
How Can a Loving God Allow Suffering in the World?

Courtesy of <name of church>

How Can a Loving God Allow Suffering in the World?

It is the wrong question to ask.

Those who are suffering from tragedy have understandably been confounded by this question. Does the God who created the universe lack the power to prevent suffering? Is God lacking in love? Is God aloof and distant, merely setting time and space into motion providing no care for his creatures whatsoever? Does God even exist?

The alleged post-Christian culture in the West has lost its fear of God and has become increasingly emboldened to make accusations against him. Today, man judges God by his own standards using the tenets of “political correctness” while branding his Word as “hate speech.” *It would seem that truth is hate to those who hate the truth.*

God reveals in his creation and in his Word that he is almighty, but also most holy and most loving. The problem is a matter of perception on the part of man. Finite man cannot enter into the mind of an infinite God. While God is not the author of evil, evil is present. Suffering is a symptom of a fallen world caused by man’s rebellion.

A study of God’s infallible Word will lead to a more profitable question. The better question is, How can a righteous and infinitely holy God bring guilty sinners into his presence without contradicting his nature?

So what does the Bible say? God has given to us in the Holy Scriptures an inspired, infallible, inerrant, and sufficient Word to guide his creatures into all truth relating to spiritual life and godliness. In other words, what does God say?

All have sinned.

Man has the audacity to judge God, but God says:

There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. (Romans 3:10-12)

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23)

Man’s will is corrupt.

God created man in his own image, upright, with the freedom to obey or to disobey his command. Man exercised that freedom in rebellion to God (Genesis 3). Since the fall, man’s will is enslaved. A glass of water containing a drop of poison would not be a “glass of poison.” It would be more accurate to say that it is “totally” tainted. In the same way, fallen man’s nature is “totally depraved.” He is debased, defiled, and defiant, totally unable to please God or to seek after him. While man is capable of doing outwardly good deeds, he does them for selfish purposes.

Man underestimates the gravity of sin.

Man's rebellion might seem a small thing to most. This is a failure to grasp the gravity of sinning against an infinite God. Consider the following illustration. Suppose you were at a picnic and some children were torturing worms. One would take offense, but not go so far as giving them a condemning rebuke. Rather this circumstance might be used as a "teaching moment." You might explain that these are God's creatures and should not be tortured.

Now let's say that the children were torturing a dog. A dog is a nobler creature, hence the greater offense; torturing a human infant greater still.

This illustration demonstrates that even from our finite human perspective, outrage increases on a sliding scale relative to the nobility of the one offended. Given this principle, imagine how great is the offense of sinning against an infinitely holy and just God!

The predicament of sin.

God is perfectly in his right to condemn all men to eternal punishment. How can a perfectly just and righteous God bring guilty sinners into his presence? It is a violation of his perfect righteousness. It is contrary to his nature. He would be an unjust judge to forgo punishment. It is man who is in the predicament, deserving an eternal punishment and accruing a debt he cannot pay back.

Why do men inherit the penalty of sin?

That fact that the penalty for sin is passed on from our ancestors seems unfair on the surface. Think of it this way: if one's parents accrued massive debts offering their million dollar house as collateral, those debts would be inherited by the heirs. They could not simply take ownership of the million dollar house without paying off the debts. The problem with inheriting sin is that fallen man cannot pay off the debt against an infinite God. Fallen man can only add to the debt and penalty with continued sin.

Why can't God simply forgive everyone unconditionally?

Now one might still object. If God is all-powerful, why does he not just forgive everyone? Consider the following illustration. Suppose that a loved one were a victim of a heinous crime. The prosecuting attorney presents a mountain of incriminating evidence. Suppose the defendant even defiantly confesses to the crime. It is plain to all that the accused is not only guilty beyond a shadow of doubt, but is also unrepentant without the slightest hint of remorse. However, the judge after a short deliberation announces to the courtroom that he is in a good mood, so he finds the defendant not guilty!

Imagine the outrage! Imagine how the reputation of that judge is besmirched! Well, again, God cannot bring guilty sinners into his presence on the same principle. He is perfectly just.

There is Good News.

The "good news" is that God has made provision to save sinners. Over 2000 years ago, God intervened into history by taking the form of man, born of a woman. He was true God and true man. This God-Man is Jesus Christ. Being true man, he is able to represent fallen man to God. He obeyed God's law perfectly, leading a sinless life, and paid the penalty for man's sin by dying on the cross. Being true God, his work is of infinite worth, able to satisfy all of man's debt and penalty.

God's love is shown by means of self-sacrifice for man.

The Bible says that God is love. For many, love is a feeling, a sentimentality portrayed in romance novels, movies and television. But God "is" love, and he shows his love in a profound act of self-sacrifice as his Son laid down his life for the salvation of his friends.

Now that salvation is accomplished, how is it applied?

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: (Romans 5:1)

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)

Christ acts as our substitute. Consider a courtroom analogy: we stand before the judge as guilty sinners. However, God does not see the sins of those who are “in Christ”, rather he sees the perfect work of Christ instead. The believer is delivered from the penalty of sin. The verdict is “not guilty” and that verdict cannot be overturned because the judge is God himself.

Now God is vindicated.

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. (Romans 3:25-26)

Christ was put forth as “propitiation”; that is, a holy sacrifice that pleases God, that averts his wrath. Justice has been served once and for all though Jesus Christ throughout all ages past and present for those who believe in him. The dilemma is solved; the predicament removed by God himself. This is how God permits guilty sinners into his presence without contradicting his nature, without besmirching his reputation as judge.

Salvation is by grace through faith, not of works.

Now that Christ has revealed himself to a sinful world, God commands all men to “repent and believe”; to put their trust in Christ’s work; not their own. Trusting in the work of Jesus Christ delivers the believer from the penalty of sin.

God commands all people everywhere to repent. (Read Acts 17:22-31)

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel. (Mark 1:15)

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Romans 10:13)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John. 3:16)

Faith is a gift from God.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

It is hard to accept a free gift. One would rather think that they need to do their part too, as in “God helps those who help themselves.” That sort of thinking is an offense to God.

All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6)

Even our best works are but filthy rags. Man without Christ and the Holy Spirit cannot please God. There was a man that lived in a hot climate in Arizona. He did not have air conditioning, but some of

the people at his church donated an air conditioning unit to him. The people could not afford to pay for the installation however. Fortunately for the man, one of the parishioners was a contractor and offered to install the air conditioner for free. The man was grateful, but proud and insisted on paying something. He promised that it would be a nice amount. The contractor worked for several hours, toiling in the heat, a job that would normally cost \$900. When the job was done, the man proudly presented the contractor with \$20, as if to satisfy his debt to the contractor.

Similarly, the notion that you can earn your way to heaven is like giving God \$20 to forgive your sins! Could you imagine walking up to Jesus as he is hanging on the cross thanking him with \$20! You would not dare!

You must be born again.

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3)

Jesus is explaining to a religious leader that salvation is not acquired by means of the heritage of a favored birth such as being a Jew, or by keeping religious rituals. It is not the act of repenting, turning over a new leaf, or becoming worthy to be a child of God that brings about new birth. New birth is an act of God that restores the will. We choose God because he chooses us first. It is nothing that we do.

We love him, because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

The recipient of new birth desires to trust on Jesus and receives all of the benefits God gives to his children. In this life, the recipient of new birth has a foretaste of heaven, set apart for holiness. The believer is delivered from the **penalty** of sin being justified by the work of Christ. The believer is delivered from the **power** of sin by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The believer grows in grace through progressive sanctification by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

The believer will be delivered from the **presence** of sin, but not in this life. While growing in grace and holiness, the believer still has the fallen nature and will continue to struggle with sin. But the day is coming when he will receive a glorified resurrection body when Jesus' kingdom is fully consummated.

Not magic words.

It is a mistake to think that all you have to do is walk down to the altar at a revival meeting to "get saved." This is not to say that new birth cannot come about this way, but each one needs to examine himself to determine whether or not he has true faith.

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; (2 Corinthians 13:5)

If one is truly born again, then one has had an encounter with the God who created the universe. One cannot experience that sort of encounter without it having an impact. It may not show all at once in a miraculous way, but over the lifetime of a believer, the fruits of salvation should be manifest. It might be "two steps forward, one step back" and there will likely be seasons of "backsliding," but the one possessing saving faith will produce good fruit over a lifetime.

Back to the original question about suffering in the world:

As difficult as present trials may be, one who belongs to Christ can rejoice in tribulation, for even tribulation serves God's purpose of salvation.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

As well, the believer realizes that this life is but a moment compared to eternity, in what lies in store for the children of God. While God is not the author of evil, he does hold the universe in his providential hands. He has a sovereign purpose that finite man cannot fully comprehend.

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:1-8)

We are an eschatological people, meaning that our true citizenship is heavenly. We look to Jesus rather than to our current circumstances. The ultimate answer to the question of suffering in this world is finding contentment in Christ.

Have you been born again?

Are you drawn to Jesus; do you hear his voice?

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. (John 6:37)

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. (John 5:24)

If you have been born again, you are now a child of God. You may not always have assurance due to doubt-inducing sin, but you can be certain that once you become a child of God, your salvation is secure.

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. (John 10:28)

What about the church?

Both the nature of the church and her worship are ordained by God. The church belongs to Jesus Christ.

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18)

It has been rightly noted through the centuries by serious Christians, "If God is our Father, then the church is our mother." The church is the place where Christian nurture takes place. Christians need one another for the sharing of gifts and graces. This is called the communion of the saints (Acts 2:43-47). Most importantly, we all need the public worship of God for the sake of the public means of grace. The public means of grace are those outward and ordinary means, or channels, whereby Christ communicates the benefits of his mediation to the souls of men and women, boys and girls, those benefits noted earlier in this pamphlet. These means of grace found only in public worship are ordained

of God to promote the salvation of the guilty. The public means of grace, therefore, are not negotiable, but necessary and irreplaceable (Acts 2:41-42).

Isn't Church just a matter of taste?

We live in an age that thinks anything goes when it comes to worshiping God. God is not honored by “entertainment” masquerading as worship. Believers are called out of the world to serve God.

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:2)

Believers are not to bring a worldly perspective into the church. A true believer is satisfied with the sweetness of Jesus Christ and comes to realize that the world never satisfies.

We invite you to our church. From the Bible, we adhere to well established principles for worship and a view of the Christian life that honors God. You won't get a “pep talk” on how to conquer your worldly pursuits. You will receive real food for the soul from reverent singing of psalms and godly hymns, from the diligent expository preaching of the Word of God, from the observance of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and from communal prayer. You will be part of a community of “saints.”

And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. (John 6:35)

Church Name

Street Address

City, State, Zip

<http://www.churchwebsite.com/>