

Why does God allow people to suffer?

31570 Railroad Canyon Rd
Canyon Lake, CA 92587
(951)333-3822

Jerry E. McKeehan

Question: Why did God create man when he knew man would suffer? Why did God create man knowing he would sin? Why does God allow evil? If God is all-powerful, he could put an end to suffering at once. If God is merciful and loving, he could surely step in and stop all injustice.

Short Answer: The theology of suffering is the most difficult of all. This short answer will not attempt to solve the problem of evil. No theological mind or system has done this.

First: Suffering is a theological problem (in more ways than one). For sin is a theological matter. If sin is the cause of suffering, then suffering too is a theological problem. Not merely because we ask, 'Why does God allow suffering?' But because suffering is directly related to sin.

Second: There was no suffering prior to the Fall. God created man and women in a world free from pain. God created man 'able to sin', said Augustine. Why this was so is not knowable. But there was no pain in Adam's pre-fallen state. Man was given warning of the consequences of sin before he fell (Gen. 2:17).

Third: Once man sinned, everything pertaining to his being changed. The chemistry of his body (e.g., aging process). The inclinations of the soul that were alien to man before the Fall; unbelief; fear; pride; jealousy; greed; insecurity.

Fourth: The earth in a sense fell with man. 'Cursed is the ground because of you' (Genesis 3:17). This means that nature itself changed and this change owes entirely to the Fall. Hence all natural disaster has its origin not in God but in man who sinned.

Fifth: Not all sickness is traceable to sin. The proof of this is that not all who needed healing had sinned so as to be ill (James 5:15). We all have to die one way or the other, no matter how godly we are.

Sixth: There is however a connection between health and holiness (1 Corinthians 11:30). If we live holy lives we can avoid a lot of needless suffering. For example, some diseases are traceable to sexual sin.

Seventh: Becoming a Christian is not a way of avoiding suffering. The greatest sufferer of all was Jesus; we are called to imitate him (1 Pet 2:21). Suffering of a different sort is

promised to the Christian (2 Tim. 3:12).

Therefore, the Christian is a person who has double suffering:

- The suffering that comes to all generally (Job 5:7).
- The suffering that comes to the Christian particularly (1 Peter 3:17; 1 Peter 4:16; 2 Timothy 3:12; Philippians 1:29).

Parallel with this is God's chastening, or disciplining (Hebrews 12:6).

- All discipline is painful (Hebrew 12:11).
- And yet it is for the Christian only (Hebrews 12:7-8).

Eighth: Anyone who tells you that the Bible promises health and prosperity if we meet certain conditions is misleading you.

- We are not called to avoid suffering.
- We are called to accept it graciously when it comes.
- 'Jesus does not promise to take us out of the fire but promises to get into the fire with us.'

Ninth: The nearest we can come to an explanation of evil is that, were there no evil, there would be no need for faith. God has decreed that those who know him do so by faith (Habakkuk 2:4; 1 Corinthians 1:21). Faith to be faith must believe when there is no empirical evidence (Hebrews 11:1). The world, however, says, 'seeing is believing' (Mark 15:32). God may have allowed evil if only that there may be faith. God wants us to believe his Word (Bible).

Tenth: There are generally two ways by which God increases faith:

1. Positive - When He just pours out his Spirit on us.
2. Negative - When God has to discipline us to get our attention (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Eleventh: No-one knew unfairness, humiliation or injustice like Jesus. For example:

1. Family relationship (John 7:1-5)
2. Living conditions (Matthew 8:20)
3. Being misunderstood (John 2:18-19)
4. Being laughed at (Matthew 9:24)
5. Loneliness (Matthew 26:45)
6. Humiliation (Matthew 27:28)
7. Unfair 'trial' (Matthew 27)
8. Emotional torment (Matthew 27:40)
9. Physical pain (Matthew 27:32-35)
10. Spiritual pain (Matthew 27:46)

Twelve: Jesus endured suffering for three reasons:

1. That he could sympathize (Hebrews 2:18).
2. That he would be perfected (Hebrews 2:10; 5:8-9).
3. That he could atone for sin (Matthew 5:17; Hebrews 2:1).

Thirteen: Moral or human evil came from God's choice to make beings that had the freedom to reject His love.

1. To be evil is to be out of fellowship with God. To do evil is to violate the love of God, self, and others.
2. God created humans with the potential to break relationship with Him.
3. God is ultimately responsible for moral evil.

I didn't say God is evil, or that He made evil. I said that evil's existence is God's responsibility. Dorothy L. Sayers said it this way:

“God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrow and death. He [God] had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair... He has himself gone through the whole human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.”

Fourteen: The Cross shows that God is no stranger to pain. God does not allow us to go through what He Himself avoids. He came face-to-face with evil in this world when He came among us in the person of Jesus. The Cross can never be separated from the Resurrection. It points steadily, at the midpoint of time, to that ultimate victory over pain at the end of all time. Because of the Cross and the Resurrection we can be sure that God will not ultimately be defeated by evil and suffering, and neither will His followers.

Fifteen: The only answer that makes sense concerning 'natural evil' to me is that God allows suffering for two reasons:

1. To constantly remind us that this world is not our home; and
2. To constantly remind us that our place is at home with Him.

Your brother in Christ,

Jerry

Web Page: <http://maverickscorner.com>

Email: drmckeehan@gmail.com

Recommended Reading:

Wiersbe Warren W. "Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People" (Revell, 1984)