

Why does God allow suffering? (part 2)

Overview

This is the second part of this topic. We will look at:

- The problem of continual suffering
- Can we profit from pain?
- A world without pain
- Suffering beyond our control
- The Bible message about suffering:
 - why we suffer
 - a permanent solution to suffering

The problem of continual suffering

We saw last time that the pain system in our bodies has marvellous protective qualities. For example, if someone breaks their ankle - a broken bone causes a lot of pain – they don't put their weight on it because it is painful. This stops them damaging it further.



There is a problem though. What if the pain doesn't stop? We all know those who may have forms of cancer or arthritis, or who have suffered the loss of a loved one or suffered from severe accidents. This type of physical or mental suffering is incessant. It doesn't seem to stop.

This suffering can't be switched off. So why did God create continual pain?



This question is very hard to answer. Some people with continual pain seem to endure far more than others. They can be physically ill or suffer mentally for long periods of time with no apparent hope of release. Quite clearly, in many, many cases, their suffering is not their fault – it wasn't caused by what they had done. So what is the answer? The Bible, as we have seen, suggests that suffering can be for our own good, even if we can't see the

reason for it. Here is one example:

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ... Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect... For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He [God] for our profit that we may be partakers of His holiness.

Hebrews 12 v 7, 9 and 10

Let's try and understand what the writer to the Hebrews is saying. God disciplines us as children, and often children can't see why they are being disciplined.

You can perhaps think back to the time when you were a child, and how your parents told you off for doing something; and you thought they were being stupid or were simply plain wrong.



Can we profit from pain?

Sometimes we can't see a reason for God's discipline. But in hindsight it is sometimes possible to see the benefit gained because of pain we have had to endure. Of course saying this to someone who is currently suffering continual pain is very unlikely to make them feel better. Even spoken with great tact and diplomacy, the words "*don't worry, this pain you are suffering is for your own benefit*" could seem very heartless and cruel. Yet benefit can come from enduring pain.

A world without pain

Let's just change tack a little bit. Have you ever imagined a world without pain? What would a world without pain be like? The Philosopher John Hick imagined what a world without all pain and evil would be like. Here is a quote from his book "Philosophy of Religion"

Suppose contrary to fact, that this world were a paradise from which all possibility of pain and suffering were excluded. The consequences would be very far reaching. For example, no one could ever injure anyone else: the murderer's knife would turn to paper or his bullets to thin air; the bank safe, robbed of a million dollars, would miraculously become filled with another million dollars; fraud, deceit, conspiracy, and treason would somehow leave the fabric of society undamaged. Again no one would ever be injured by accident; the mountain-climber, steeple-jack or playing child falling from a height would float unharmed to the ground; the reckless driver would never meet with disaster. There would be no need to work; there would be no call to be concerned for others in time of need or danger, for in such a world there could be no real needs or danger.

To make possible this continuous series of individual adjustments, nature would have to work "special providences" instead of running according to general laws which men must learn to respect on penalty of pain and death. The laws of nature would have to be extremely flexible: sometimes an object would be hard and solid, sometimes soft...

One can at least begin to imagine such a world. It is evident that our present ethical

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concepts would have no meaning in it . . . in our hedonistic paradise there could be no wrong actions – nor any right actions in distinction from wrong. Courage and fortitude would have no point in an environment in which there is, by definition, no danger or difficulty. Generosity, kindness Love, prudence, unselfishness, and all other ethical notions which presuppose life in a stable environment, could not be formed.”

In other words, in that sort of world we couldn't develop any character.

So in the world where we live we can develop characteristics like love, compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, longsuffering, endurance. The Bible says that God shows these characteristics and He wants us to be like Him.

In the Bible God is described as a loving Father who allows us to choose how we live our lives. We all, after all, generally like to have our own way. But of course, as a parent knows, letting children have their own way is not always best for them. So it is with us: God wants us to develop His characteristics and show His character in our lives.

We suggest that suffering is a way that a loving Creator has chosen to get our attention, help us develop good characteristics, AND make us think about His offer of life after death.

Suffering beyond our control

Floods and earthquakes

Jesus again gives us help when thinking about suffering from events such as floods and earthquakes over which we have no control. Following on from the incident that we looked at on page 89, Jesus also mentions the suffering caused by a tower falling on some people:

“Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”



“Natural disasters” cause much suffering

Luke 13 v 4 and 5

Jesus repeats the warning that he gave in the previous incident: stop and think about the end of your life. Ultimately it does not matter whether we die from an accident at 20 years old or in bed at 95, the end result is the same. We all tend to put out of our minds the fact that our life will end. Suffering can be a warning that interrupts our normal routines. It can make us stop and think about the fact that our lives will end one day.

The good news is that death need not be the end for us. The purpose of this seminar

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is to give you the evidence that there is a trustworthy message in the Bible and that its message contains a hope of life after death.

- Suffering and death serve as a warning
- We should consider whether or not we can trust ideas about life after death
- Suffering disturbs our routines and makes us consider what life is all about

The Bible message about suffering

Why we suffer

We now want to look at what the Bible says about the origin of suffering.

At the start of the Bible, the record of the creation of everything tells us that when the work was finished:

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.

Genesis 1 v 31

There is no mention of pain and suffering, so it would seem reasonable to assume that there was no suffering at that time.

The Bible record then tells us that our first parents were given a simple command:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'

Genesis 2 v 17

We can see that the man was given a simple choice – obey or disobey. But it is made clear that there would be consequences for disobedience. Unfortunately for us, our first parents disobeyed. As a result of their disobedience they were told:

'I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children.'

Genesis 3 v 16

and

'Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground.'

Genesis 3 v 17 to 19

We are left in no doubt that life was going to be hard and painful as a result of the disobedience.

Later in the Bible we are told that the consequences of the disobedience of our first parents were far reaching:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—

Romans 5 v 12

We all inherit the tendency to want our own way and disobey God's commands. This also means that we suffer the consequences for disobedience.

This confirms the conclusions that we have already come to:

- We have choices
- There are consequences as a result of our choices
- Suffering is a part of those consequences

A permanent solution to suffering

If we trust what the Bible tells us, we can be assured that one day suffering will end. One of the aims of the *Life's Big Questions* information is to give you the evidence which can help you have real confidence in the Bible message.



The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ will come back to the earth to remove all of our world's imperfections, including pain and death. Two examples of this comforting message are:

*He will swallow up death forever,
And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces*
Isaiah 25 v 8

...God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.
Revelation 21 v 4

The apostle Paul in the New Testament talks about the creation waiting to be freed at the return of the Lord Jesus. This is what he says:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits ... for the sons of God to be revealed ...For the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The apostle Paul says our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will follow. The suffering we endure tells us we are dying and decaying, but the Bible says that we can be freed to become God's children.

We look in more detail at God's plan for us in later sessions.

- Suffering is part of the consequences of our tendency to want our own way
- The Bible promises a time when there will be no more suffering
- We should consider whether or not we can trust this promise

Summary:

We live in an imperfect world.

We have freedom of choice.

Our Creator wants us to choose to respond to His love despite our selfish tendencies.



Suffering

- can make us stop and think
- sometimes warns that things are not right
- may make us stop and consider risks we are taking
- makes us think about the effect of our actions on other people
- disturbs our routines and can make us realise:



- that our lives are not endless
- there is something wrong with our world

- can make us stop and think about our loving Creator's offer of life after death which we can choose to accept or reject



The Bible tells us that suffering is part of the consequences of our tendency to want our own way. It also tells us that suffering will end when Jesus returns to remove the imperfections in our world.

Further information

1. Suffering can be sent for our good

The Bible tells us that God sometimes sends suffering to encourage us to go in the right direction in life:

Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Hebrews 12 v 11

Solomon, the wise king of Israel, gave a prayer at the dedication of the temple he had built. This is part of that prayer:

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray toward this place and confess Your name, and turn from their sin because You afflict them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel, that You may teach them the good way in which they should walk; and send rain on Your land which You have given to Your people as an inheritance. 2 Chronicles 6 v 26 and 27

From this we can see that Solomon is suggesting that natural disasters such as drought can be sent to make people stop and think about how they are living. God brings suffering on people for their own good.

2. Freedom of choice

The Bible makes it plain that our Creator gives us the choice of whether to obey Him or not. The position was made plain to the early Israelites:

...I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice. Deuteronomy 30 v 19 and 20

They could either love and obey God and have the hope of life, or disobey and have no hope of life. The writer of one of the Psalms says:

I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on Your laws. I hold fast to Your statutes, O LORD. Psalm 119 v 30 and 31

The book of Proverbs tells us that those who ignore God are free to choose to do so:

*Because they hated knowledge
And did not choose the fear of the LORD,
They would have none of My counsel.* Proverbs 1 v 29 and 30