

# Why does God let bad things happen to us?

## WHY?

Why does God allow the disease to strike, the terrorist to kill, the tornado to destroy, the child to die, the crime to be committed? Perhaps the most difficult question for a Christian to answer is, "Why does God let bad things happen?" It is this question that unbelievers point to as proof that the Christian concept of God is inconsistent and this question that Christians agonize over in their deepest struggles with doubt.

The problem arises from two truths about God that appear to be in conflict with each other. Christians believe that God is all-powerful; there is nothing that God cannot do. We also believe that God is good and that he desires the very best for his creation. How then can a good God allow suffering in this world? This dilemma is commonly referred to as the problem of evil. Doesn't evil prove that either God is not all-powerful or that he is not completely good? Would an all-powerful God who is good and loving allow bad things to happen to his people? These are questions that cry out for answers if faith is to survive.

## NO EASY ANSWERS

There is a sense in which the entire Bible reflects the struggle with the problem of evil. One of the first examples of this is found in the story of Joseph. After Joseph had endured the hatred of his brothers, slavery in the land of Egypt and imprisonment as a criminal, he experienced a complete turn of events in his life. He was freed from prison and elevated to the position of being the second most powerful man in all of Egypt. His brothers, who had once contemplated murdering Joseph but had sold him into slavery instead, were forced by famine to come to Egypt to buy food. Predictably, when Joseph the Egyptian revealed his true identity to his nervous siblings, they feared for their lives. When they pleaded for him not to kill them and offered to be his slaves, Joseph said, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:19-20).

Joseph was wrestling with nothing less than the problem of evil. Why had God allowed such bad things to happen to him through the years? Would not an all-good and all-powerful God have prevented his suffering? Apparently not. For whatever reason, God had let bad things happen to Joseph for years. Yet, Joseph was able to look beyond the pain and find purpose in what had taken place. God, he believed, had been working toward a greater good, something that had been hidden from Joseph's eyes for years.

When Bible-reading people think of suffering and the problem of evil, their

minds often turn to Job. In this classic story of suffering, we find a godly man who was wealthy and enjoyed a large, blessed family. Then, one day, everything fell apart. His livestock was stolen, his wealth was lost, his children were killed and his health was destroyed. Everything was taken from Job.

Three friends came to sit with Job and help him in his time of near-total destruction. For seven days they sat silently next to him on the ground. After that, they began trying to explain to their friend why he had suffered so much. The book of Job reports that their firm conviction was that all suffering could be traced back to sin; for Job to be suffering so much, he must have committed some terrible sin.

However, in the end, God spoke up and rebuked Job's friends for their foolish and false words of comfort. Job responded, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted....Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:3).

Job received no easy or complete answers about his suffering. However, his faith endured, and he confessed that God was both all-powerful and completely good. His suffering was not explained, but neither did it destroy his faith.

Joseph and Job remind us that there are no easy answers to our questions about why God lets bad things happen. Sometimes, as was true in the experience of Joseph, time eventually helps make sense of our hurts; we can see the purpose in our pain. But this does not always happen. Sometimes, losses and pains never make sense. The suffering seems purposeless, and we are tempted to doubt either the power or the goodness of God. When it comes to human suffering, there are no easy answers. Instead, there are many ideas about life and God that must be considered as we grapple with the question of why God lets bad things happen. The following are two such ideas:

### **THE PROBLEM WITH FREE WILL**

When God created human beings, he created us with free moral will. God did not manufacture robots who would mindlessly do whatever they were programmed to do; he made people who could say "Yes" or "No" to the one who created them. God said to the first man and woman, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). Genesis also records that God instructed the first couple, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die" (Genesis 3:3).

From the very beginning of our existence, we have had a choice. This free

moral will is, at the same time, a wonderful gift and a terrible burden. No one would give it away, and yet we struggle with the responsibility that comes with it.

Our free moral will helps to explain much of the suffering in this world that is caused by human behavior. Murder, robbery, child abuse, terrorism and genocide are the sorts of things that make our spirits groan and cause us to scream out, "Why?" Surely God could stop such suffering, so why doesn't he? At least part of the answer may lie in this matter of free will.

You and I do not want God to take away our freedom to make our own choices. But we sometimes insist that he take away the freedom of anyone who would cause suffering.

Take, for example, the horrible events of September 11, 2001, when terrorists slammed hijacked airplanes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania, killing more than 3,000 innocent people. Almost everyone with any faith cried out that day, "Where is God? How could he allow such a thing to happen?" But what did we really want him to do? Did we want him to take away the free will of the hijackers? Sure we did! But did we also want him to take away our freedom to choose our response to God? The inconsistency of our answer is obvious; we want God to limit the free will of everyone but us!

### **THE BIGGER PICTURE**

There is a small book near the end of the Old Testament that helps us confront the issue of the bigger picture. Habakkuk was a prophet who complained to God, How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save (Habakkuk 1:2)?

Habakkuk was bothered by the way the wicked Israelites were mistreating their poor neighbors. So, God told Habakkuk not to worry, because he was sending the Babylonians to overtake their kingdom. The prophet was stunned by what he heard! How could God use a nation that was even more unrighteous than Israel to resolve the first problem? Habakkuk had wanted a little justice, just enough to clean up the mess he could see, not enough to destroy his homeland.

In the end, after his overwhelming encounter with God, Habakkuk began to understand a little bit of how much he did not understand. He sighed, Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior (Habakkuk 3:16-18).

Habakkuk's encounter with God suggests that our understanding of suffering is perhaps like that of a child who is receiving his immunizations. The stunned infant screams as a sharp needle is plunged into his tender flesh. He cries out in confused pain, not able to make sense of what is happening to him. All he knows is that he hurts and that the adults in the room are doing nothing to stop this terrible injustice. However, the child's mother, perhaps with tears in her own eyes, can see the bigger picture and knows that the momentary pain is nothing compared to the pain from which the child is being protected.

Is this how God views our suffering? Does he hold us and weep with us, knowing that if we were only able to see and understand the big picture, we would appreciate the reason for his actions? Along this line, the Apostle Paul wrote, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:18, 28).

So, why does God let bad things happen? I don't know. No one fully does. The free will of man and the bigger picture of life and history are partial answers. But I do know that Joseph, Job, Habakkuk and millions of believers through the centuries have held on to their faith as they walked through the valley of deep darkness and have trusted that there is no limit to the goodness and the power of their God!

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