

Suffering

Introduction

God – the God of the Bible – is good. Look at everything He created – It was all “very good”! (**Genesis 1**) And **God has unlimited power.** Again, read the first page, even the very first *sentence*: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” **He uses His goodness for our well-being.** *Witness*: The beautiful creation. Besides, He “gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (**John 3:16**)

The Bible tells how God conducts Himself. Unfortunately, many people develop *their own ideas* of what a good God will and will not do. They say things like, “God, who wants us to have everlasting life, would never send anyone to hell.” But the Bible plainly teaches that we need to make proper choices (“repent,” that is, turn from evil) in order to receive life and avoid eternal destruction. (See, for example, **Mark 9:42-47**; **2 Thessalonians 1:6-9**; **Hebrews 10:26-31**; **2 Peter 3:5-9**)

The “problem” of evil and suffering. In a similar way, people decide *from their own imagination* that God’s goodness would cause Him to use His unlimited power to eliminate evil altogether. (Please see the related article about “Evil in the World” at <http://www.MyPreachingPen.com/files/evil.htm>.) A similarly imaginative, and equally unfounded idea is that “a good God would never allow people to suffer.” But the same Bible that teaches us about our good and all-powerful God clearly teaches that God allows evil to exist, and that He allows people to suffer, at least, *here on earth*.

This article explores some aspects of suffering and presents some of the Bible’s lessons on this topic. Hopefully this article will help you deal with whatever suffering you have to endure.

Why do people suffer?

The simple answer to this natural question is that *everyone* suffers! Suffering is not so much *explained* in the Bible, as it is simply presented as a *fact*. Jesus told a parable about two men, one who built his house (i.e., life) on the sand, the other on the rock. They BOTH suffered the winds, rains, and floods. The point is that we will ALL pass through trials in this life. Notice that they had BOTH *heard* Jesus’ words, but only the one who *obeyed* Jesus had the strong foundation to overcome life’s problems. (**Matthew 7:24-27**; compare **Matthew 7:21-23**)

Or, to explain this in the words of the comic strip, Ziggy, a man stands looking into the heavens and asks God, “Why me?!?” The voice booms back, “Why NOT?!” In other words, what makes *me* think that I’m so special that I will escape suffering in this life, while *everyone else* has to endure suffering?

Actually, God *does* provide special care to His children. Those who listen to and obey His voice will have special protection. However, this protection is neither promised nor measured in physical terms. There’s a famous, but often misapplied, passage in **Romans 8:28** – “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” To hear some people explain it, this passage teaches that bad things will *never* happen to good people! But notice the context (the passages around this verse). The chain of blessings starting with God’s calling and ending with our glorification (verses 28-30) applies to people who are being “conformed to the image of His Son,” and the passage is

establishing the point that *nothing* “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” But notice that the Christian is potentially going to be exposed to *all manner* of things that will *try* to separate us from God’s love, including tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword (verse 35) and even death (verse 38).

A similar passage can be found in **2 Corinthians 4:8 – 5:10**. There is a list of great problems which especially Jesus’ apostles had to endure, but the apostles’ perspective and hope carried them through because they looked to spiritual blessings and spiritual outcomes. Notice the mentions of spiritual renewal, faith, effort to be pleasing to God, and confidence in God’s spiritual promises, even in the face of God’s judgment.

Why do bad things happen ... ?

Sometimes, people suffer the **natural physical consequences of their foolish or sinful choices**. For example, people suffer a hangover after getting drunk. Also, many accidental deaths result from inadvertently violating some natural law such as gravity. Also, see **Romans 1:27** concerning homosexuality (“receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due”). Sometimes, **God Himself inflicts punishment** on people in direct response to their ungodliness. For example, God killed Herod in **Acts 12** because of Herod’s awful pride.

... to good people?

Why, why, why? We understand and even *expect* that foolish and evil people may suffer. But it comes as a great surprise to many people that God knowingly and purposefully allows *good* people to suffer. It just doesn’t seem *fair* to us. Remember, though, that God allows *good* things happen to both *bad people* and *good people*. For example, “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (**Matthew 5:45**) In a similar way, as referred to in the section above, *bad* things happen to both bad people and good people.

The Bible gives several instances when **God allowed Satan or one of his agents to inflict suffering** on people. The ultimate example is Jesus Christ, Himself. “Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.” (**Hebrews 5:8**) What’s *fair* about that?!? Another classic example is the life of the man named Job. In **Job chapter 1**, Satan used a combination of enemy armies and natural disasters to destroy Job’s possessions, servants, and children. Then in chapter 2, Satan directly attacked Job’s health. (When people blame God for bad things in their lives, they *ought* to lay the blame on *Satan!*) All this happened to Job *because he was righteous!* Another important example is from the life of the apostle Paul whom God permitted to suffer some physical problem (illness? weakness?) in spite of Paul’s prayer that it be taken away. We need to accept the fact that life is NOT fair... and that God is control. Whether we understand His reasons or not, we can trust Him to do all things for our spiritual and eternal well being.

Why does God allow good people to suffer? Here’s a quick list of reasons given in Scripture, taken from the cases of Jesus, Job, and Paul:

- **To fulfill God's purpose in heavenly realms.** Jesus is referred to as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” (**Revelation 13:8**) **Genesis 3:15** predicted Jesus’ suffering as a result of battling Satan. “He [Satan] shall bruise your head, and [Jesus] shall bruise His heel.” As stated in the New Testament, after the crucifixion, “Christ died for the ungodly.” (**Romans 5:6**; see also **1 Peter 2:24**) Because of Jesus’ suffering, “He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, ¹⁰ called by God as High Priest....” (**Hebrews 5:9-10**; compare **Philippians 2:5-10**) In the case of Job’s

suffering, we see God's honor being magnified by Job's life of faith especially in **Job 1:8** and **2:3**.

God's battle against Satan is much bigger than any one person on this earth. We can choose to be God's faithful instruments – volunteer pawns, if you will – in this spiritual struggle, which may mean additional physical suffering beyond the commonplace trials that befall all people. (See **2 Timothy 3:12**.)

- **To test** (or demonstrate!) **our faith and trust in God**. Satan accused Job of only serving God because of all the physical blessings God had given Job. (**Job 1:9**) But Job shows by his patient and humble tolerance of all the horrible things that Satan put on him that Job served God *because God is worthy to be served*.
- **To teach us patience**. While we suffer, especially if our suffering is undeserved, we must believe that God will make all injustices right in the end. **James 5:11**, "Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful."
- **To strengthen us**. In **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**, Paul mentions a "thorn in the flesh" that he suffered. Jesus declined to remove it – in other words, answered 'No' to Paul's three prayers! – explaining, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Paul accepted the answer, concluding, "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Like the saying goes, "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."
- **To humble us**. In the same context of Paul's thorn in the flesh, he states *twice* in **2 Corinthians 12:7** that it was put on him, "lest [he] should be exalted above measure."

Preaching points for those who suffer

- A by-product of our suffering is that it gives others an opportunity to serve and develop compassion, i.e., "weep with those who weep." (**Romans 12:15**) Some people need desperately to learn compassion. *Your suffering* may be just exactly the circumstance that will help them grow!
- God does not promise to remove your problems, but rather to give you the strength to endure them. (**2 Corinthians 12:7-10**)
- "Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." (**1 Peter 4:13**)
- "Arm yourselves" with a determination to cease from sin and live for the will of God, remembering Jesus' example. (**1 Peter 4:1-2**) This will prepare you for the judgment!

The time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?

¹⁸ Now "If the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?" ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.

(**1 Peter 4:17-19**)

- Remember that there's more to life than just THIS life! Physical suffering is *temporary*; for the Christian, spiritual life is *forever*!

Romans 8:18 – "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

2 Corinthians 4:17 – "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸ while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Revelation 21:3-8 – [God] will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ “And 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.” ⁵ Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.” ⁶ And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. ⁷ “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. ⁸ “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

God is calling. Will you listen? Will you turn from sin and follow Jesus as your Lord? Will you obey the gospel? Jesus said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” **(Mark 16:16)** Will you “observe all things [Jesus] has commanded”? If you do, Jesus promises to be with you till the end. **(Matthew 28:18-20)** *You can* endure and overcome the trials and sufferings of this life, with God’s help. Eternal blessing and joy awaits when the sufferings of this life have ended!

Please send any questions or comments to **InkMan@MyPreachingPen.com**.
May God bless you in His service.