

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

The following is a typical conversation that one of Jehovah's Witnesses might have with a neighbor. Let us imagine that a Witness named Michelle has come to the home of a woman named Sophia.



HOW DOES GOD FEEL ABOUT OUR SUFFERING?

Michelle: Hi, Sophia. I'm happy I found you at home.

Sophia: Me too.

Michelle: The last time I was here, we discussed how God feels about our suffering.* You mentioned that this is something you have wondered about for a long time, especially after your mother was injured in a car crash. By the way, how has your mother been doing?

Sophia: She has good days and bad days. Today, she's doing OK.

Michelle: I'm glad to hear that. It must be a real challenge to keep your head up in a situation like this.

Sophia: It is. Sometimes I wonder how much longer she will have to suffer.

Michelle: That's a natural response. You may recall that at the end of our last visit, I left you with a question about why God has allowed suffering to continue if he has the power to end it.

Sophia: Yes, I remember.

Michelle: Before we consider the Bible's answer, let's review a few of the points we covered last time.

Sophia: OK.

* See "A Conversation With a Neighbor—Does God Care About Our Suffering?" in the July 1, 2013, issue of this magazine. Also available at www.jw.org.

Michelle: For one thing, we learned that even a faithful man in Bible times wondered why God allows suffering. Yet, God never scolded him for asking about it, nor did God tell him that he simply needed more faith.

Sophia: That was a new thought to me.

Michelle: We also learned that Jehovah God hates to see us suffer. For example, the Bible says that when his people were going through distress, "it was distressing to him."* Isn't it comforting to know that God feels for us when we suffer?

Sophia: Yes, it is.

Michelle: Finally, we agreed that considering the vast amount of power our Creator possesses, surely he has the ability to step in and end suffering at any moment.

Sophia: That's what I don't understand. Why does God let all these bad things happen when he has the power to stop them?

WHO WAS TELLING THE TRUTH?

Michelle: We can start to find the answer to your question by turning to the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Are you familiar with the account of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit?

Sophia: Yes, I learned that story in Sunday school. God said not to eat from a certain tree, but they went ahead and ate from it anyway.

* See Isaiah 63:9.

Michelle: That is correct. Now, let's focus on the events that led up to Adam and Eve's sin. Those events have a direct bearing on the question of why we suffer. Would you please read Genesis chapter 3, verses 1 through 5?

Sophia: OK. "Now the serpent was the most cautious of all the wild animals of the field that Jehovah God had made. So it said to the woman: 'Did God really say that you must not eat from every tree of the garden?' At this the woman said to the serpent: 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden. But God has said about the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden: "You must not eat from it, no, you must not touch it; otherwise you will die."' At this the serpent said to the woman: 'You certainly will not die. For God knows that in the very day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and bad.'"

Michelle: Thank you. Let's examine these verses for a moment. First, notice that a serpent spoke to the woman, Eve. Another part of the Bible shows that it was really Satan the Devil who was speaking to her through the serpent.* Satan asked Eve about God's command regarding a certain tree. Did you notice what God had said the penalty would be if Adam and Eve ate from it?

Sophia: They would die.

Michelle: Correct. Then, with his very next words, Satan made a major accusation against God. Notice what he said: "You certainly will not die." Satan was calling God a liar!

Sophia: I never heard that part of the story before.

Michelle: And when Satan called God a liar, he raised an issue that would require time to settle. Can you see why?

Sophia: Hmm. I'm not sure.

Michelle: Well, maybe I could illustrate the point this way. Let's say that one day I approach you and claim that I'm physically stronger than you are. How could you prove me wrong?

Sophia: I suppose with some sort of a test.

Michelle: Yes, exactly. Maybe we would choose a heavy object and then see which one of us was able to lift it. Actually, proving who is stronger is pretty straightforward.

Sophia: I see your point.

Michelle: But what if instead of saying that I'm stronger, I claimed to be more *honest* than you? That's a different matter, isn't it?

Sophia: Yes, I suppose so.

Michelle: After all, honesty is not something like strength, which can be proved with a simple test.

Sophia: No.

Michelle: Really, the only way to settle the challenge would be to let enough time pass for others to observe the two of us and see who really is more honest.

Sophia: That makes sense.

Michelle: Now, look again at this account in Genesis. Did Satan claim to be stronger than God?

Sophia: No.

Michelle: God could have quickly proved him wrong. Instead, Satan claimed to be more *honest* than God. In effect, he said to Eve, 'God is lying to you, but *I'm* telling you the truth.'

Sophia: Interesting.

Michelle: In his wisdom, then, God knew that the best way to settle the challenge would be to allow time to pass. Eventually, it would become clear who was telling the truth and who was lying.

AN IMPORTANT ISSUE

Sophia: But as soon as Eve died, didn't that prove that God was telling the truth?

* See Revelation 12:9.

Michelle: In a sense, it did. But there was more to Satan’s challenge. Look again at verse 5. Do you notice what else Satan told Eve?

Sophia: He said that if she ate of the fruit, her eyes would be opened.

Michelle: Yes, and that she would become “like God, knowing good and bad.” So Satan claimed that God was withholding something good from humans.

Sophia: I see.

Michelle: And that too was a major challenge.

Sophia: What do you mean?

Michelle: By his words, Satan implied that Eve—and by extension, all humans—would be better off without God’s rulership. In this case too, Jehovah knew that the best way to address the challenge would be to let Satan try to prove his point. So God has allowed Satan to rule this world for a time. That explains why we see so much suffering around us—it’s because Satan, not God, is the real ruler of the world.* But there is good news.

* See John 12:31; 1 John 5:19.

Sophia: What’s that?

Michelle: The Bible teaches these two beautiful truths about God. First, Jehovah is there for us when we suffer. For example, consider the words of King David, as recorded at Psalm 31:7. David experienced a lot of suffering during his lifetime, but notice what he was able to say in prayer to God. Would you please read that verse?

Sophia: OK. It says: “I will rejoice greatly in your loyal love, for you have seen my affliction; you are aware of my deep distress.”

Michelle: So even though David experienced suffering, he found comfort in knowing that Jehovah saw everything he went through. Do you find that comforting—the thought that Jehovah is aware of everything, even our painful emotions that other humans may not fully understand?

Sophia: Yes, I do.

Michelle: The second beautiful truth is that God will not allow our suffering to go on indefinitely. The Bible teaches that he will soon bring an end to Satan’s wicked rulership. And he will completely undo all the bad things that have happened, including the things that you and your mother have suffered. May I come back next week and show you why we can be sure that God *will* soon end all suffering?*

Sophia: That sounds good. ■

* For more information, see chapter 9 of the book *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* published by Jehovah’s Witnesses. Also available at www.jw.org.



Is there a particular Bible subject that you have wondered about? Are you curious about any of the beliefs or religious practices of Jehovah’s Witnesses? If so, do not hesitate to ask one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. He or she will be pleased to discuss such matters with you.