because when God promised life, he also warned against death. But when life was spurned by the man and woman death and destruction resulted, following God's pronouncement of judgement upon the man and woman, upon the living creatures and upon the whole creation itself.

As Carson says, in his book *How Long O Lord*,

"Every scrap of suffering we face turns on the fact [that we human beings live in rebellion against God.]" p46

And the consequence now of this first act of rebellion is that we all stand under God's curse, all people, and the entire creation (Romans 8:20-21).

Every single human being is now not good, but fallen, imperfect, a sinner, one who stands under the curse of sin. Every part of God's creation is now not the good that it was created to be, but something far less – because of man's sin.

Now let's just pause here for a moment and understand this. Because right about now, it starting to sound like, God stands behind all good and all evil. As though the evil which leads to suffering is just sent by some vicious, spiteful vindictive God.

But that's *not* what the Bible teaches us.

Boxing Day 2004, and that massive tsunami overwhelms Aceh in Indonesia, killing some 230,000 people (the number of residents between here and Nunawading) and leaves 500,000 homeless. This is God's world, but God did not send a Tsunami because of the sins of the people there. The tsunami happens because this world that God made stands under the curse of God. Which means that people everywhere are affected, and it just so happens that the poorest on this earth, tend to cop it the hardest. It's not karma. It's not payback. It's the consequence of living in a fallen world.

[By the way, did you know that Ian at our 9am congregation spent a number of years there helping rebuild in Aceh? God bless him, what a great thing to do.]

Concerning the presence of evil and the power of God, And here we come to the hardest thing I'm going to say all night, the Bible teaches that two things are true:

It teaches both that our good God is sovereign, in control of all the earth, standing behind all the good and all the evil, but it also teaches that God is never the one morally responsible for evil, humans are.

To put it bluntly: Nothing happens in this world that hasn't first gone across God's desk. But God is never the one morally responsible for evil.

Because we're looking at this more next week, I'm not going to dwell on this now. It is hard, and it has lots of other implications, suffice to say that we have to do the hard of holding these two difficult ideas together, because God teaches us to do that.

We've covered a lot of territory here. Let's summarise where we've got to.

We've seen that suffering comes from evil and that evil began with rebellion.

### **So we can now see four different types of suffering:**

Suffering comes because

1. In a general sense because this world is under God's curse. It's out of step with God. It's no longer the perfectly good world he made it to be. Now we have natural disasters, and birth defects. We have vicious diseases, and environmental damage.
2. But also we suffer because people are sinners. Jack lies to his business in order to get a better bonus, but the company goes bankrupt, leaving many without a job. Zimbabwe right now face grinding poverty, to a large extent, because of greed and corruption of some leaders there.
3. We suffer too because of our own sin. So Jamie gets drunk, decides it's a good idea to drive. Crashes his car, and ends up paraplegic.

Suffering comes through evil. The evil of heart turned away from God, the outcome of sinners living out of step with God who is good.

4. In fact there is a fourth kind of suffering which is peculiar to a Christian. Hebrews 12: the loving discipline of our heavenly father, and opposition and persecution incurred because of Christ. where both people and the evil one assail Christians because of their faith, because they are opposed to Christ: Jesus said "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you"  
Ask me about this at the end if you want.

### **Psalm 88**

Suffering is real, and if you live long enough, you'll experience it. Suffering comes to all people, whether Christian or not Christian, and it hurts.

Did you notice in Psalm 88, the darkest Psalm in the whole 150-Psalm songbook, did you notice how bleak and suffocating suffering is?

Here's a guy who loves God. But who feels completely overwhelmed. It's not like belief in God is going to shield you from suffering. And when you're in the midst of it, it's heavy and lonely and dark.

v3 my soul is filled with troubles.

v13 O Lord I cry to you, why do you hide your face from me? I suffer your terrors, I'm desperate. Everyone has left me. Darkness is my only companion.

Suffering hurts deeply, whoever you are.

Notice though how this guy in the midst of anguish doesn't walk away from God. He doesn't say. God how could you do this to me? and walk away. Instead he keeps on crying out to God, the God who saves day and night. He may feel isolated, but he continues to relate to God. That's a good model for us, when it hurts.

### **Well, what is God doing about suffering?**

The short answer is, God is doing a lot. It might not be the thing you want, but it is the thing you need. God is good, and he's not inactive in the face of suffering. He has done much, He is doing much and He will do much in response to suffering, in response to evil.

Here are four ways God responds to suffering and evil, each of which you would do well to write down, explore in the Bible by yourself, and when suffering hits, come back to and consider.

### **Four responses of God to suffering**

#### **1. *God in Christ enters human flesh and suffers.***

When Jesus comes, born of Mary, he comes not merely to be a good man, a good example, a fine teacher. Jesus comes to suffer and die, a gruesome and hideous death on a cross. We heard the passage read from Mark 15. It's not so much the physical pain that Jesus cries out about – did you notice? Actually it's the deep anguish caused by being forsaken by God. His loving and good heavenly father, turning his face away from his perfect and righteous Son.

'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?'

Here is suffering at its deepest.

Our God knows pain and suffering. He doesn't just know about it. Christ experienced it. He bleeds. He dies. Here is no remote, uncaring God. Here rather is a tender loving God who knows firsthand what it's like.

#### **2. *When we look at why he suffered. We learn that he was forsaken, in order that we might be forgiven.***

He the perfectly good God, absorbed the curse of sin. He acted as if he was the one responsible for the rebellion. As if he was the vile, wicked creature that said 'Get lost'. He bore the curse of sin: death.

He didn't deserve to die, we did. And his death is imputed to evil people. And evil people are imputed with his righteousness. Here is the heart of why Christ's death for sinners is good news. The price for sin is paid. The curse of sin is finished. All who trust in him will live.

Which is why it's not right to stand accusing God, in the face of suffering. Sometimes you hear that: "God how could you do this to me?" It's as if we think God owes a favour. But God doesn't owe us anything. We owe him!

But God here freely gives of his only Son, gives him up to death, that we might be forgiven and reconciled. Oh what grace. what kindness. what mercy!

**3. Thirdly God provides a new community for his suffering people. We're never alone.**

God says: draw near. Which means a relationship of forgiveness and love and trust with God is available with him, and with his people. Christ was forsaken by God, so that we could be forgiven and be forever with God and his people. Which is why God's promise **"I will be with you"** is one to hold onto.

**4. Finally, Christ's resurrection shows that suffering will one day cease for his people.**

Revelation 21-22 show us a glimpse of heaven on earth, when God promises 'to wipe away every tear, death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. God himself will be with his people for his says. **"look! I am making all things new"**.

God is not inactive in the face of suffering. Indeed God has addressed the very root cause of suffering, evil, by sending Christ to suffer in our place. Christ's new community, the church, is part of the way God promises to be with us. God's new creation is God's final and ultimate answer: suffering will be no more.

Which leads us then to a response.

**How to respond to suffering?**

Responses:

1. Draw near to God, don't walk away. God is good. And though his world is fallen and often very painful, he, through his word, beckons you to draw near. It may just be that through the painful thing you're experiencing, this might be the time to come closer.
2. If you've been standing far off from God: draw near. Put your trust in Christ. You'll never be alone. He'll always be with you. Please don't refuse God's kindness and love, where will you turn – to your own resources?
3. Psalm 90 says in the face of death: we ought to number our days, number the blessing of life that God has given us today. He owes us nothing, but shows us mercy. We rightly respond with great love and commitment.
4. In the pit, cast your burdens onto him. Remember his promises. He cares for you.
5. Endure through faith. Often it's the testing time that refines us and enables us to love God more. (Not a reason to try and suffer, but the fruit of suffering, which says that "not in vain".)
6. Start yearning for heaven. A day is coming when every tear will be wiped away.
7. If you know others are suffering. Then be a Christian – not a Job-like-friend. Sit. Listen. Practical help. Private prayer. No 'glib' answers, but steadfast relationship. On-going love.

At the same time we had our first child, some friends of ours (both strong Christians) had their first child. But the woman died during the child-birth. There were complications and blood poisoning and other stuff. She held her newborn, and moments later blacked out and never again came to. It was utterly devastating for the husband, and the families, and distressing for our church family. Such a strong Christian woman, taken in the prime of life. The moment of joy turned into the moment of deep grief..

What was most comforting at the time for this newly bereaved Dad?

God's promises, particularly in the Psalms. There was great pain. Scars still remain. But God is good and his mercy is forever. Friends kept up with him. Other friends took him and his beautiful new daughter in to live with them – not just for a few weeks, but for a year. And then another family for another year. And another family for another year. Here was the church in action. But even more than this, the God who promises continued to be near to his child:

“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you”

That's God's promise.

You can trust him, now and when you hurt.