



Why is there Suffering?



- ❑ To “suffer” is to bear pain, distress, sorrow, damage or loss. In general, pain and suffering offer a message of warning that something is wrong.
- ❑ This “wrong” is generally the result of some kind of “evil” – either “moral evil” (action or inaction of moral agents) or “natural evil” (e.g., disease, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, etc.).¹

Christian Perspective

- ❑ The *reality* of suffering and evil is consistent with the Christian worldview.² If good and evil actually exist, an objective standard of good is needed, and that objective standard is a good God. Thus the existence of suffering and evil can be used to support the existence of God.³
- ❑ The Christian view states that the causes of suffering are numerous and complex, but are generally traced to the conditions of the *fallen* world – a world out of harmony with God.⁴
- ❑ The major cause of suffering in this world is sin,⁵ either directly or indirectly.⁶
 - How does pain and suffering affect us? “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁷



“I Can Relate!”

- ❑ The Bible shows human experience. The writers of Scripture, and other people of faith, faced times of suffering and despair, and they questioned God.⁸ For example, read Psalm 13:1-2.
- ❑ The book of Job focuses on the problem of undeserved suffering. At one point, Job said:
 - 📖 “I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer;
I stand up, but you merely look at me.
You turn on me ruthlessly;
With the might of your hand you attack me.” (*Job 30:20-21, NIV*)

¹ Of course, some natural disasters can be traced to irresponsible human activity.

² Questions concerning evil and suffering are difficult for any worldview to answer. However, I believe the Christian worldview provides the best explanation *and* solution.

³ But this may raise the question, “How can a good, all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?” For a philosophical response to this question, see “How Can a Good God Allow Suffering?” under Evil & Suffering on the ICF website.

⁴ The world is “fallen” because of man’s rebellion against God (Genesis 3). As a result of “the Fall,” evil and suffering entered the world of human beings. The ultimate origin of evil (prior to the Fall) is largely unexplained. However, it is clear that God did not create evil (evil is not a substance), and He is not the direct cause of evil.

⁵ “sin” may be defined as “any attitude or action that is opposed to the nature and will of God.” Suffering may result from our own sin, or the sin of others (including humanity in general). Jesus suffered though he committed no sin.

⁶ It is obvious that human sin is the cause of much suffering in this world. Great suffering also results from “natural disasters,” which can sometimes be traced to irresponsible human activity. How does the present physical world (with its earthquakes and hurricanes) relate to the original (pre-fall) creation? This is disputed among theologians. In any case, sin has affected the “whole creation” which is under God’s judgment is (Romans 8:20-21).

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1962), 93. Pain is not necessarily a bad thing. In our physical bodies, pain is a beneficial warning signal. In a broader sense, trouble, pain and suffering offer “a *general* message of warning to all humanity that something is wrong with this planet, and that we need radical intervention” (Phillip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990]. 84). Of course, not all respond positively to suffering. As D.A. Carson says, “Pain tends to make people better, or bitter” (Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering & Evil* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990].121).

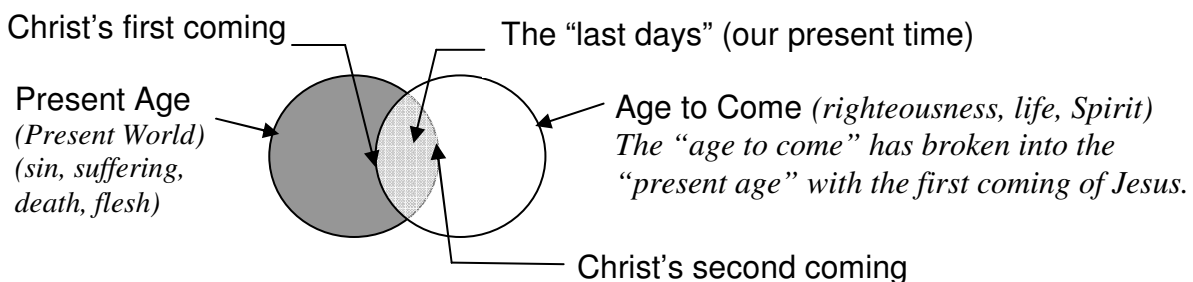
⁸ Even Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)

- It's important to note that God never answered Job's questions of *why*, but that was okay. As John Blanchard writes, "One message that comes across very powerfully from Job's experience is this: it is less important to know all the answers than to know and trust the one who does. Laying hold on this can be a liberating experience."⁹

The Big Picture of Evil & Suffering

- ❑ The all-good God created a "very good" world (*Genesis 1:31*). The first humans enjoyed moral innocence and harmony with God and his creation (*Genesis 2:8-25*).
- ❑ Moral evil was an intrusion into God's good world, brought through the free agency of God's creatures. Man's sin against God resulted in a broken relationship with God, which resulted in a fallen world, infected with evil and suffering (*Genesis 3*).
- ❑ God initiated a plan to defeat evil and suffering, and promised a restored and harmonious created order (*Genesis 3:15; 12:1 ff.*).
- ❑ God was (and is) faithful to his promise, and even uses evil and suffering to accomplish his purposes (e.g. *Genesis 50:15-20, Acts 2:22-24*).
- ❑ God's plan is fulfilled in Christ, who suffered and died for the sins of the world. Christ's death and resurrection defeated evil and death (*Colossians 2:15, Hebrews 2:14-15*).
- ❑ Through faith in Christ, we receive the benefits of Christ's victory over evil and death, but these benefits are not *fully* realized until the end of this age (*Acts 3:18-21, Romans 8:18-25*).
- ❑ The end of evil and suffering will be fully realized in the "new heaven and new earth" – God's everlasting harmonious order in His glorious presence (*Revelation 21:3-4*).

The Christian is a "new creation" but still lives in the "old world."



The Suffering of Christ

- ❑ God purposed that Jesus Christ would suffer (*Acts 2:22-24*). Jesus said of himself, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (*Luke 9:22, NIV*).
- ❑ The suffering of Christ was in fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus said, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms ... This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day" (*Luke 24:44-46; see Acts 26:22-23; Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; 16:9-11; Acts 2:24-36*).
- ❑ Christ had to suffer and die to provide redemption and salvation.



⁹ John Blanchard, *Where is God When Things Go Wrong?* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2005), 28

The Suffering of Christ's Followers

- ❑ Christians are not exempt from suffering in this world. In fact, many suffer *because* they are Christians. Jesus told his disciples, “*In this world you will have trouble*” (John 16:33). “*In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Tim 3:12).
- ❑ Christians may suffer “*for [Christ]*” (Philippians 1:29); “*for what is right*” (1 Peter 3:14); for “*the kingdom of God*” (2 Thessalonians 5:5); and for the “*gospel*” (2 Timothy 2:8-9).
- ❑ Suffering “*with Christ*” is not something to shun. “*But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ*” (1 Peter 4:12-19). Paul wrote, “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings*” (Philippians 3:10, NIV).
- ❑ Of course, Christians suffer for many of the same reasons that others in this world suffer.

The End of Suffering

- ❑ Christians look forward to the future end of suffering, in the *new heaven and new earth*. “*Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them ... He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*” (Revelation 21:3-4, NIV).
- ❑ This blessed hope helps Christians endure their present sufferings. Paul wrote, “*I consider that my present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us*” (Romans 8:18, NIV). He also wrote, “*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*” (2 Corinthians 4:17, NIV).¹⁰

Dealing with Suffering

- ❑ Suffering in this life is unavoidable.¹¹ The question is: How can we deal with it personally? Suffering provides opportunity. Opportunity for what? The Bible says that God uses suffering for his good purposes.¹²
 - ? How might our suffering result in something good? How can we be encouraged in times of suffering?



Here are some of the ways God uses suffering for good:

Suffering → Realization of Need

- Suffering reminds us of our mortality and need. Suffering can help the non-Christian see his/her need for salvation in Christ Jesus.

Suffering → Change in Values & Perspective

- Suffering helps us to realize what is truly valuable. Suffering influences us to shift our focus from earthly things to relationships and heavenly things (2 Corinthians 4:7-19).

¹⁰ Paul’s “light and momentary troubles” included imprisonments, severe beatings, a stoning., exposure to death, shipwreck, various dangers, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, and anguish of heart (2 Corinthians 11:23-28; 2:4).

¹¹ Of course, much suffering can be avoided by godly and wise living. But suffering affects all people.

¹² Some of God’s purposes can be found in the following passages: Hebrews 12:7-13; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; 4:8-10; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-19; Acts 28:8-9; Philippians 3:10; Matthew 5:10-12. An article by J. Hampton Keathley, III is a concise and helpful summary (see www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=771).

Suffering → Humility

- Suffering humbles us and reminds us of our dependence on God (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Suffering → Christian Character (Christ-likeness)

- God uses suffering to develop Christian character and spiritual maturity.
 - 📖 “And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we rejoice¹³ in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:2a-4, NIV)¹⁴
 - 📖 Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit¹⁵ he prunes¹⁶ so that it will be more fruitful.” (John 15:1-2).

*Suffering → Preparation for Helping Others*

- Our suffering helps develop our capacity and sympathy in comforting others who are suffering, especially those who are suffering in a similar way (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

Suffering → Christian Testimony

- Christians who handle suffering with peace, joy, and stability are a testimony to the power and life of Christ (2 Timothy 2:8-10; 1 Peter 3:13-17; 2 Corinthians 4:7-12).

Reflection/Application

- Are you presently experiencing difficulties, trouble, pain or suffering? If you aren't now, you certainly will in the future. How will you handle it? *What* are you trusting in? Where will you find help? The Bible says, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). Have you entered into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ?
- As a Christian, how are you enduring the troubles in your life? Remember, God uses trouble and suffering to mold us into the image of His Son. We may not desire suffering, but we *should* desire Christ-likeness. When it seems too difficult to endure, share your troubles with a trusted Christian, and ask God for strength.
 - Don't dwell on the “why?”¹⁷ Instead ask, “How can God work through this?”
 - Reflect on passages like Romans 8:18-39 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, which teach us to focus *not* on our troubles, but on God and his good purposes and promises.
- As a Christian in this present world, seek to be “salt and light” in order to help restrain the spread of evil and suffering (Matthew 5:13-16).

¹³ Paul says “rejoice” (5:3). Peter says “rejoice” (1 Peter 1:6). James says “consider it pure joy” (James 1:2). This does not necessarily mean rejoice *because* you suffer, but rejoice *in* your suffering and trials. Why? Because God uses suffering and trials to accomplish good.

¹⁴ The word translated “perseverance” (ὕπομονή) comes from the idea of “remaining under.” A person who successfully carries a heavy weight for a long time develops strength and endurance. Muscles need resistance to become stronger. The word translated “character” (δοκιμή) is related to the word for “test” or “prove to be genuine” (δοκιμάζω), so we can say perseverance brings about tested character or proven character. As we rely on God to help us endure suffering and develop character, it strengthens our trust in God for the future.

¹⁵ “Fruit” can mean 1) the result of one's labor, including evangelism (John 15:16); 2) the evidence of one's true identity (Matthew 7:15-20) and/or 3) character (Galatians 5:22-23 – the “fruit of the Spirit”).

¹⁶ God “prunes” (“trims clean”) the bad branches in our lives. These may be particular attitudes, perspectives, values, actions, etc. that need to be cleaned out, so we can become more fruitful. God “prunes” us in various ways. One way is through trouble and suffering. This “pruning” may be painful at the time, but later on “it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).

¹⁷ It is okay to ask “why?” but we should not dwell on it. Sometimes the “why?” cannot be known. Consider Job.