

Why Suffering And Trials?

Suffering and trials are a subject which cannot be understood totally because God's Word does not reveal completely the reason for suffering.

God's Word only hints at various reasons, but anything outside of this is speculation.

All we can do is probe at the subject of suffering, if we are to remain true to God's Word.

What we do find revealed in God's Word is very comforting and positive so we need to know what God has shown to us.

The most asked question by non-Christians is *"if there is a loving God as you claim, why does He allow suffering and evil in this world?"*

- a) This is the most natural question to ask!
- b) It is the question that God refuses to answer in totality.
- c) It is the question that makes faith a possibility.

Why did God create us when He knew that we would have suffering in our lives?

Why does God allow evil?

If God is all powerful surely He is able to put an end to suffering instantly?

If God is merciful and loving He will surely step in and stop suffering, injustice and evil.

These are the questions, this is the problem we face in trying to answer why suffering and evil that causes suffering.

This study will not solve the problem of evil, no theological study ever has.

What then is the purpose of this study?

- a) To apprehend the theology of suffering.
- b) To help us answer people who ask us the question *"why does God allow suffering?"* even if all we are able to do is to show that we understand their problem.
- c) To help us to focus on Jesus, the greatest sufferer who ever lived.
- d) Help us see that Jesus is the answer to all the suffering in the world.

Hebrews 2:18 [NIV] *"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."*

Jesus is the One who can help us most when we are suffering in trials.

Hebrews 5:7-8 [NIV] *“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”*

Jesus is well aware of what suffering is and what it can accomplish in us.

God does understand suffering.

Jesus is God, and no-one has ever suffered as He did.

Definition of suffering:-

Being subjected to disadvantage over which we have no control. It is pain which we are unable to do anything about, whatever the cause. The unavoidable feeling of pain, hurt, grief or loss.

Mental, emotional or physical suffering.

Examples of suffering:-

Hunger – people who don’t know if they are going to have food to eat today.

Poverty – those who are trapped in a life where they have little or none of the things we consider as necessary for normal living. **Those who are trapped in debt with no way out.**

Cruel dictators or governments – having to live under the oppression and **fear of such tyrannical rule.**

Natural disasters – earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, these have nothing to do with people. Yet some suffer total loss of all their physical possessions and perhaps they end up with broken bodies or poor health.

Accidents – in which many are hurt or killed without any personal mistakes being made.

Sickness or disease – including afflicted children, some born with physical or mental handicaps.

Child sexual abuse – that causes people to grow up and never be able to have normal sexual relationships, or thoughts.

Crime, murder, theft – where the strong and **violent abuse the old or weak.**

Being lied about – our character and **our reputation being destroyed by others.**

Wicked people getting away with the evil deeds – where there is no justice, bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people.

People professing to be Christians, or ministers of God taking advantage of other Christians – using the name of Christ to fill their own pockets with gold. Christians who make promises and don’t keep them.

In human thought and theology there are two ultimate positions taken.

1 Existentialism – this is where the emphasis is upon the here and now.

The main proponents of this position is:

- a) There is no rhyme or reason to life;
- b) No explanation to suffering can be found.

2 Theodicy – there is purpose in history for God is governing His Creation.

- a) This is the historic Christian view.
- b) There is purpose in life for God is in control.
- c) Though we cannot fully understand suffering now, one day we will understand.

Suffering is the consequence of sin.

Suffering is not always the result of the sin of the person suffering but sin has been committed.

Suffering is always related to sin.

How do we know this?

a) There was no mention of suffering prior to the fall of Adam and Eve.

Genesis 3:17-19 [NIV] *“To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”*

This is the first mention of pain and death and it was a direct result of sin.

b) **Genesis 2:16-17** [NIV] *“And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”*

Adam was warned in advance of the result of sin, disobedience to His Creator.

God created humanity in a world free from pain.

But God created humanity able to sin, why He did this God’s Word does not tell us.

Once Adam and Eve sinned, everything pertaining to their being changed.

- a) The chemistry of their body changed so that they aged and eventually died.
- b) The inclinations of their mind and heart changed. Before sin there is no sign of unbelief, fear, pride, jealousy, greed or insecurity, all these are by-products of sin.

Once Adam and Eve sinned and fell out of fellowship with their Creator, the earth on which they lived changed.

The earth came under a curse because of Adam and Eve's sin.

Hence all natural disasters are **not** “acts of God” but originate from our sin as a continuation of the sin that Adam and Eve initiated.

We are all the product of Adam and Eve's sin.

Psalm 51:5 [NIV] “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

Augustine outlined the four stages of man's fall and reconciliation to his Creator.

- a) Humans were created **able to sin**.
- b) Humans since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin are **unable not to sin**.
- a) On conversion we are **able not to sin**.
- d) Eventually in our glorified state we will be **not able to sin**.

This does not mean that our suffering is necessarily the result of our own sins.

Luke 13:1-5 [NIV] “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. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Just because a person is part of a disaster does not mean they are more sinful than the rest of us, we are all sinners.

Romans 3:23 [NIV] “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”

We have all followed the path that Adam and Eve took, we have all fallen short of the glory [holiness or righteousness] that God desires in His children.

There is a connection between health and holiness.

1 Corinthians 11:30 [NIV] “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.”

In this scripture we have an example of Christians who had abused the Lord's Supper were sick and some had even died.

If we seek to live Holy lives we can avoid a lot of needless suffering, for example some diseases are traceable to sexual sin.

James 5:15 [NIV] “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.”

This scripture shows that not all who are ill are sick because of personal sins. But remember we all have to die physically one way or another, no matter how godly we may be.

The point is, that suffering would not exist had sin not entered the world via the fall in the Garden of Eden.

We therefore must take the blame for all the suffering in the world and not blame God for it.

All of us are as responsible as Adam and Eve for the sin that has brought suffering to the whole of mankind.

Suffering is no respecter of persons.

Matthew 5:45 [NIV] *“... He [God] causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the un-righteous.”*

Becoming a Christian **is not** a way of avoiding suffering.

1 Peter 2:21 [NIV] *“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”*

The greatest sufferer of all was Jesus, and we are called to imitate Him.

One of the greatest abuses of scripture that is preached by “health and wealth gospel” preachers is that becoming a Christian and giving a big donation to their church will solve all your problems in life.

In truth a Christian faces three types of suffering.

2 Timothy 3:12 [NIV] *“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,”*

Suffering **persecution** is an addition to the **normal suffering** the world endures.

Job 5:7 [NIV] *“Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.”*

This refers to the normal day-to-day suffering we all face.

Hebrews 12:5-6 [NIV] *“And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”*

Added to normal suffering and persecution is the **chastening or disciplining** that we receive from our Father God.

Hebrews 12:11 [NIV] *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

This God-given discipline also can involve suffering.

Hebrews 12:7-8 [NIV] *“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.”*

This additional suffering of discipline is for Christians only, not the world in general.

Anyone who tells us that The Bible promises health and prosperity if we meet certain conditions is misleading us.

1 Peter 4:12-16 [NIV] *“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of*

Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

We are not called to avoid suffering, but to accept it graciously when it comes.

Suffering is what makes faith possible.

The nearest we can come to an explanation of evil is that were there no evil and suffering, there would be no need of faith.

Habakkuk 2:4 [NIV] *“See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright, but the righteous will live by his faith...”*

God has decreed that those who know Him do so by faith. When we read this directly from the Hebrew it says “we will live by His faithfulness.”

We live by God’s faithfulness.

We believe what God has promised.

Hebrews 11:1 [NIV] *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”*

Faith can only be faith if there is no physical evidence of what is promised.

Mark 15:32 [NIV] *“Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.”*

Belief or faith, in non-believers only comes when physical evidence is present, that is not faith, it is merely proof.

1 Corinthians 1:18-24 [NIV] *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*

God could have chosen many different paths to bring reconciliation and salvation to mankind. God could have chosen the way of wisdom or the way of works or the way of signs and wonders.

But in His Great Wisdom He chose faith in His Preached Word, faith in His Promises, faith in His faithfulness.

God may have allowed evil and suffering only that there may be faith in his followers.

God wants us to believe His Word, His Promises, without immediate physical proof.

The highest affirmation we can ever give to another person is to accept their word without additional proof.

God wants us to know Him so well that we have total confidence in His Word without physical proof.

John 11:14-15 [NIV] *“So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so **that you may believe.** But let us go to him.”*

The reason Jesus did not heal His beloved friend Lazarus immediately was to develop faith in His power over death.

This experience was to prepare His followers for belief in His own death and resurrection.

When we first read the account it seems that Jesus did not care about the suffering the family of Lazarus were experiencing.

But the truth is Jesus wanted to make room for the possibility of faith!

The family of Lazarus and the disciples of Jesus wanted Jesus to heal Lazarus, as they had seen Him do before. Jesus all along had a far better idea, to raise Lazarus from the dead.

This example of Lazarus takes us far beyond pain, suffering and death, to a new vista of resurrected eternal life beyond the reach of pain and suffering.

Revelation 21:1-4 [NIV] *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be **no more death or mourning or crying or pain,** for the old order of things has passed away.”*

Our faith in this promised life is where God wants us to direct our eyes and our hope.

God may sometimes use suffering to get the attention of the un-godly.

We have many examples of this in scripture:-

1 Samuel 5 – The account of what happened to each Philistine city that housed the stolen ark of God.

Or **Jonah 1** – The account of the peril that was brought on the sailors of Jonah’s ship as Jonah tried to avoid being God’s messenger.

In present day, God does the same to get the attention of some non-believers and bring them to their knees through pain and suffering. a) Financial crisis; b) marriage breakdown; c) family problems; d) sickness; e) unemployment.

God does use suffering to increase faith in believing Christians.

What at first may appear to be the event that will destroy faith is in fact the only way faith can be increased.

God asks Christians to break the betrayal barrier.

At some time, sooner or later, every Christian will feel that God has betrayed them.

They feel they have lost the special presence of the Holy Spirit, or they feel that their prayers are not being heard.

Some, at such a point, do back away from God and do not move forward with Him, and are left just barely coping in their Christian living.

God will then have to wait and start again to give them the chance to strengthen their faith in Him.

Others will press on with their Christian lifestyle, prayer, study and faith in God and break through that betrayal barrier.

Such Christians are the ones who really find God.

Such Christians are akin to those listed in Hebrews 11, all of whom through pain and suffering did not lose faith but strengthen their faith in God's promises that were not fulfilled in their physical lifetime.

Hebrews 11:39-40 [NIV] *“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”*

Made perfect in faith, and through faith.

There are two ways in which God increases faith, positive and negative.

Positive way:-

When God just pours out the Holy Spirit into our lives and our fellowship with Him causes us to receive the gift of faith.

This is the way we all pray for and would prefer.

This **gift of faith** comes from reading The Bible, praying, worship and hearing the Word of God preached.

Negative way:-

When God has to discipline us to get our attention, this is the painful way of suffering.

Hebrews 12:10-11 [NIV] *“Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

Though painful the benefits are very positive.

Suffering seems to be God's chief way of getting our full attention.

Suffering could be "*Plan B*" but our attention to the correction available in His Word and our being insensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit may force God to use painful suffering to give us the needed course corrections in our lives.

Matthew 6:13 [NIV] *"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

We are told to pray that we don't need the painful correction of suffering.

1 Peter 5:10 [NIV] *"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."*

If we do face suffering it is a call to grace and eventual glory.

The period of suffering in this life is nothing compared to the future eternal glory in God's presence.

Suffering and those chosen for a special task go hand-in-hand.

Acts 9:15-16 [NIV] *"But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him **how much he must suffer for my name.**"*

The calling may be one that brings with it a high profile.

Mark 5:18-20 [NIV] *"As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed."*

The calling may be one that brings with it a low profile but no less in value to our Creator God.

James 1:12 [NIV] *"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."*

This is why we can rejoice in our suffering. We have the opportunity for a greater reward in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Also, we may be under preparation for a greater work here and now in this life.

Those who have been used in the past by God all endured a great deal of suffering: Abraham, Moses, Joseph, David, Paul, etc.

The greatest sufferer of all was Jesus.

John 1:1, 14 [NIV] *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." ... "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

God Himself became man.

Hebrews 4:15 [NIV] *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin."*

Jesus the God-man endured every suffering we may ever face.

Jesus endured every suffering to the extreme for three reasons.

a) **Hebrews 2:18** [NIV] *“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*

So that He could sympathise with us, and show the world that God understands suffering personally.

b) **Hebrews 2:10** [NIV] *“In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”*

Hebrews 5:8-9 [NIV] *“Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”*

So that He would be perfected in character the same way we can be.

c) **Matthew 5:17** [NIV] *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.”*

Hebrews 2:17 [NIV] *“For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”*

So that He could atone of our sins.

No-one knew unfairness, humiliation or injustice like Jesus.

John 7:5 [NIV] *“For even his own brothers did not believe in him.”*

Family relationships gave him no support.

Matthew 8:20 [NIV] *“Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”*

Did not own a home was dependent on the hospitality of others.

John 2:18-19 [NIV] *“Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”*

Being misunderstood.

Matthew 9:24 [NIV] *“he said, “Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.” But they laughed at him.”*

Being ridiculed.

Matthew 26:45 [NIV] *“Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.”*

Being lonely.

Matthew 27:28 [NIV] *“They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,”*

Being humiliated.

Matthew 27 [NIV] Jesus' trial was unfair from start to finish.

Matthew 27:40-44 [NIV] *“and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.”*

Tormented emotionally.

Matthew 27:32-35 [NIV] *“As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.”*

Endured extreme physical pain.

Matthew 27:46 [NIV] *“About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

Endured spiritual pain of being at that moment of greatest need being cut off from His Father.

Christians are called to dignify every suffering and trial.

Why should we show honour and respect for the trials God allows us to have.

James 1:2-4 [NIV] *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*

Because God has trusted us with a trial to enable us to grow more like Him through that trial.

Every trial is part of God’s Will and has a great purpose.

We then need to look on every trial as a love gift from God.

How we react to each trial will determine whether we “*move up higher*” in God’s Grace or not.

If we show contempt for the trial or suffering it will not do us any good, and we will have to wait for the next trial before we have the chance to grow in grace.

God will give us a second chance by allowing and using additional suffering in another trial, and an opportunity for us to dignify it.

When we dignify a trial we move up higher with God and can be trusted with more grace.

How then do we dignify a trial and suffering?

a) Don’t complain when a trial and suffering comes in our lives.

- b) Don't question God's Wisdom or Love in allowing this trial and suffering to come on us.
- c) Accept the trial and suffering and pray that God will show us the purpose for the trial. Seek to know what God wants us to learn or what He is wanting to strengthen in our character through this trial, patience, endurance, faithfulness, loyalty, etc.
- d) Don't abort the trial prematurely, let it last as long as God wills. For example, if it is a trial involving family relationships do not walk out on the family or divorce ourselves from them.

Conclusion.

The reason for trials and suffering may remain a mystery, but we can find meaning in suffering if we affirm God's Wisdom and Love for us in everything that is happening to us in this life.

Always remember we are God's children and His Love for us is far beyond any human love we can experience.

Always remember this love, shown in the life and death of our Saviour Jesus Christ, even if we do not understand what is happening to us in our life of trials and suffering.