

# ARE YOU SUFFERING?

By

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“Why does God allow so much suffering in the world?” This is a common question. While we do not expect to know why Almighty God does everything, there are some things about suffering that can be understood from a study of Scripture.

Suffering is a universal problem. From the modern hospital bed in Rochester to the bombed out streets of Kabul, there is physical pain, mental anguish, and the lonely helplessness of dying.

In every national political campaign great promises are heard: there is to be no more ignorance, poverty, disappointments, infidelity, defeat or despair. In our society everyone, if he is “normal,” is healthy, wealthy, financially secure from the cradle to the grave, and supplied with plenty of recreation and entertainment. Nevertheless, he is going to suffer. But when suffering strikes, it comes as a great shock to the person totally unprepared.

Many religious writers, whose understanding of the book market is developed far beyond their understanding of THE BOOK, tells us that the Christian life should be one free of burdens. They “use” Christian concepts for success in the market place and insist that if we have faith God will make us rich, cure all our physical ailments and see that we are loved and esteemed by everyone.

Then Christians ask, “But why does God allow me to suffer?”

If they had done their homework, they would have read that suffering is a part of God’s program. Jesus said, “The Son of man must suffer many things ... If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:22-23). So at the very beginning of the Christian journey there is the introduction of the cross and suffering. How could anyone think that he could be a true Christian and escape suffering?

Since Adam’s rebellion, there have been evil people in the world. Life must be lived out in the midst of good and evil, and although we choose the good, there still remains the pressure and opposition of the evil. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18).

If so much suffering is due to sin, the next question is, “Why does God allow sin in the world?” The answer is that as long as God allows people in the world, He must allow sin! Man is created with such marvelous mental powers that he may do good or evil, and as long as he is alienated from God he continues to do evil. Only by stamping out man could God stamp out sin. Of course God will do just that very thing in the Day of Judgment, by destroying the entire world, sinners included (2 Pet. 3:9).

As long as the world stands there will be good and evil, the wheat and the tares, and therefore suffering. The solution will come when God rescues all believers – those who

have turned their hearts and minds to the Creator, through Christ – from the world, and then destroys it. In the new heaven and earth there will be only righteousness, for there will be only righteous people there (2 Pet 3:13. Cf. Rev. 21:1-5, 22:1-5).

Still, we ask, “But why does God allow THIS suffering?” In the prime of life, one is cut down in the agony of disease. The one that is striving to make a Christian home is stunned by the wife or husband who bitterly opposes the life of faith. After gearing one’s life to suburban living, with all the luxuries a comfortable salary can afford, one find he is out of a job and the financial pressure becomes unbearable.

So suffering inevitably comes even to those of faith. We might say that it comes *especially* to those of faith, for these are the ones who can profit by it. To understand suffering, we first must understand the purpose of God. “And we know that to them that are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). ALL THINGS! Even suffering? Yes, especially suffering.

But the key to understanding this bold statement is the word, purpose. It is God’s purpose that is to be done. His goal is not to give everyone a paradise on earth, but to prepare us for the eternal paradise to come. His goal is not that we should be rich in material things, but rich in His spiritual blessings. His purpose is to have a people in His image, “holy and without blemish before Him in love.” Whatever the suffering the Christian must endure, it cannot defeat his purpose to attain this goal.

Did not the suffering of Christ work out for the good of God’s purpose, that He might redeem sinners from death by the sinless one dying in the sinner’s place? Did not the suffering of Stephen work for good for all Christians who are challenged by his example? Who can know the influence that Stephen’s martyrdom had on Paul, who held the coats that day for the Jews who committed the murder? And while the suffering ended Stephen’s life, it did not thwart God’s purpose for him, for God can raise him up at the last day and grant him immortality.

And what of the suffering of Peter and John? Did it thwart the purpose of God for them? Not at all. It developed their patience and compassion, so that they could withstand the pressure from their enemies and hold fast to the truth of God, leaving the marvelous records for millions to read and know His purpose. There is a witness for God that only the dark shadows can bring out. The fact of God’s sustaining spirit can only be proven in the crucible of suffering. The reality of our belief in God’s ultimate purpose to save us from the present evil world and give us immortality in a new creation is best demonstrated in the pressure of the suffering we endure. Hence the Hebrew Christians could take joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing that for themselves they had a better and more enduring possession (Heb. 10:34).

Is your suffering physical? Paul suffered physically, “longing to be clothed upon with (the) habitation which is from heaven” (2 Cor. 5:2). Paul was writing about the resurrection (2 Cor. 4:14-5:10). Such suffering in the flesh teaches us the necessity and the glory of the immortality to be granted at Christ’s coming, when all believers will be changed to powerful immortal beings. Also, physical suffering causes the witness of the sufferer to stand out all the stronger. It was when seen in the midst of the fiery furnace

that the three Hebrews in Babylon called attention to the power of God. From the cross we look excitedly to the resurrection.

Is your suffering caused by financial pressure? It is God's purpose to have us trust Him totally, not for material benefits, but in spite of their absence. It was after Job lost all that he possessed that he exclaimed, "To God would I commit my cause" (Job 5:8). It is only when deprived of material things that many people can learn not to depend upon them. To be diminished in goods does not mean we are diminished in God's eyes. The goal - to be conformed to the image of God - does not require luxurious furnishings and all the modern gadgets money buys. Moreover, the witness to the world is more convincing from the lips of those who obviously do not serve God for the sake of temporal gain.

Is your suffering at the hands of others? Jesus said, "In the world you have tribulation" (John 16:33). John wrote, "We know that the whole world lies in the evil one" (1 John 5:19). It is natural that the purpose of God should be opposed by God's enemies, and we who are aligned with His purpose will receive the enemy's blows. Such conflict forms the background for our witness, and builds us up for the battle. Adversity puts muscle in our faith and our message. "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial among you, which comes upon you to prove you, as though a strange thing happened unto you: but insomuch as you are partakers of Christ's suffering, rejoice; that at the revelation of His glory also you may rejoice with exceeding joy." I Pet. 4:12)

Suffering burns out the ambition to gain this world, so that we might gain the new one. Suffering demonstrates the evil of sin and sets us toward the goal of godliness. Suffering lays a steady hand upon our fickleness, to force us into a steadfast purpose. And when we have passed through the fire of suffering we do not curse the flame, but rather bless God for the affliction which opened our eyes to His blazing glory.

To understand suffering, we must know God's purpose and make His purpose our own. As pilgrims in this world, we understand that "the world passes away, and the lusts thereof; but he that does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17).

Anti-Christian forces have become more militant, and seek to destroy all that is Christian, causing intense suffering to faithful Christians over the entire world. But this means that the time of fulfillment of all we hope for is nearer. To be marked for opposition from God's enemies means that we are marked for His fellowship in the new creation.

"In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

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