

How Can a Good God Allow Suffering?

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Date: 11 October 2020

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- [0 : 0 0] The scripture reading comes from Psalm 22, starting at verse 1. Please follow along on the screen or in your Bible. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
- Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groaning? Oh, my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.
- Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted, they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued.
- In you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me.
- They make mouth at me, they wag their heads. He trusts in the Lord, let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him. Yet you are he who took me from the womb, you made me trust you at the mother's breast.
- [1 : 0 8] On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God. Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help. Many bulls encompass me.
- Strong bulls of Bishan surround me, they open wide their mouths at me like a ravening and rolling lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.
- My heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws. You lay me in the dust of death.
- For dogs encompass me. A company of evildoers encircles me. They have pierced my hands and feet. I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me.
- They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. But you, O Lord, do not be far off. O you may help, come quickly to my aid.
- [2 : 1 0] Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog. Save me from the mouth of the lion. You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen.
- I will tell you of your name to my brothers in the midst of the congregation. I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him. All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him.
- And stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel. For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard when he cried to him.
- From you comes my praise in the great congregation. My vows I will perform before those who fear him. The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied. Those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
- May your hearts live forever. Amen. Great. Thank you so much, Christina. Welcome to all of you.
- [3 : 1 4] Again, my name is Chris. I'm one of the leaders here at Watermark, and it's just really exciting to bring God's word to you this morning as we carry on this series of looking at why Christianity, the big questions of faith, and how does Christianity deal with some of these questions.

And we're looking at a big question today, the question of suffering. And so, I don't know about you, but it has been a crazy year.

The world has, in the midst of what seems to be the most affluent, the safest, the most stable time in the whole of human history, we've been hit by the reality of suffering again and again and again from every angle.

We've got COVID and the global pandemic. There are refugees fleeing everywhere. There is human rights abuses. There's sex trafficking. There is typhoons. There is earthquakes.

There is so much in the world that we have to say, what's going on? And even if you look at just back a few years into the 20th century, you'll see nothing much has changed in that aspect.

[4 : 24] A guy called Eli Wiesel, who is a Jewish Nobel Prize winner, he spent 13 months in a Nazi concentration camp.

And he saw his mother and his younger sister brutally murdered. And he said this, For some people, the question of suffering consumes their faith.

For others, it turns them to faith. But the question still remains, if there is a God and he's good, why on earth does he allow all of this suffering to take place?

For some of us, that's actually an intellectual question. But for many of us, it's actually like Eli Wiesel. It's a very personal question. And it's a very personal question for me.

My mother, she got arthritis in her hips and she suffered in agony while the surgeon who did her first hip operation messed it up completely, leaving her in such pain that she needed two subsequent operations just to fix it.

[5 : 50] My dad has had Crohn's disease, meaning half his colon had to be cut out and he suffered from that and had a stroke last year. Myself, when I was 10, I got an illness which meant that I had to leave school and I didn't do a full day schooling until I was 16.

And I missed out on all kinds of opportunities. When I was at university, I had four years out from a severe depression. And in the midst of that, we watched my brother eaten away and dying from brain cancer.

And if I was to look at that, I still look at my friends and I say, my suffering has not been anything compared to a lot of people I know. I've got another friend that he is a Cameroonian.

And he fled, he was tortured and he fled to the UK. The last time he saw his pregnant wife, she was being beaten and kicked on the ground by government forces.

He's never seen her since. How do we make sense of these things? How do we make sense of the picture I saw last week of a two-year-old girl who has a head so swollen and deformed by brain cancer and her parents are too poor to be able to afford any operation?

[7 : 04] How do we make sense of this? And we could just go on and on and on. And for some of us though, we haven't really suffered seriously yet in our lives.

But the fact is, if you live long enough, you will. So this is a question for all of us. And suffering isn't just major things. Elizabeth Elliot, who is an author, she defines suffering as having what you don't want and wanting what you don't have.

Okay? Having what you don't want and wanting what you don't have. That covers everything from cancer to a flat tire to losing your job. Suffering is when our illusions of heaven on earth get shattered by life itself.

And as we think about suffering, some suffering is self-inflicted. Some is inflicted by other people. Some is just by nature with earthquakes and drought.

But some, and a lot of the suffering, just seems unfair. And we just don't know why it happens. And that's what I want to focus on today. You see, the psalm that we just read is a psalm written by someone for whom the suffering he's going through doesn't make sense.

[8 : 26] Right now, he's suffering rejection. He says, I'm scorned by mankind. I'm despised by people. There's no one to help me. He's got physical suffering.

He says, all my bones are out of joint. He's got emotional and psychological suffering. He says, my heart is like wax melting within me. He's suffering abuse and injustice.

A company of evildoers encircles me. They've pierced my hands and my feet. This guy is just being hit from every single angle. And he's a good guy.

And he believes in a good God who is powerful enough to deliver him and rescue him. But he hasn't. And his absence seems to make the whole thing even worse.

He just doesn't get it. And when we experience suffering and pain, don't we just ask questions like, why me?

[9 : 23] What have I done? Or if it's a loved one or a child who's suffering, we may go, why not me? Why them? Why? Why?

The psalmist here does the same. He says, my God, my God, why have you forsaken, abandoned me?

Why are you silent? I've prayed and I've got nothing back. This is real. And maybe it's because there just isn't a God.

Or maybe he's just not powerful enough to change things. Or maybe even worse, he's there. He's powerful. But he doesn't really care.

He doesn't really love us. He isn't good. And it doesn't matter what your belief is. This why question is a question every single one of us has to answer.

[10 : 19] And so many religions and many points of view have got different responses to this. And so I want to look at three different responses to this question of why suffering?

The first response sees suffering as punishment. It's karma. It's because something you did in your previous life or in this life has led to now you getting what you deserve in punishment.

I know of a guy whose daughter was crashed her car into a tree and just died. And there was no apparent reason for the crash. And the father saw this as punishment from God or from fate for the fact that he'd been having numerous affairs.

It seemed to make sense to him of the randomness of why his daughter, who seemed to be a good person, seemed to suffer. And why some good people suffered terribly, why other people seemed to have a good life, even though they seemed to be bad people.

This response, suffering as punishment, says to that two-year-old with cancer, she deserves it in some way. It's an explanation, but it doesn't give you much comfort.

[11 : 39] Then there's not so suffering as punishment, there's suffering as illusion. Buddhism, the Buddha saw suffering as caused by our desires because we get too attached to things in life.

See, what makes losing a job so hard is my desire to keep the job. What makes losing a loved one so hard is my attachment to them. So the solution is to detach from them in some way, from that desire.

Because life is like dew, a watery substance, water drops that just appear and then disappear. There's no substance to them, really. So don't get overattached to things that will disappear tomorrow.

But the famous Buddhist-Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa, who wrote over 20,000 haiku poems, after the death of his infant daughter, he said this, he wrote this, This world of dew is only a world of dew, and yet, and yet.

You see, what he felt and he experienced was, can a father, a mother, truly detach themselves from their child?

[12 : 58] How do you love by holding yourself at a distance and withdrawing from the pain of it? So suffering is punishment, suffering is illusion.

Suffering as natural is another response. This is a response of maybe atheism or an agnostic. Suffering is just part of life. There's no higher meaning, no higher purpose. You just have to create your own meaning out of it.

As famous atheist Richard Dawkins said, Our universe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

So life is just a challenge. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. But ultimately, people with this position believe suffering and their response to it is on our shoulders.

And humanists will argue this is what motivates us to make the world a better place. To fight against disease. To maybe help that two-year-old girl. Or fight against injustice in the world.

[14 : 04] Because it's up to us to make this little time we have on earth that much better. But you know, I went out with some friends to clear up some rubbish on a beach in Chung Chao.

And we, at the end of the day, we'd done a pretty good job. We cleared everything. We felt very satisfied. We got back on the boat. And just as we were about to leave, I turned around. Only to see that the tide was just washing more and more rubbish in.

In a few minutes, all of our work would have been in vain. You see, if suffering is just the reality of a meaningless that we have to create our own meaning.

You might make life better for a few people. But ultimately, it's worthless and pointless. That's why secular NGO workers are known to have high levels of alcoholism and depression.

Because ultimately, if suffering is natural, you're just fighting against existence itself. And you've got to live in some kind of denial to reality.

[15 : 11] To even claim and even say, get angry and say, that's not right at injustice. Those are some of the responses that other philosophies give us.

But I want to look now at what Christianity says in this. And Christians, I cannot give a full answer to this. Christians don't have a simplistic cookie cutter answer to all suffering.

I could talk about the problem of evil. We could talk about justice. We could talk about the redemptive nature of suffering. I don't have time for all of that. But I want to focus on three things. I want to focus on how Christianity gives us a reason and a place to question.

How it gives us a reason to trust. And how it gives us a reason to hope. So here's a reason to question. And a place to question.

You see, the question of why a good God allows suffering doesn't catch the Bible by surprise. It's a question the Bible itself asks.

[16 : 17] It's not avoiding it. It's not denying it. The reason this, why have you forsaken me prayer is in the Bible is to validate it as a response.

God himself in bringing this passage to us is inviting us to approach him with our questions. And in our questioning, what we're looking at suffering and we're looking it in the eye and we're saying, that's not right.

You know, the Bible here says we should be angry and weep at suffering. One Bible verse says this.

All of creation is groaning. And this man's angry, confused cry is like that of the two-year-old's mother.

It's a reflection of a world that is groaning and it's not the way it should be. But why? In John's gospel, Jesus goes to the graveside of one of his best friends, Lazarus.

[17 : 26] He's just died. And previously he said, hey, I'm going to raise him from the dead. But as he gets there and he sees the weeping of the people around it, it says he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

And that word deeply troubled is a word which means he was furious. He was furious and then he wept. You see, commentators tell us, like, why is he angry?

Like, if he knows he's going to raise him from the dead, why not just say, hey, chill out, guys. It's fine. He doesn't do that. Commentators tell us he's angry and grieved because he's looking death in the face and says, you are an intruder.

You don't belong here. This is not the good world that I made. Evil and suffering are in the world because they don't come from God, but are as a result of humans rejecting God's good world and good rule and wanting to rule the world ourselves.

You know, a diver who cuts their oxygen supply should not be surprised when the beautiful water they swim in becomes a painful and deadly experience.

[18 : 45] When God is our oxygen, when we cut him out of our lives, then everything, even the beauty of the world, becomes tainted by pain and death and injustice.

And so one reason that God allows suffering in the world to continue is that suffering is like physical pain.

In C.S. Lewis's words, it's a megaphone to wake up a deaf world to the fact that we have a problem. And the world is not right because we are not right with God.

And you can see the consequences of that in our relationships everywhere. And our anger and our confusion and our weeping is simply facing that reality. Writer Malcolm Muggeridge, he said this, he said, Supposing you eliminate suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be.

Because everything that corrects the tendency of this man to feel over-important, over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered.

[19 : 59] Didn't the 2008 global financial crisis show us that greed isn't good, even though we believed it was? Maybe hasn't COVID woken us up to the fact that we are not in control of our world, even though we believe often that we are?

And the question is, with the pain and with the anger, do we hear the megaphone saying, there's a problem? And then with that, where do you run to?

Because the Bible doesn't just give you a reason to question, it gives you a place to question. Where do you cry to? Where's your oxygen when you feel the reality of pain?

You can go to your family, you can go to your friends, you can go to a counselor. But so often, they don't even get you. And what about the refugee who has no one left to turn to?

Psalms 22 is written to call us back, to cry to God who hears our pain. And we can be honest with him.

[21 : 08] We can approach him. We have license to be angry and to say, this is not right, because life is not right, because we are not right with God. But God invites us to bring that question to him.

That's the first thing. It brings us a reason to question. The second thing Christianity gives us is a reason to trust. You see, you could say, that's all very well.

But God could still fix it, couldn't he? Why would we, like the psalmist, run to God if we feel like he's just allowing our lives to be miserable in some way?

We often run from cruelty, not towards it. But the Christian faith says this. We don't know all the reasons why God allows suffering. Because we are human.

We are limited. We don't get everything. But that doesn't mean there isn't a good reason for it. You see, when my one-year-old screamed in pain as I held him down and allowed him to be stabbed three times by a stranger.

[22 : 17] How could I, as a loving father, allow this to happen to him? He couldn't understand. But I, as an adult, see a bigger picture.

You see, I see that the vaccinations that he was having might just save his life or those of others later on. What to him feels like hideous cruelty with a different perspective looks like love.

And when the needles of suffering in our lives enter into our lives or the lives of other people and those we love around us, often it doesn't look like love to us.

Often it doesn't feel like love. But like the son, like my son, the only way that Christians can hold the truth and reality of suffering together with the truth of God's love is not with some neat logical answer and just go, oh, this is the reason why.

No, it's by knowing the character of our heavenly father. You see, if my son knows that I love him to bits, then he's willing to humbly trust me with things he doesn't totally understand.

[23 : 26] But why should we trust God? Because like in no other religion, no other philosophy, our God also has wounds.

Because the psalmist describes, he says, evil doers are surrounding him. They're piercing his hands and feet. He says, they cast lots for my clothes. He's on his own.

God seems absent. The crowds mock. He trusts in the Lord. Let him deliver him. His enemies think God is a genie who blesses good people and curses bad people.

And since God hasn't rescued him, then clearly his suffering must be punishment for his sins. But over a thousand years later, it was a Friday on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

The same violence, the same mocking, the same piercing of hands and feet on a cross would take place. Jesus' garments were cast by lots.

[24 : 28] The soldiers cast lots. He was mocked. But this time, it was not just the psalmist. This was Jesus Christ. God come down to earth.

He was totally sinless. It was totally undeserved. His followers couldn't make sense of it. Jesus, though himself, takes the prayer of Psalm 22 and he makes it his own.

And he says, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Tragedy. A sinless man. Wrongly executed.

But with a different perspective. The greatest self-sacrificing love the world has ever known. And he suffered for you and for me to draw us to himself so that we could know his love.

He didn't stay distant from us. He didn't say just tough it out by yourselves. He entered into our suffering. He identifies with our suffering. And ultimately, so he can draw us out of our suffering.

[25 : 35] His suffering is not a sign of the absence of God's love. It's a sign of God's presence with us in suffering. He understands. You know, when my brother died, the next day I went to the church service.

I was numb. Why had it happened? He was 26. He had his full life ahead of him. But then, as I was numb, this verse from the scripture from Isaiah 53 came to me.

It said, he, Jesus, was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. And you see, at that moment, I had peace.

Because I didn't need an answer at that moment. I needed an answerer. I needed to know that I was not alone, that someone was with me.

That someone was with me who understood what this was like. You know, in suffering, what we need is compassion. The word compassion means to suffer with.

[26 : 39] Come with, passion, suffer. We need compassion. Human compassion is good. But it's not enough when people don't understand what you're going through.

But at the heart of the Christian message is there is one who understands what you're going through. Exactly because he's been through it and worse for you.

You see, God has wounds. God has wounds. We don't all see the bigger picture. But God, if God hasn't remained at a distance from us, if God has entered our suffering for us, then whatever reasons he has for allowing suffering, we know those reasons aren't because he doesn't love us.

Because he would never have come to us like that. There is no greater love. That's why we can trust him. You know, Luke Ferry, atheist, philosopher, and politician said, Christianity changed the world because it made the impersonal nature of suffering personal.

He said it brought us a person in the pain, not just a logical answer. It brought us God himself. That's the reason we can run to God with our questions.

[27 : 57] But we can also have a reason to trust him because he's entered our suffering. And thirdly, and finally, we have a reason to hope. You see, even with all of that, if we are still doomed to a continual existence of suffering, if we are continually going to die, then ultimately life is still all meaningless.

Because death is the ultimate form of suffering. It's the end. But you see in this psalm, the journey of the psalmist takes him from despair to praise and hope.

You see, he says in verse 26, You know, I have sat at the deathbed of a number of people with their non-believing relatives who always turn to me and they say things like, he'll be in a better place, won't he?

Or they'll say, I know she's still with us. She's kind of with us still. She lives on in our memories. It's the same, isn't it? And I wish that was true.

But the problem is, the reason death and loss of any kind is so painful is because the people are not still with us.

[29 : 29] It's because your memories are not the same as having the real person with you. And the reason why it hurts is because suffering is so painful.

And so why then do people who've lived their whole lives without any regard for anything beyond this life, do they have their own worldview so inadequate at the moment they face death that they have to borrow and find hope from somewhere else, from some other worldview?

Luke Ferry again says, if when we die we simply cease to exist, there is no reason to dread death at all. But we do dread death.

But we do fear losing our loved ones. Viktor Frankl, who's one of the most famous psychologists of the 20th century, he was imprisoned for three years in Nazi concentration camps.

And he analyzed who were the people who survived the longest. And do you know what he found? He found it wasn't the strong looking or the self-confident who managed to make it.

[30 : 36] They often died the first. The people who survived, those who lived longest, were those who had hope outside of the camp. That's what got them through whatever they faced right now.

If all your meaning and purpose in life is found in this world, then suffering can snatch it away at any moment. But as Christians, we have a hope that is beyond this world.

It's not an airy, fairy, kind of vague kind of hope. Wishful thinking will be in a better place. It's a Christian hope that is grounded in a historical reality, the resurrection of Jesus.

For the Christian message is not that God just entered into our suffering. It's that he's also risen victorious and defeated death and been victorious over our suffering.

Death is defeated. It's not the end. The Bible says Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee that God will transform our suffering world into a new world.

[31 : 44] The book of Revelation says there will be no more mourning. There will be no more tears. There will be no more pain. The old will be wiped away. The new will come. This won't be just kind of floating on the clouds.

This will be everything of the joys that we experience now just in full multicolor. And everyone who trusts in Jesus will experience this.

And at the center of this world is a creation worshiping and praising God, not as an evil tyrant for allowing us to suffer, but praising the Jesus whose wounds are still visible.

But they're no longer ugly, but they are beautiful scars. They're the means by which God is healing and restoring our broken world. And he wants to start with us today.

You know, like a war hero returning scarred from the battlefield. Oh, the battlefield can feel hard. We don't always understand it. But when we look back, we will see that the wounds that Jesus went through and our wounds were weaving a bigger story, a more beautiful story, that our human perspective, we couldn't comprehend at the time.

[32 : 56] On the night my brother died, I stood with my parents weeping. We felt the loss. Death hurts.

But we also had incredible joy. There was no despair. My parents thanked God for the gift of my brother, that God had given us 26 years with him.

We were not entitled to that. We didn't deserve that. But a good God had blessed us with 26 years. And only as he was removed did we realize how much God had given us.

I don't know why God took him. But we have a confident hope that because of Jesus' resurrection, we're going to be reunited with him.

We're going to see him again. And so right now with whatever you're going through, maybe you're struggling, maybe you're going, why? There's a place for you to run to.

[34 : 01] And there's a reason for you to run there. Because there's a God who has entered into our suffering, who wants to be with you in whatever you're going through, and who says there is not a despair in life right now, which is where everyone else is, but there is a hope, a sure and certain hope, because Jesus has risen from the dead and he will create a new world.

We don't need to clutch onto vague, inconsistent hope. We don't need to live in fear of death or avoid it because we can stand because Jesus has already done it for us.

I want to just pray. And wherever you are, I want you just to approach God right now.

Maybe you are not a Christian. Maybe you still have a lot of questions. I want to invite you to actually run to the God who invites you to run to him with all your questions.

Maybe you feel alone. Maybe you feel, you wonder whether life is worth living. The gospel tells you there is hope because there is one who wants to walk with you and one who's going to bring you through the valley to the other side.

[35 : 30] Some of us may be actually indifferent to suffering because actually your life is fairly comfortable.

You know, the only other time in the gospels when Jesus is both angry and grieved is when he sees indifference in religious people's hearts at the suffering of a man with a withered hand.

God wants to challenge us that he has a heart for the suffering and he wants us to reach out to them. So let me just pray. Father, I thank you that even the question of suffering just humbles us because we don't have a full answer.

But thank you that in the midst of that we're not left alone. That you have come to us. That you love us. That you want to draw us to yourself.

I pray for whoever right now is really going through the pain of life. Lord, I pray would you draw alongside them. Would you show them that you are the only hope beyond this world that they can rely on who is secure, who is steadfast.

[36 : 48] I pray, Lord, for us as a community that we be a community that has the most confidence and is the most real and is able to weep the most and be angry the most and yet have confident trust and peace the most regardless of the circumstances because we know who you are and we know that we can trust you.

And may that lead us to reach out to those who are suffering around us, I pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.