

Why does God allow suffering? (part 1)

We have sympathy for those who suffer greatly, and we want to do what we can to help.

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We sometimes ask, “If there is a loving God, why does He stand back and do nothing while the world is full of suffering?”

Suffering in our own lives can be a big problem.

Some of us are not able to believe in God or the Bible until we have found an answer to the problem of suffering.

We shall look at this problem in two sessions and see that:

- **we suffer because we live in an imperfect world**
- **suffering can be a warning that something is wrong**
- **suffering can make us stop and think**
- **suffering can help build our characters**
- **sometimes there are reasons for suffering**
- **the Bible tells us why we suffer and speaks of a future time when there will be no more suffering**

There are three main types of suffering:

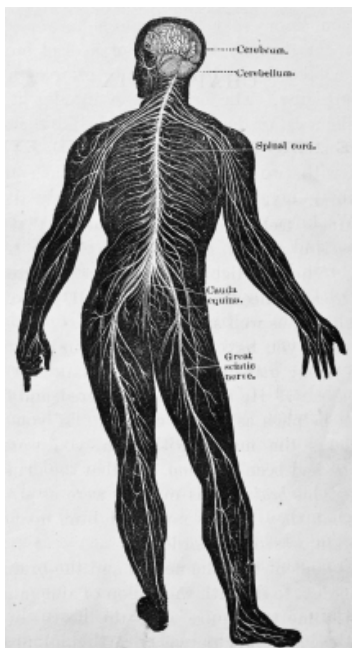
- Caused by ourselves – pain and suffering as a result of accident injuries
– suffering resulting from our lifestyle
- Caused by mankind in general – war, persecution and pollution
- Outside human control – floods, earthquakes, illness and death

We shall look at these three categories and see what we can learn.

Our imperfect world

We live in an imperfect world full of imperfect people. This is the root cause of all suffering. The Bible tells us why there is this imperfection and what has been done to remove it in the future. The “Is the Bible a message from a God I can’t see?” sections that we have looked at are intended to help you have confidence in the Bible message when it tells us about these issues. Suffering can be a reminder that we should think about why our world is not perfect.

An unappreciated protective system



Before we think about suffering in detail we want to consider the wonder of our pain system.

Nobody, after all, likes pain. It hurts too much. But our pain system is often unappreciated as a protective system. Our skin has sensors scattered all over it, sensing pressure or touch or heat or cold. Interestingly, there are no dedicated pain sensors.

What is marvellous about our skin is the sensitivity to touch. The absolute threshold of touch is the smallest pressure we can detect applied to an area of skin which doesn't have any hairs on it. The most sensitive

	Sensitive to:-
Tip of tongue	2 g/mm²
Fingers	3 g/mm²
Back of hand	12 g/mm²
Back of forearm	33 g/mm²
Sole of foot	250 g/mm²

area to touch is our tongue, then the tips of our fingers. We can see from the table that the sole of our foot requires a high pressure before we notice it – this makes sense as our feet bear all our weight when we are standing. We can see that the threshold of touch in each case is absolutely right for its purpose.

Scientists have also measured the absolute threshold of pain. They measure this by seeing how much pressure needs to be applied to a very sharp needle to induce pain. Typical values are:

Cornea	0.2 gram
Forearm	20 grams
Back of hand	100 grams
Sole of foot	200 grams
Fingertip	300 grams

The most sensitive part of our body to pain is the cornea, which can stand only 0.2 g of pressure. Again this makes sense, as anything sharp in our eye has the potential to cause us some very serious damage, or even cause blindness, so it is essential that we quickly remove anything in our eyes.



What is interesting is the fact that finger tips are virtually the most sensitive to touch and yet the most insensitive to pain. This means that someone can play a musical instrument like a guitar or a violin by applying pressure to the strings without feeling pain.



Interestingly, our internal organs don't respond to needles or heat. They respond to stimuli which are important to each particular organ. For example, the stomach responds to the feeling of being distended and full. Kidneys respond to kidney stones.

The pain system is designed to tell us that something is wrong with our bodies. Referred pain happens when the organ recruits nearby pain sensors to sound the alarm. For example a heart-attack victim may feel burning or constriction in the neck, chest, jaw or left arm. Skin cells there, though perfectly healthy, send alarm messages to the brain as if they were damaged, when in fact the problem lies

with the neighbouring heart. If we eat an ice cream too fast or drink something too cold we immediately suffer from a head ache. Pain is something which has been marvellously designed. Without it our lives would be fraught with danger.

The importance of this kind of pain is illustrated by an American boy who was born with no sense of pain. He was nine years old when his mother took him to the John Hopkins medical school in Baltimore one November day in 1937. We might think that not being able to feel any pain would be great. However this is what the examining doctor wrote in his report:

- Partial blindness in one eye because when he had sand in his eye he did not notice it until permanent damage had been done
- Scars on almost every part of his body
- Enormous scar across his buttocks where he had sat on a heater and did not notice until his flesh was burnt to the bone
- One foot permanently deformed, as he had broken a bone and walked about on it for months before it was spotted
- Both hands so badly cut that he would never again be able to straighten his fingers

We can see that pain acts as a danger signal to the rest of us, but this unfortunate boy had nothing to warn him to stop and think when his body was being injured.

Suffering caused by our own actions

Minor injuries

We cause suffering and pain to ourselves in many ways. We may burn ourselves on a hot object, bruise our hand by hitting it with something or strain a muscle by lifting a heavy object. This suffering is helpful, it tells us not to do it again! Next time we are in a similar situation, we remember the pain and act appropriately. Pain is a warning that things are not right. We must stop and think about the problem.

Backache usually tells us that we have damaged our back



Accidents



Car accidents cause much pain and suffering

Many of us are willing to do things which we know could involve suffering if things go wrong. Do we consider the risks before we do them? Modern travel is one example. Many of us travel in cars, knowing of the suffering that could occur if we had an accident. Some of us, when thinking about the potential suffering involved in aeroplane accidents, decide that the risk is not worthwhile and do not travel by plane. Like suffering caused by minor injuries, the risk of suffering from

accidents sometimes makes us stop and think about what we are going to do.

Lifestyle-related suffering

Many of us suffer as a direct result of the sort of life we choose to lead. In some countries, cigarettes carry a health warning, yet how many people ignore the warning and suffer the consequences later! Some of us choose to eat too much of the wrong kinds of food and become overweight, with the increasing risk of heart disease and diabetes. Because of immorality, AIDS is another problem that humanity has inflicted on itself. All of these problems are warnings that we are abusing our bodies.



- We live in an imperfect world
- Pain is a warning that things are not right
- Suffering from accidents makes us stop and consider what could happen
- Lifestyle-related suffering should make us want to change our lifestyle

Suffering caused by mankind

Wars and persecution



The results of atrocities in Cambodia

We sometimes ask the question, “If there is a loving God, why has He allowed people to inflict so much suffering on others?”

When we think like this, we should remember that if we want our Creator to intervene, He could well intervene in our lives and stop us doing things which cause suffering. Many of us would resent such restrictions in our lives. We all have a selfish streak which wants its own way (see p. 91). That being so, it should not surprise us that from time to time our self-interest causes suffering for others.

In the Bible, Jesus has an interesting comment about suffering inflicted on innocent people. Relations between the Roman governor Pilate and the Jews at the time of Jesus were never very good. The tension from time to time resulted in blood being shed. The people pointed out to Jesus a recent incident:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Luke 13 v 1 to 3

Jesus answered their question by assuring his listeners that those killed were no more wicked than other people. The interesting point for us to note is that he is showing that such events should make us stop and think about the fact that we shall all die eventually. Such events disturb our routine and remind us that it could be our turn next. Like suffering caused by injuries, we are being warned that we have a problem that requires thinking about. This should encourage us to look into what life is all about.

Man-made problems



Many people suffer from asthma as a result of pollution

Almost all of us choose to do things which we know cause suffering. The way we cause pollution is just one example. We make the choice to pollute and must take the consequences of illnesses such as asthma.

If we were to expect a loving God to prevent all suffering, this would include that caused by pollution. This would affect most goods and services in industrialised countries.

All suffering caused by people should make us stop and think. We are being reminded that something is not as it should be. We should think about the consequences of what we are doing in relation both to other people and to the planet on which we live.

Many people are now thinking about the current and potential problems caused by human activity and are realising that there is something wrong. Measures are being taken to try and reduce the problems.

- We can choose how to live our lives
- We can choose how we treat other people
- Other people's deaths remind us that our lives will not last for ever
- Suffering should make us think about the effect of our actions on others

God does care

The Bible is very clear that God does not take pleasure in people's suffering. Here are three quotations from the Bible, one from the Old Testament, two from the New.

- *For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!*
Ezekiel 18 v 32
- *For God **so loved** the world that He gave His only begotten Son*
John 3 v 16
- *He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*
2 Peter 3 v 9



The Bible describes how God has a plan where pain and suffering will be permanently be taken away. We'll look at that plan in part 2.

Further Information

Our selfish streak

The Bible tells us that we are basically self-centred. In the early days of our history, the Bible tells us what this produced:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Genesis 6 v 5

Jesus spelt out what we are capable of:

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.

Matthew 15 v 19

The prophet Jeremiah was even more blunt:

*The heart is deceitful above all things,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it?*

Jeremiah 17 v 9

The apostle James in the New Testament tells us that we are an imperfect dying race because of this selfish streak:

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

James 1 v 14 and 15

