

# Why does God allow suffering?

A brief introduction to a...

- Common Question

How do you expect me to believe in God, asked Woody Allen, 'when only last week I got my tongue caught in the roller of my electric typewriter?'

For a while now, at least in the Western world, the existence of any form of pain, suffering or evil has been regarded as evidence for the non-existence of God. If a good God existed, people say, these things wouldn't. But they do and, therefore, He doesn't.

- Big Question
- Intellectual Question

The problem raised for the apologist by the existence of evil or suffering is usually stated in terms of three propositions:

- a. God is all powerful and all knowing.
- b. God is completely good.
- c. There is suffering and evil in the world.

It is often suggested that these three statements are inconsistent. In other words, the omnipotence and goodness of God is not consistent with the existence of suffering or evil in the world. All three statements cannot be true at one and the same time.

The reality of suffering and evil cannot be denied. It is an observation of experience.

Therefore either God is not all-powerful, or he is not good.

And so the logical coherence of the Christian faith seems to unravel. A fatal logical flaw has been exposed. Or has it?

C. S. Lewis in his celebrated book *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis begins by stating the problem as follows:

*'If God were good, he would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty he would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either the goodness, or power, or both.' This is the problem of pain, in its simplest form.*

- Personal Question

## Points to ponder

- Some suffering is down to us
- But some is not - John 9:1-3

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.

<sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' <sup>3</sup> 'Neither this

man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

- Suffering is a part of living in a fallen world - Rom 8:18-25

<sup>18</sup> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

<sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. <sup>23</sup> Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

<sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

- Asking God to take away suffering isn't as straightforward as it sounds

## Hope in the struggle

- God hears - Ex 2:24

<sup>24</sup> God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.

- God understands - Mk 6:34, 9:36, Jn 11:33,38

<sup>34</sup> When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

<sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

- God acts - Jn 3:16

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

- God suffers - Mk 14:33, 15:33,34

<sup>33</sup> He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. <sup>34</sup> 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.'

<sup>33</sup> At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>34</sup> And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?').

- God restores - Rev 21:1-5

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. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> "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.' <sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

### Final thoughts

- Always unknowns - Is 55:8,9

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,'  
declares the LORD.

<sup>9</sup> 'As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

- Always a choice - Ps 73

Surely God is good to Israel,  
to those who are pure in heart.

<sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;  
I had nearly lost my foothold.

<sup>3</sup> For I envied the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

<sup>4</sup> They have no struggles;  
their bodies are healthy and strong.

<sup>5</sup> They are free from common human burdens;  
they are not plagued by human ills.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace;

they clothe themselves with violence.

<sup>7</sup> From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
their evil imaginations have no limits.

<sup>8</sup> They scoff, and speak with malice;  
with arrogance they threaten oppression.

<sup>9</sup> Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
and their tongues take possession of the earth.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.

<sup>11</sup> They say, 'How would God know?  
Does the Most High know anything?'

<sup>12</sup> This is what the wicked are like –  
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

<sup>13</sup> Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure  
and have washed my hands in innocence.

<sup>14</sup> All day long I have been afflicted,  
and every morning brings new punishments.

<sup>15</sup> If I had spoken out like that,  
I would have betrayed your children.

<sup>16</sup> When I tried to understand all this,  
it troubled me deeply

<sup>17</sup> till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.

<sup>18</sup> Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.

<sup>19</sup> How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!

<sup>20</sup> They are like a dream when one awakes;  
when you arise, Lord,  
you will despise them as fantasies.

<sup>21</sup> When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,

<sup>22</sup> I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.

<sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.

<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterwards you will take me into glory.

<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion for ever.

<sup>27</sup> Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

<sup>28</sup> But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds.