

Why God Allows Suffering and Tragedy

Severe suffering or tragedy often causes people to ask many questions and perhaps the most perplexing question of all is “Why did God allow this?” And while we won’t always be able to discern what reasons God has for any particular suffering or tragedy, the Bible has much to teach us on this subject.

First of all, the Bible tells us that God is ultimately in control of everything and that nothing happens that does not fit into His overall plan and purpose for this world: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” (Isaiah 46:9-10). Ephesians 1:12 tells us that God “works all things according to the counsel of His will”. Psalms 115:3 says that “our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.” In Isaiah 45:7, God says “I make peace and create calamity” and Amos 3:6 says “When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?” In Deuteronomy 32:39, God says “I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: nor is there any who can deliver from My hand”. Acts 17:24-27 tells us that God “gives all men life and breath and everything else” and that “from one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.” 1 Samuel 2:7-8 says “The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.” In Exodus 4:11, God says to Moses, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” Dan 4:17 tells us that “the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men” and Proverbs 21:1 says “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes. “ God is sovereign over everything: war and peace, disease and healing, blessings and disasters, kings and paupers, evil men and saints, tornadoes and gentle rains, stock market crashes and unexpected bonuses. This is important to see because we must understand that bad things do not happen apart from God’s control. God was not sitting in heaven chewing on His fingernails because He couldn’t do anything to prevent the 2004 tsunami that killed over 200,000 people. He wasn’t sleeping or caught off-guard when the federal building in Oklahoma City was bombed nor when terrorists did their evil work on 9/11/2001. He has always been and always will be in absolute control of everything. But this does not mean that God likes everything that happens in and of itself. For example, He hates all sin and evil, and He Himself cannot even be tempted to sin nor does He ever tempt anyone else to sin (James 1:13) and He will hold sinners responsible for their sin. Nevertheless, He still allows people to do even the most horrible things because He has some good purpose for it in His eternal plan. A major part of His plan is to prepare a people for Himself who will love righteousness and hate sin and live in loving fellowship with Him both now and for all eternity (Rom 8:28-29). But accomplishing this requires some suffering and we’ll now examine some of the ways that God uses suffering.

God works all things according to the counsel of His will - Ephesians 1:12

One reason that God sends suffering is to discipline His people when they are going astray. The Bible tells us that just as human fathers lovingly discipline their children, so God disciplines all who belong to Him: “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives” (Heb 12:5-6). In fact, the Bible goes even further by saying that if God does not discipline us then we are not truly His children (Heb 12:8). “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. 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.” (Heb 12:10-11). The Psalmist wrote “before I was afflicted, I went astray but now I keep Your word... it is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your word... in faithfulness You have afflicted me” (Ps 119:67,71,75). Sometimes our sin may not even be something that the world considers to be bad. It may be placing something or

The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. Hebrews 12:6

someone above God which is idolatry. But whatever the sin, God has many ways to discipline us such as sickness, famine, failure, disasters, the government, friends, neighbors, relatives, co-workers, unjust treatment, etc. In the Old Testament, God sometimes used even wicked nations to punish Israel when they rebelled against Him. Sometimes our suffering flows as a direct consequence of our own sin and at other times God may bring it indirectly. Sometimes it is a mixture. But if we are His children then regardless of how it comes, it is meant for our eternal good.

But sometimes God allows His children to suffer even when they are living faithfully to Him. Some suffering happens simply because we live in a fallen, sin-cursed world. Even the best of saints get sick, have flat tires, stub their toe, lose their wallet, have car wrecks, etc, and eventually die. But all of these things are used of God to help build our character and draw us closer to Him. In fact, scripture tells us that “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purposes” (Romans 8:28). And the verse that follows this one tells us that God has predestined His people to be conformed to the image of Jesus. So making us like Jesus is an important part of the “good” end to which God is working “all things” in our lives. We might not always be able to see how God will use something for our good, but He will. The Bible also says that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim 3:12). One reason for this is that the world hates the true God, Jesus, and Christians (John 15:18-25). So God’s people sometimes suffer precisely because they are trying to live godly lives which provokes hatred from Satan and from the world (John 15:18-25). But such suffering provides an excellent opportunity for Christians to glorify Him by the way that they handle it. It is an opportunity to practice Jesus’ command to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. And because this can be so hard to do, it really requires us to look to God for the faith, courage, strength, and love with which to do it. The early believers even counted it an honor to suffer for the sake of Christ (Acts 5:41, Phil 1:29, Matt 5:10-12). The apostle Paul wrote “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:3-5). So suffering, whether deserved or not, is used by God to refine our character and build our faith and trust in Him. It should also draw us closer to God as we find our comfort in Him: “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.” (2 Cor 1:3-5). And thus we see that it also prepares us to help and comfort others who are suffering.

All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. 2 Timothy 3:12

The Bible also shows us examples where God brought much good out of evil and suffering. In Genesis 37, Joseph’s jealous brothers betrayed him and sold him to some travelers who in turn sold him in Egypt to the Pharaoh’s captain of the guard. But rather than becoming bitter, Joseph faithfully served both God and his master and became his master’s most trusted servant. But then his master’s wife falsely accused him because he wouldn’t give in to her evil seductions and as a result, his master put him in the dungeon where he remained for at least two years. There he faithfully served the keeper of the dungeon and God orchestrated events that raised him straight from the dungeon to second in command to Pharaoh and then God used him to save multitudes (including his brothers) from perishing during a great famine. After he was finally reunited with his brothers, he told them that what they had meant for evil, God had meant for good (Genesis 50:20), and that “it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Gen 45:8). In the book of Job, Satan told God that the righteous man Job was only serving Him for the material blessings that God was giving him and that if God would take away his blessings that Job would curse God to his face. To prove Satan wrong, God gave Satan permission to mess with Job, and Satan used evil men, a strong wind, and fire to bring a series of disasters upon Job which killed all of his children and took away all of his flocks and herds in a single day. Job responded by worshiping

“you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20)

God and saying, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). Job accepted his hardships as from God, and God says that Job spoke rightly about Him (Job 1:22, 42:8). Then Satan afflicted Job with painful boils from head to toe and Job’s friends lectured him at length because they believed he must have done some great evil to deserve so much suffering. But in the end, God revealed Himself to Job and his friends in a marvelous way and then rebuked his friends because they had spoken wrongly about God. Job said to God, “I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You.” (Job 42:2). God eventually doubled Job’s previous possessions and gave him just as many more children as he had had before (and I believe his other children were safely awaiting him in heaven). James writes “You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord — that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11). So while Job suffered at the hands of Satan, bandits, the weather, and his accusing friends, God was ultimately behind it all and had a good purpose for it. Job got to experience God in a magnificent way and God was seen to be more valuable to Job than everything else he had. And perhaps the greatest benefit of suffering is that it helps us to find our joy in God Himself and not in His gifts. Only He can truly satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts.

Suffering and tragedy may also be sent by God as a warning to ungodly people. In such cases, though we may consider it to be judgment in one sense, it is also a mercy, an opportunity for them to realize where they are headed and repent before they are eternally condemned. Proverbs 29:1 warns us that “He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.” So when a person or a nation persists in rebellion against God, God will eventually bring irrevocable judgment.

He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy. Proverbs 29:1

Sometimes this judgment is clearly and dramatically seen as suffering or tragedy in this life but at other times God just allows people to continue carelessly on their way until they die and meet Him at the final judgment. The scriptures give us many instances where God brought devastating judgment into the lives of individuals and nations that would not repent. In Luke 13, some people told Jesus about some men whom the Roman governor had slaughtered. Now, being God as well as man, no one has ever been as loving as Jesus. He was one who wept with those who wept. And had these people been grieving over this incident, He probably would have wept with them. But from His response, it seems more likely that they were handling it like some bit of juicy news, perhaps even speculating what great sins the victims may have been guilty of to bring such tragedy upon themselves. And because of His great love, Jesus always said whatever needed to be said for the good of those listening. He never played to the crowds or avoided the truth for fear of losing His popularity. People’s eternal souls are far too valuable for that. So Jesus responded “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2-5). His reply warns us of a very dangerous attitude which we so easily fall prey to and that is judging others to be worthy of God’s wrath while assuming that we deserve better. The truth is that we are all sinners in the sight of God and worthy of His judgment. We were created to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind and to love others as ourselves (Matt 22:37-40). God is perfectly holy, righteous, just, loving, merciful, gracious, and kind and He gives us all “life, breath, and all things”. So He is infinitely worthy of our complete love and devotion. We should not only place Him and His purposes above ourselves and our purposes but we ought to make it our purpose to fulfill His purpose for us. To do less is a great evil and because God is perfectly righteous and just, He cannot ignore our sin. Just as a human judge would be unjust if he were to let criminals go unpunished, so God would be unjust if He let our sins go unpunished. That puts us in a very bad spot. But it’s worse yet. Not only have we all committed many sins but we all have a sinful, selfish nature which continues to add more sins to our account. How can we ever hope to be accepted by this holy, righteous, and just God?

Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Luke 13:5

The good news is that God has provided a solution. But this solution actually involved the most unjust suffering that has ever happened. About two thousand years ago at the time and place prophesied, God sent His only Son Jesus

Christ to earth as a baby born to a virgin named Mary. He was fully God and fully man. He lived a perfect, sinless life. He loved the people, taught them about God, and performed many miracles. But many of the religious leaders hated Him because of jealousy and because He condemned their hypocritical religiosity which was devoid of true love for God and others. These religious leaders persecuted Him and wanted to destroy Him. Then one of His own followers named Judas betrayed Him into their hands. They then turned Him over to the Roman governor, falsely accusing Him of treason. Then the people turned against Him and called for His execution. The governor knew He was innocent but he was afraid of the people so he ordered Jesus to be beaten severely, and then when the people were still unsatisfied, he ordered him to be crucified which is perhaps the cruelest method of execution ever invented. This was the most unjust suffering that has ever occurred. But the scripture tells us that God planned for this to happen even before He created the world (1 Peter 1:20). Judas, the religious leaders, the Roman governor, and the people all freely chose to reject Jesus because of their own wicked hearts but in so doing they brought to pass that which God had planned all along (Acts 1:16, Acts 2:23, Matt 18:7). And three days later, Jesus rose from the dead just as He had prophesied and then He came and went among His followers for forty more days before finally ascending up to heaven (Mark 10:33-34, Acts 1:3-11, 1 Cor 15:3-6). Why did He have to die? To a people who were suffering, the apostle Peter wrote "Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). By His suffering and death on the cross, Jesus paid for the sins of all who would trust in Him as their Savior and Lord, including those responsible for His death. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). God can freely forgive our sins and still be righteous and just (Rom 3:21-26). So the most wicked betrayal and wrongful execution in all of history is being used by God to bring about the eternal salvation of all of His people.

Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. 1 Peter 3:18

But that is only part of the good news. By His Spirit, God is also able to change our hearts and set us free from the power of sin in our lives (Ezekiel 36:25-27). God Himself comes to live within those who trust in Jesus and submit themselves to Him (Acts 2:38). He gives us a heart to know Him, to love Him, and to love others. This does not mean that we instantly become sinless but it does mean that He will begin the process of making us like Jesus. We will still struggle every day to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong but we will have God working within us to strengthen, empower, and lead us (Phil 2:13, Gal 5:16-23). When we fall, He will help us get back up and get going again. When we need discipline, He will provide it. As we seek Him in prayer and in His word, He will help us to know Him better and to understand and obey the Bible which is His word to us. All of this is available to us only through Jesus. Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me" (John 14:6). He also said "whoever comes to Me, I will never cast out" (John 6:37). If you have never done so, then God commands you to repent (turn away from your sin and rebellion and humbly submit yourself to Him) and trust in Jesus (Acts 16:31, 17:30-31). He promises that "whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13) but He also issues a warning, saying "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb 4:7). No matter what you have done or how wicked you are, God is able to save you (1 Tim 1:15-17). "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 6;23). If you refuse to repent and trust in Jesus Christ then all of the sufferings of Jesus and all of your own sufferings in this life will do you no good and you will suffer even worse for all eternity in hell. But if you receive Jesus, then all the benefits of His sufferings will be yours and He will use all of your sufferings in this life for your eternal benefit as well. Repent and call upon Him today! If you would like to know more about what it means to repent and trust Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord then go to the website www.godforgives.info.

"whoever comes to Me, I will never cast out" (John 6:37)