

Is Goodness an Antidote to Pain?: A Reflection on Suffering

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Question of questions

The most vexing question for those who believe in God is this: "Why do good people suffer?" This question belongs to the field of theological exploration known as theodicy. Suffering is integral to human life. Buddhism calls it *dukkha* (Barbara O'Brien, "Life Is Suffering? What Does That Mean?"); Christianity views it as the outcome of 'sin'; Judaism (Bradley Shavit Artson, "On Suffering") and Islam (Ellen Leventry, "Why Bad Things Happen") explain it as either the result of intransigence to the will of God or the mystery of God's activities. In spite of this, religious people pray and worship some deity precisely as a means of overcoming this hurdle of life. Yet all around us are good, religious, and upright people who suffer horrendous tragedies. The television images of the 1990's Rwandan genocide, the 2004 Asian Tsunami, the 2010-11 Christchurch earthquakes, or the recent Japan earthquake and tsunami (11 March 2011) compel even the most phlegmatic individuals to raise serious questions of theodicy.

Uppermost in the minds of sufferers and spectators alike are the issues of divine justice and fairness. The following quote from Epicurus, the 3rd and 4th century BC Greek philosopher, underscores the thoughts of many. He queried, "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" Indeed!

What is the relationship between being good and undergoing suffering? Is this relationship inevitable? Is it merely an outworking of cause and effect? Is it part of a grander master plan? How should believers understand and explain this relationship?

The renown 20th century Christian scholar, C S Lewis (author of the now Hollywood popularised *The Chronicles of Narnia*), once observed that the "problem of pain" is atheism's most potent weapon against the Christian faith (Jacek Bacz, "C.S. Lewis: The Problem of Pain"). This is a very astute observation because history has demonstrated its validity. It is common knowledge that many Jews who survived the Holocaust did so with their faith in tatters. Nevertheless, just as many survived with their faith intact. With every ensuing tragedy, these same responses are elicited. It is virtually impossible to sit on the fence on this issue. Those who attempt to do so eventually are compelled to choose their option when personal tragedy strikes.

Interpretational options

Where do we go with this question? Perhaps we ought to begin by examining the most commonly used Christian explanations to answer the question, "Why bad things happen to good people?"

Suffering is deserved

One such option maintains that we all deserve the suffering because we are sinners. Those who utilise this argument call upon several biblical passages as proof of their claim. Gen 3:16-19 speak of the curse of God on Adam and Eve as a consequence of their disobedience. Rom 5:12-14 assert that this one sin of Adam brought suffering upon the entire human race. To compound matters, Rom 3:10-18 insist that suffering is not only a result of sin but it is deservedly so. Therefore, sin carries a penalty of suffering and death (Rom 6:23; Eze 18:14). On the surface this argument appears rather convincing. However, like most arguments, it raises as many questions as it answers. For instance, is it fair that the sin of Adam and Eve be transferred, by default, upon all of us? Why should anyone

suffer for someone else's wrong doing? Would a God who commits the human race to such a fate truly be a good God? This approach portrays God as an unjust and despotic ruler.

Suffering is the work of Satan

A second option argues that the suffering in the world is caused by the evil (that is, Satan, the devil) that is resident in the universe and not by God. Again, there is biblical evidence for this, particularly with regards to the suffering of God's people. Rev 12:13-17 describe the fury of the devil as he pursues God's people, intent on their demise. Zec 3 paints the picture of Satan accusing a truly good man, Joshua the high priest, because even this good man had many shortcomings. Ultimately, the book of Job depicts another good man, Job, whose life is turned into living hell because Satan sets out to destroy him. In these stories God appears to be as much a victim of this resident evil as are the inhabitants of planet earth. Nevertheless, like the first option, this one also poses several difficult questions. If God allows this resident evil to wreak so much havoc, does that mean God is impotent? Moreover, if there is an air of inevitability about the existence of good and evil, does this not imply in some sense the presence of a form of dualism in the biblical data? Furthermore, how should passages like Isa 45:7, where God says, "I form light and create darkness; I make success and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things", be interpreted? Even the story of Job intimates that it was God who allowed the tragedies of Job. Such arguments depict God as either morally confused or powerless.

Suffering is a test

Another option frequently employed to explicate the nature of suffering posits that God is testing the faith of his people. Jesus himself taught his disciples to pray, "Do not lead us into testing but deliver us from the evil one" (Matt 6:13). Paul stated that God will not allow his people to be tested beyond their ability to overcome and in doing so provides a way out (1 Cor 10:12-13). The trouble with this approach is that it makes God out to be the evil one. God is merely toying with his creation. He is whimsical and perhaps even capricious. How can a God who behaves in this manner be good? How can he be trusted? This approach raises questions about God's goodness and integrity.

Suffering cannot be explained

A fourth option works on the basis of the inscrutability of God. Those who utilise this approach assert that God's ways are mysterious and we simply do not know enough to answer the question. Passages like Isa 55:8-9 come to mind here. God declares that his ways and thoughts are beyond human discovery, implying that humans should merely trust this all-knowing but incomprehensible God. However, to accept this approach means that faith becomes an exercise in futility. This would seem such a travesty considering the fact that God's best gift to the human race is intelligence (see the book of Ecclesiastes). This approach far too readily succumbs to charges of predestination with their inherent stoical acceptance of preordained fate annulling the biblical notion of free will. Further, it does not adequately explain the existence of evil in the world, even making God the source of this evil.

Is there a way to understand all of these issues, face life's suffering, and still maintain faith?

A path to understanding

It is crucial that the biblical data be examined thoroughly and objectively. When this is done, the following picture emerges.

First, the misuse of God-like powers by the first humans, Adam and Eve, brought about very negative consequences upon the world (Gen 2-4). The tree that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat was called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17). The Hebrew word pairing here suggests that the best rendering of the name is “the tree of the knowledge of good-evil.” Adam and Eve were not created with intellectual and moral ambiguity. Since God created Adam and Eve in his image (Gen 1:26-27), he also equipped them with three skills that would define this image: creativity (Gen 1:28), intelligence (Gen 2:19), and will (Gen 2:16-17). At creation God attempted to shield Adam and Eve from actually knowing the evil that thrills but causes pain. All this implies that the misuse of these powers would have dire consequences for the human race, as history has amply demonstrated. In this sense, suffering has resulted from the misuse (maybe, even abuse) of the image of God and these God-like powers. That God allows this is testament to the fact that he is neither reticent about his creative will nor wary about his creative activities.

Second, despite the misuse of these powers, God is still very much in control of his creation. Not only is he in control, he also dictates the ebb and flow of world and personal history. When Satan wished to harm Job, he could only do so at the behest of God (see Job 1-2). God claims creative control over all of his creation, the entire spectrum of life (Isa 45:7). God tells Israel that he has plans for them that would be to their long-term advantage (Jer 29:10-11). Ironically, those plans included displacement from the promised-land (Canaan) and sojourn in a foreign land (Babylon). Paul asserts that “in everything, God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom 8:28). God reminds his people through the prophet Daniel that the events of history are all within his purview and control (Dan 2:20-23). Even the devil’s rage against God’s people in Revelation is portrayed as strictly regulated by God (see Rev 12). God is sovereign over his creation; he does not exist in a dualistic universe; and to him the evil that produces suffering is a pesky problem that must be confronted.

Third, God permits suffering to continue because it is an obstacle that has to be overcome on the road back to Eden. As hard as this statement is to accept, it is nevertheless true. The stories of God’s people in the Bible are peppered with tales of suffering. These are not recorded merely for bedtime entertainment. They exist as testimonials that the path to Eden runs through the gateway of suffering which resulted from the misuse of God-like powers. Coming to terms with this reality enables us to encounter both the mystery and power of God. It also empowers those who traverse this path to comprehend the very nature of God, making them even more like him. They learn the art of sacrifice and endurance. They discover that “those who wait on the Lord” find their strength renewed and are able to soar on wings like eagles (Isa 40:31). This voyage of discovery enables persons of faith to scale to new heights in their relationship with God and evidences to them the strength of commitment that this God has towards his people. Viewed in this manner, each tragedy becomes a window into the heart of the almighty God. Suffering becomes an opportunity to know God better.

A final piece of reflection concerns the issue of divine justice and fairness, the heart of all questions of theodicy. Here, the will of God is examined. It is tempting to think of God’s will in a very narrow way. However, God’s will is rather comprehensive. There are various aspects to the will of God. First, there is the *active will* of God by which he performs creative and redemptive acts (see Gen 1 & 2 and Rom 5). Sometimes he also performs acts of judgement as depicted in such passages as Isa 1 or Rev 16. Second, there is the *permissive will* of God as observed in the story of Job. God does allow bad things to happen even to his people and faith requires the acceptance of this aspect of the divine will. Third, there is the *proactive will* of God. Here God is making things happen that would overturn the suffering of life even though such actions may not be readily evident. Rev 13:8 informs us that the sacrificial death of Jesus pre-dated the creation of the world. This means that God prepared a backup plan for recovery, should Adam and Eve misuse their powers. Yet, that plan was not evident for thousands of years. Fourth, there is the *contingent will* of God. Not only does God work to

salvage fallen humanity, he also has to contend with ongoing misuse of God-like powers by every single individual. Even God's people are prone to making choices that are counterproductive to their lives. Isa 38 and 39 record the tragic story of a good man, king Hezekiah, who refused to accept the original plan so God permitted a contingent plan, one that resulted in even greater tragedy. Coming to terms with the multiplex will of God provides many options for understanding him. In this way we may be assured that God is truly there and there with us; that he is just and fair. Comprehending the total will of God makes it possible for us to see that there is nothing that can "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).

Putting it together

"Why do good people suffer?" Despite several stereotype approaches, the answer to this question is not always forthcoming. However, certain foundational, biblical principles may alleviate the pain of suffering and empower those who choose faith on their voyage of discovery.

Suffering does exist and it is here because of the misuse of the very powers (creativity, intelligence, and will) that God has embedded into human nature. However, God is still very much in control of his entire creation. Suffering is neither testament to his impotence nor evidence of his non-commitment. In this way, suffering itself becomes the primary hurdle that we must overcome in order to regain the full use of the God-like powers granted at Eden; it is the obstacle to be breached before victory can be achieved. Most significantly of all, God's will, which operates on several different levels, demonstrates that God is completely with his people and suffering becomes a pilgrimage of faith, an exploration into God himself. Arguably, the way of suffering is the way back to God.

As things stand, goodness is not the antidote to pain and faith does not immunise us from suffering. However, goodness and faith arm us with the necessary fortitude to walk through the darkest valleys without fear (Ps 23:4). Goodness and faith equip us with the knowledge that we may pass through floods but they cannot drown us and raging fires cannot burn us (Isa 43:2). The *via dolorosa*, the way of suffering, is the path that goodness and faith must tread but we do not do this alone. God makes this promise, "Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isa 43:5).

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