

Why is there so much Evil and Suffering in the World?

On the street I saw a small girl
cold and shivering in a thin dress,
with little hope of a decent meal.
I became angry and said to God:
"Why did you permit this?
Why don't you do something about it?"
For awhile God said nothing.
That night he replied, quite suddenly:
"I certainly did something about it.
I made you."

Sister Mary Rose McGeady
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It has taken me a long time to recognize
that darkness is an essential element for
personal growth. No matter how many
"right things" I do, darkness will still come
unannounced and uninvited because it is
an essential part of life. Without darkness
I cannot become the person I am meant to be.

Joyce Rupp
Little Pieces of Light

If God exists and is all-powerful, how could He let people suffer the way they do? This question is the most common reason why people doubt the existence of God.

One must first realize that most of the suffering in this world is a result of poor decisions made by humans. God gave humanity free will to make their own decisions. I suppose He could have made androids that would do His will exactly as He intended, but God could only truly be in relationship with, and obtain love from, humans by giving them free will. It is not his fault that humanity has abused this gift. There clearly are enough resources on this planet to feed and house every human being, yet we choose not to do so. As a result, millions of people suffer and die from malnutrition. God wants us all to love one another and treat each other as one large world community, yet we choose to seek power and possessions over love and compassion. We choose war, where thousands of people are killed and thousands of others severely wounded. In recent times, we are well aware of the sites where the earth's crust will erupt into volcanoes or earthquakes (which is necessary to relieve pressure), yet we still choose to live in those

places. People repeatedly relocate back to the same floodplain that was devastated by overflowing waters.

Additional suffering occurs from acts related to the natural laws of science. These laws must remain constant in order to have a stable planet. For example, odds are that if you fall out of the window of a twelve story building, you'll die or be severely injured. That is the law of gravity. We can't very well expect God to reverse the laws of gravity just to prevent this injury. Our very existence on this planet depends on having a precisely calibrated, constant gravitational field. There are also biologic constants that are necessary for our bodies to function. Billions of molecular actions and reactions must occur with dependability for our everyday existence. To repeatedly change these would negate the very possibility of life itself. The fact that our body's molecular and biochemical machines function reliably year after year is miraculous unto itself. What is surprising is how often people choose to abuse this gift. We eat foods that God never intended. We add unnatural chemicals to our food during processing and spray them with pesticides. We inhale smoke and abuse alcohol. We sit on the sofa with the remote instead of exercising. The ability of the body to tolerate such abuse and regenerate itself is truly marvelous. Unfortunately, it is inevitable that complex systems will ultimately fail, even if we make good choices. Ultimately, illness and death are unavoidable. So why doesn't God just fix it? Surely the God of the Bible, capable of miraculous feats, can reverse our misery. How compassionate can He be if he lets people remain in distress? Atheists insist that there can be no loving God if He allows such pain and misery. The problem with this argument is that it presumes life is meant to be happy and free of strife. I don't believe that is God's intent. In fact Jesus tells us directly that there will be suffering in this life and despite His divinity, He accepted ridicule, torture, and crucifixion.

From God's perspective, would spiritual growth be possible without challenges and difficulties? When life is good, we most often follow our own direction and leave God out of the picture. It is only when the direction we choose leads to misfortune, or when adversity finds us despite the decisions we've made, that we turn to God. Suffering, in essence, acts like God's giant megaphone shouting, "Pay attention; do it my way". We trust ourselves when times are good. We trust God when they are bad. This was personally illustrated to me one afternoon in Philadelphia. During my "Values through Sports" mentoring program on Saturday, I came across eight-year-old Latisha, sitting all by herself while other children were engaged in a variety of activities. I hadn't seen her before and she was obviously hesitant about joining in with the others. There was enough staff that day so I decided to sit with her for awhile. I asked her about her family. "Mommy goes in and out of the hospital to make herself well (rehab) and daddy had to go away for a long time (prison). My grandmom takes care of us now." I found out that her grandmother scraped by to keep six children fed and clothed. Latisha was wearing bedroom slippers and torn jeans; no luxuries in that house. I asked her what she does with her time. She told me about playing with her brothers and sisters, and Jesus. I asked her what she meant by playing with Jesus and she said, "Well, sometimes my brothers and sisters don't want to play with me and I don't want to be alone so I pretend that Jesus is there with me and we play together." I asked her if she had any games or

toys. She didn't. She said it would be nice to have a few, but she wouldn't want too many. This surprised me since I grew up in the suburbs where there was no such thing as too many toys. I had to ask, "Why?" "If I had too many toys to play with, I might stop playing with Jesus and I think that would make him sad." We can learn much from Latisha. Perhaps most of us have too many toys to truly appreciate the presence of Jesus in our lives. It is no accident that the areas of the world where Christianity is growing fastest are in Africa and South America, places where there is great need and suffering. Under these destitute conditions, Jesus' revolutionary message of hope and justice for all of humanity are readily embraced. Circumstances that might otherwise lead to despair are trumped by accepting God's love and the hope of human possibility proclaimed through Jesus.

We need periods of darkness for psychological and spiritual growth. Difficult times clarify how our behavior and decisions impact others. Suffering forces introspection. We are compelled to ask, "What's really important? Who is really important? What do I take for granted? How do I make my decisions? Who do I use for guidance? Who was I meant to be?" The Bible is replete with "wilderness experiences," times of tribulation that forced character development. The Hebrews wandered in the desert for forty years. It is during that time and that they learned about faith, discerned their strengths and weaknesses, and developed resilience that would be required when they entered Canaan. David's wilderness experience (fleeing from the jealous Saul) transformed a shepherd boy into the commander of a nation. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness enabled Him with strength to resist temptation, solidified his divine connection to God, and prepared Him for ministry. Paul's years in Arabia provided the necessary time and solitude for him to process the significance of his encounter with the risen Christ. Later he endures beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, and imprisonment, and yet was able to conclude, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28). How could he believe this after all of his suffering? Paul gives a clue in the next verse, "For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His son." Paul understood that God is not in the happiness business. He is in the business of transforming us, instilling within us His character as modeled through Christ.. In his letter to the Romans, Paul proclaims, "We also rejoice in our sufferings" (Romans 5:3). What? Is this guy a masochist? Is he saying God gives us suffering on purpose? No, but Paul recognizes that suffering is a profound tool through which God can mold our personal growth. Paul continues, "because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which He has given us" (Romans 5:3-4). Suffering has a way of turning our focus away from the external, from the power, possessions, and prestige we thought were so significant. We begin to develop our inner strength and beauty, traits more essential from God's perspective.

It is during times of suffering and periods of tribulation that we develop patience and perseverance. God wants us to be in relationship with one another. It is during times of need that this happens. It is in these moments we learn how to accept help from others and learn to trust. Think about the people you know who have gone through no major

strife in their life. They are often shallow and self-centered. They're certainly not equipped to help others. Those who only know health cannot empathize with the sick. Only a divorced person can shepherd another through the agony of that separation. If you have never lost a loved one, how can you really console a friend during their loss? The apostle Paul alludes to this in his second letter to the Corinthians. He is tormented by a "thorn in my flesh." He pleads three times for God to remove this but God answers, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Our vulnerability during these times opens us to His presence, allowing Him to work through us. We develop the strength and compassion necessary to live our life and minister to others. We cannot deny the reality of tragedy with its pain and anguish. But we must accept the fact that suffering is a part of life and seek to find meaning through it. People in great need allow us the opportunity for spreading compassion and love, which Jesus says is God's foremost intent for us. His goal is nothing less than a Christ-like transformation of our soul. When we ourselves are suffering, we must trust that God is with us in that suffering and use these times of tribulation to refocus on His will for us. Maybe God wants us to move in a different direction with the gifts and talents He has given us. Maybe He wants us to use our affliction to help others who are struggling with the same issues.

Often it is not easy to comprehend how suffering benefits us. Many times it seems as though there is no conceivable good that can emerge from it. At those times we must, like Job, trust that there is a good and gracious God, even if we cannot understand His agenda. We often forget that there was a day of excruciating darkness between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Yet from this darkness a transformation emerged that would forever change the world. Sometimes answers develop over the fullness of time and sometimes not. We cannot pretend to understand all of the ways of God. All we can do is use Jesus as a model of how to respond to suffering with compassion, love, and trust.