

WHY WOULD A GOOD GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

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It's an old question. Four thousand years ago, a victim of personal, family, and financial reversals spoke to the silent heavens and pleaded, "Show me why You contend with me. Does it seem good to You that You should oppress, that You should despise the work of Your hands?" (Job 10:2-3). The questions are still being asked. "Does God hate me? Is this why He is allowing me to suffer like this? Why me and not others?"

There are answers. Not exhaustive, but enough to keep our pain in perspective. Enough to show us how to put suffering to work for us. In the following pages, *Our Daily Bread* managing editor Kurt De Haan shows us that while heaven may not be answering all our questions, it is giving us all the answers we need to trust and love the One who, in our pain, is calling us to Himself.

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ELUSIVE ANSWERS

Life can be hard to understand. In trying to come to grips with the cold realities of our existence, we can easily become frustrated. We long for answers to the immense problem of suffering. We may even wonder if we will ever fully comprehend why bad things happen to good people and why good things happen to bad people. The answers often seem to be elusive, hidden, out-of-reach.

Oh, it makes sense that a terrorist would be killed by his own bomb. It makes sense that a reckless driver would be in a serious accident. It makes sense that a person who plays with fire would get burned. It even makes sense that a chain-smoker would develop lung cancer.

But what about the innocent men, women, and children who are killed by a terrorist's bomb? What about the young driver who suffers severe brain damage because a drunk veered over the center line? What about the person whose home burns down due to no fault of his own? And what about the 2-year-old child with leukemia?

It is dangerous, even foolish, to pretend that we have a complete answer as to why God allows suffering. The reasons are many and complex. It's just as wrong to demand that we *should* understand. When the Old Testament sufferer Job realized that he had no right to demand an answer from God, he said, "Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3).

But God *has* given us

some answers. Although we may not be able to know why one person gets singled out for a disease, we can know part of the reason why diseases exist. And even though we may not understand why we face a certain problem, we can know how to deal with the situation and respond in a way that pleases the Lord.

“The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith.”

—John Stott

One more thing. I am not going to pretend that I fully understand the suffering that you personally may be experiencing. Although

some aspects of human pain are common, the particulars are different. And what you may need most right now is not a four-point outline on why you are suffering or even what to do about it. What you may need most is a hug, a listening ear, or someone who will just sit with you in silence.

Sometime along the way, however, you will want and need the truths of God’s Word to comfort you and help you to see your plight from God’s perspective.

You and I need more than untested theories. That’s why in the pages that follow I have tried to include the insights of people who have suffered a variety of physical and emotional pains. My prayer for you is that your faith in God will stand firm even when your world seems to be falling apart.

WHY WOULD A GOOD GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

In our world of pain, where is God? If He is good and compassionate, why is life often so tragic? Has He lost control? Or, if He is in control, what is He trying to do to me and to others?

Some people have chosen to deny God's existence because they cannot imagine a God who would allow such misery. Some believe that God exists, but they want nothing to do with Him because they don't think He could be good. Others have settled for a belief in a kindly God who loves us but has lost control of a rebellious planet. Still others cling tenaciously to a belief in an all-wise, all-powerful, loving God who somehow uses evil for good.

As we search the Bible, we discover that it paints a picture of a God who can do anything He chooses to do. Sometimes He has acted in mercy and performed miracles in behalf of His people. At other times, though, He has chosen to do nothing to stop tragedy. He is supposed to be intimately involved in our lives, yet at times He seems deaf to our cries for help. In the Bible, He assures us that He controls all that happens, but He sometimes lets us be the targets of evil people, bad genes, dangerous viruses, or natural disasters.

If you're like me, you long for some way to put together an answer to this puzzling issue of suffering. I believe that God has given us enough pieces of the puzzle to help us trust Him even when we don't have all the information we would like. In this brief

study we will see that the basic answers of the Bible are that our good God allows pain and suffering in our world to alert us to the problem of sin, to direct us to respond to Him in faith and hope, to shape us to be more like Christ, and to unite us so that we will help each other.

WHY SUFFERING?



TO ALERT US

Imagine a world without pain. What would it be like? At first the idea may sound appealing. No more headaches. No more backaches. No more upset stomachs. No more throbbing sensations when the hammer misses the mark

and lands on your thumb. No more sore throats. But there would also be no more sensation to alert you of a broken bone or tearing ligaments. No alarm to let you know that an ulcer is eating a hole in your stomach. No discomfort to warn of a cancerous tumor that is gathering forces for a takeover of your body. No angina to let you know that the blood vessels to your heart are clogging up. No pain to signal a ruptured appendix.

As much as we may abhor pain, we have to admit that it often serves a good purpose. It warns us when something goes wrong. The cause of the misery, rather than the agony itself, is the real problem. Pain is merely a symptom, a siren or bell that sounds when a part of the body is endangered or under attack.

In this section we will

see how pain could be God's way to alert us that:

1. Something's wrong with the world.
2. Something's wrong with God's creatures.
3. Something's wrong with me.

Any one of these problems could be the reason for the pain in our lives. Let's look at each possible diagnosis.

I. Something's Wrong With The World. The sorry condition of our planet indicates that something has gone terribly wrong. The suffering we experience and the distress we sense in others indicate that suffering does not discriminate on the basis of race, social status, religion, or even morality. It can seem cruel, random, purposeless, grotesque, and wildly out of control. Bad things happen to people who try to be good, and good things happen to people who enjoy being bad.

The seeming unfairness of it all has struck close to each of us. I remember watching my grandmother as she was dying of cancer. Grandma and Grandpa Blohm moved in with our family. My mother, a registered nurse, took care of her during her final months. Mom administered the pain killer. Grandpa desperately wanted her to be healed. Then the day came when the hearse pulled up and took away her frail, wasted body. I knew she was in heaven, but it still hurt. I hated cancer—I still do.

As I sit here thinking of all the suffering that my friends, co-workers, family, neighbors, and church family have experienced, I can hardly believe the length of the list—and my list is incomplete. So often these people have suffered through no apparent fault of their own. An accident, a birth defect, a genetic

disorder, a miscarriage, an abusive parent, chronic pain, a rebellious child, a severe illness, random disease, the death of a spouse or a child, a broken relationship, a natural disaster. It just doesn't seem fair. From time to time I'm tempted to give in to frustration.

“The Bible traces the entrance of suffering and evil into the world to a grand but terrible quality of human beings—freedom.”
—Philip Yancey

How do we resolve this? How do we live with the cold facts of life without denying reality or being overcome with despair? Couldn't God have created a world where nothing would

ever go wrong? Couldn't He have made a world where people would never have the ability to make a bad choice or ever hurt another person? Couldn't He have made a world where mosquitos, weeds, and cancer would never exist. He could have—but He didn't.

The great gift of human freedom that He has given to us, the ability to choose, carries with it the risk of making wrong choices.

If you could choose between being a free-thinking creature in a world where bad choices produce suffering, or being a robot in a world without pain, what would you decide? What kind of being would bring more honor to God? What kind of creature would love Him more?

We could have been created to be like the cute battery-operated dolls that say “I love you” when hugged. But God had other

plans. He took a “risk” to create beings who could do the unthinkable— rebel against their Creator.

What happened in paradise? Temptation, bad choices, and tragic consequences destroyed the tranquility of Adam and Eve’s existence.

Genesis 2 and 3 detail how Satan tested their love for the Lord—and they failed. In biblical terms, that failure is called sin. And just as the AIDS virus infects a body, breaks down the body’s immune system, and leads to death, so also sin spreads as a deadly infection that passes from one generation to the next. Each new generation inherits the effects of sin and the desire to sin (Rom. 1:18-32; 5:12,15,18).

Not only did the entrance of sin into the world have devastating effects on the nature of human beings, but sin also brought about

immediate and continual judgment from God. Genesis 3 relates how physical and spiritual death became a part of human existence (vv.3,19), childbirth became painful (v.16), the ground was cursed with weeds that would make man’s work very difficult (vv.17-19),

***“God whispers
to us in our
pleasures, speaks
in our conscience,
but shouts in our
pain; it is His
megaphone
to rouse
a deaf world.”***

—C. S. Lewis

and Adam and Eve were evicted from the special Garden where they had enjoyed intimate fellowship with God (vv.23-24).

In the New Testament,

the apostle Paul described the whole creation of God as groaning and eagerly anticipating the time when it will be freed from the curse of decay and be remade, free from the effects of sin (Rom. 8:19-22).

Disease, disaster, and corruption are symptoms of a deeper problem—the human race has rebelled against the Creator. Every sorrow, grief, and agony are vivid reminders of our human predicament. Like a huge neon sign, the reality of suffering screams the message that the world is not the way God created it to be.

Therefore, the first and most basic answer to the problem of the existence of suffering is that it is the direct result of sin's entrance into the world. Pain alerts us that a spiritual disease is wracking our planet. Many times our troubles may be merely the side-effects of

living in a fallen world, through no direct fault of our own.

2. Something's Wrong With God's Creatures. We can be targets of cruel acts from other people or from Satan's rebel army. Both fallen human beings and fallen spirit beings (angels who have rebelled) have the capacity to make decisions that damage themselves and others.

Suffering can be caused by people. As free (and sin-infected) creatures, people have made and will continue to make many bad choices in life. These bad choices often affect other people.

For example, one of Adam's sons, Cain, made a choice to kill his brother Abel (Gen. 4:7-8). Lamech boasted about his violence (vv.23-24). Sarai mistreated Hagar (Gen. 16:1-6). Laban swindled his nephew Jacob (Gen. 29:15-30). Joseph's

brothers sold him into slavery (Gen. 37:12-36), and then Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape and had him thrown into prison (Gen. 39). Pharaoh cruelly mistreated the Jewish slaves in Egypt (Ex. 1). King Herod slaughtered all the babies who lived in and around Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus (Mt. 2:16-18).

The hurt that others inflict on us may be due to selfishness on their part. Or we may be the target of persecution because of our faith in Christ. Throughout history, people who have identified with the Lord have suffered at the hands of those who rebelled against God.

Before his conversion, Saul was a rabid anti-Christian who did all he could to make life miserable for believers—even working to have them put to death (Acts 7:54–8:3). But after his

dramatic turn to the Lord Jesus, he bravely endured all types of persecution as he boldly proclaimed the gospel message (2 Cor. 4:7-12; 6:1-10). He could even say that the suffering he endured helped to make him more like Christ (Phil. 3:10).

Suffering can also be caused by Satan and demons. Job's life story is a vivid example of how a good person can suffer incredible tragedy because of satanic attack. God allowed Satan to take away Job's possessions, his family, and his health (Job 1–2).

I cringed even as I wrote the preceding sentence. Somehow, and for His reasons, God allowed Satan to devastate Job's life. We may tend to compare this to a father who allows the neighborhood bully to beat up his children just to see if they would still love Dad afterward. But, as Job

came to realize, that's not a fair assessment when speaking about our wise and loving God.

We know, though Job did not, that his life was a test case, a living testimonial to the trustworthiness of God. Job illustrated that a person can trust God and maintain integrity even when life falls apart (for whatever reason), because God is worth trusting. In the end, Job

“Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”

—Job 2:10 (NIV)

learned that even though he didn't understand what God was up to, he had plenty of reason to believe that God was not being unjust, cruel, sadistic, or unfair by allowing his life to be ripped apart (Job 42).

The apostle Paul experienced a physical

problem that he attributed to Satan. He called it a “thorn in the flesh . . . , a messenger of Satan to buffet me” (2 Cor. 12:7). Paul prayed to be freed from the problem, but God didn't give him what he asked for. Instead, the Lord helped him to see how this difficulty could serve a good purpose. It made Paul humbly dependent on the Lord and put him in a position to experience His grace (vv.8-10).

Although most cases of sickness cannot be directly tied to Satan's work, the gospel accounts do record a few examples of suffering attributed to Satan, including a blind and mute man (Mt. 12:22) and a boy who suffered seizures (17:14-18).

3. Something's Wrong With Me. Too often when something goes wrong in our lives we immediately jump to the conclusion that God

is whipping us because of some sin we've committed. That's not necessarily true. As I indicated in the previous points, much of the suffering that comes into our lives is because we live in a broken world inhabited by broken people and rebellious spirit beings.

Job's friends mistakenly thought that he was suffering because of sin in his life (Job 4:7,8; 8:1-6; 22:4,5; 36:17). Jesus' own disciples jumped to the wrong conclusion when they saw a blind man. They wondered if the man's sight problem was due to his personal sin or because of something his parents had done (Jn. 9:1-2). Jesus told them that the man's physical problem was not related to his personal sin or the sin of his parents (v.3).

With these cautions in mind, we need to deal with the hard truth that some suffering does come as the

direct consequence of sin—either as corrective discipline from God for those He loves, or punitive action by God upon rebels in His universe.

Correction. If you and I have placed our trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are children of God. As such, we are part of a family headed by a loving Father who trains and corrects us. He's not an abusive, sadistic parent who dishes out severe beatings because He gets some twisted pleasure out of it.

Hebrews 12 states:
My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. . . . Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not

much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness (vv.5-6,9-10).

And to the church in Laodicea, Jesus said, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

King David knew what it was like to experience the tough love of the Lord. After his adultery with Bathsheba and his conniving to ensure that her husband would be killed in battle, David did not repent until the prophet Nathan confronted him. Psalm 51 recounts David’s struggle with guilt and his cry for forgiveness. In another psalm, David reflected on the effects of covering up and ignoring sin. He wrote, “When I kept

silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me” (Ps. 32:3-4).

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens.”
—Hebrews 12:5-6

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, the apostle Paul warned believers that treating the things of the Lord lightly—partaking of the Lord’s Supper without taking it seriously—will bring discipline. Paul explained that this discipline of the Lord was purposeful. He said, “When we are judged,

we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world” (v.32).

Most of us can understand the principle that whom God loves He disciplines. We would expect a loving Father to correct us and call us to renew our obedience to Him.

Judgment. God also acts to deal with stubborn unbelievers who persist in doing evil. A person who has not received God’s gift of salvation can expect to receive God’s wrath at a future day of judgment and faces the danger of harsh judgment now if God so chooses.

The Lord brought the flood to destroy decadent humanity (Gen. 6). He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18–19). He sent plagues on the Egyptians (Ex. 7–12). He commanded

Israel to completely destroy the pagans who inhabited the Promised Land (Dt. 7:1-3). He struck down the arrogant King Herod of New Testament times (Acts 12:19-23). And at the future day of judgment, God will deal out perfect justice to all those who reject His love and rule (2 Pet. 2:4-9).

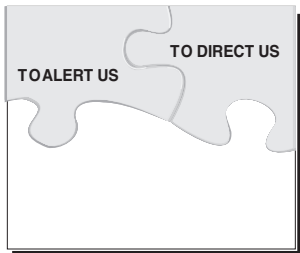
In the here-and-now, however, we face inequities. For His all-wise reasons, God has chosen to delay His perfect justice. The psalm writer Asaph struggled with this apparent unfairness of life. He wrote about the wicked who were getting away with their evil deeds, even prospering, while many of the righteous were having troubles (Ps. 73). Concerning the prosperity of the wicked he said, “When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood

their end” (vv.16-17). By thinking of the sovereign Lord of the universe, Asaph was able to get things back into perspective.

When we struggle with the reality that wicked people are literally “getting away with murder” and all sorts of immorality, we need to remember that “the Lord is . . . longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

The first part of the answer, then, to the problem of suffering is that God uses it to alert us to serious problems. Pain sounds the alarm that indicates something is wrong with the world, with humanity at large, and with you and me. But as we will see in the next section, God not only signals the problems, He also uses troubles to encourage us to find the solutions—in Him.

WHY SUFFERING?



TO DIRECT US

When a person turns away from God, suffering often gets the blame. But strangely, suffering also gets the credit when people describe what redirected their lives, helped them to see life more clearly, and caused their relationship with God to grow closer. How can similar circumstances have such radically different effects on people? The reasons lie deep within the people, not the events.

A well-known and outspoken media leader publicly denounced Christianity as “a religion

for losers.” But he has not always felt that way. As a young man he had Bible training, including a Christian prep school. When joking about the heavy indoctrination he received, he said, “I think I was saved seven or eight times.” But then a painful experience changed his outlook on life and God. His younger sister became very ill. He prayed for her healing, but after 5 years of suffering she died. He became disillusioned with a God who would allow that to happen. He said, “I began to lose my faith, and the more I lost it the better I felt.”

What makes the difference between someone like him and a person like Joni Eareckson Tada? In *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Philip Yancey describes the gradual transformation that took place in Joni’s attitude

in the years after she was paralyzed in a diving accident.

“At first, Joni found it impossible to reconcile her condition with her belief in a loving God. . . . The turning to God was very gradual. A melting in her attitude from bitterness to trust dragged out over three years of tears and violent questioning” (pp.133-134).

A turning point came the evening that a close friend, Cindy, told her, “Joni, you aren’t the only one. Jesus knows how you feel—why, He was paralyzed too.” Cindy described how Jesus was fastened to the cross, paralyzed by the nails.

Yancey then observed, “The thought intrigued Joni and, for a moment, took her mind off her own pain. It had never occurred to her that God might have felt the same piercing sensations that now racked her body. The realization was

profoundly comforting” (p.134).

Instead of continuing to search for why the devastating accident occurred, Joni has been forced to depend more heavily on the Lord and to look at life from a long-range perspective.

Yancey further says about Joni, “She wrestled with God, yes, but she did not turn away from Him. . . . Joni now calls her accident a ‘glorious intruder,’ and claims it was the best thing that ever happened to her. God used it to get her attention and direct her thoughts toward Him” (pp.137-138).

This principle that suffering can produce healthy dependence on God is taught by the apostle Paul in one of his letters to the church in Corinth. He wrote:

We do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our

trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

A similar idea can be found in Paul’s comments about his physical troubles.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

—2 Corinthians 12:9

The Lord told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Then Paul added, “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in

distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (v.10).

Suffering has a way of showing how limited and weak our own resources really are. It forces us to rethink priorities, values, goals, dreams, pleasures, the source of real strength, and our relationships with people and with God. It has a way of directing our attention to spiritual realities—if we don't turn from God instead.

Suffering forces us to evaluate the direction of our lives. We can choose to despair by focusing on our present problems, or we can choose to hope by recognizing God's long-range plan for us (Rom. 5:5; 8:18-28; Heb. 11).

Of all the passages in the Bible, Hebrews 11 most reassures me that whether life is grand or grotesque, my response needs to be one of faith in the wisdom,

power, and control of God. No matter what, I have good reason to trust Him—just as the great men and women of old hoped in Him.

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

—Hebrews 11:1

For example, Hebrews 11 reminds us about Noah, a man who spent 120 years waiting for God to fulfill His promise of a devastating flood (Gen. 6:3). Abraham waited many agonizing years before the child whom God had promised was finally born. Joseph was sold into slavery and wrongfully imprisoned, but he finally saw how God used all the apparent evil in his life for a good purpose (Gen. 50:20). Moses waited until he was 80 years old before God

used him to help deliver the Jews from Egypt. And even then, leading those faith-deficient people was a struggle (see Exodus).

Hebrews 11 lists people like Gideon, Samson, David, and Samuel, who saw great victories as they lived for the Lord. But in the middle of verse 35 the mood changes. Suddenly we are face-to-face with people who had to endure incredible suffering—people who died without seeing why God allowed them to undergo such tragedies. These individuals were tortured, jeered, flogged, stoned, cut in half, stabbed, mistreated, and forced to live as outcasts (vv.35-38). God had planned that only in the long-range view of eternity would their faithfulness during hardship be rewarded (vv.39-40).

Pain forces us to look beyond our immediate circumstances. Suffering drives us to ask the big

questions of “Why am I here?” and “What’s the purpose of my life?” By pursuing those questions and finding the answers in the God of the Bible, we will find the stability we need to endure even the worst that life can inflict because we know that this present life is not all there is. When we understand that a sovereign God is standing over all of human history and weaving it all together in a beautiful tapestry that will ultimately glorify Him, then we can see things in better perspective.

In Romans 8:18 the apostle Paul wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” Paul was not making light of our troubles, but he was telling believers to see our present troubles in light of all eternity. Our problems may indeed be heavy, even crushing.

But Paul said that when compared to the incredible glories that await those who love God, even the darkest and most burdensome circumstances of life will fade by comparison.

We need to take time to look at one more example, perhaps the most significant illustration we could consider. The day that Christ hung on the cross is now referred to as Good Friday. At the time, it was anything but a good day. It was a day of intense suffering, anguish, darkness, and gloom. It was a day when Jesus felt all alone. It was a day when God seemed absent and silent, when evil seemed to triumph, and hopes were dashed. But then came Sunday. Jesus rose from the grave. That awesome event put Friday in a different light. The resurrection gave a whole new meaning to what happened on the

cross. Instead of being a time of defeat, it became a day of triumph.

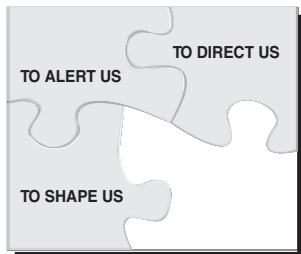
We too can look ahead. We can endure our dark “Fridays” and be able to look on them as “good” because we serve the God of Sunday.

“Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.”

—Psalm 146:5-6

So when troubles strike, and they will, remember this: God uses such situations to direct us to Him and to the long-range view of life. He calls for us to trust, to hope, to wait.

WHY SUFFERING?



TO SHAPE US

Athletic coaches like to use the phrase “No pain, no gain.” As a high school track star (Okay, maybe I wasn’t that great, but I tried hard!), I heard coaches remind us again and again that the tough practice sessions would pay off when we began to compete. They were right. Oh, we didn’t always win, but our hard work did produce obvious benefits.

I learned a lot about myself during those years. And now I’m learning even more as I discipline myself to jog daily. Many days I would just as soon forget it.

I don’t want to have to feel the pain of stretching exercises. I would rather not push my body’s “radiator system” to the extreme. I would just as soon not have to battle fatigue as I go up the hills. So why do I do it? The gain *is* worth the pain. My blood pressure and pulse rate are kept low, my middle isn’t expanding, and I feel more alert and healthy.

Exercise may have obvious benefits, but what about pain that we don’t choose? What about illness, disease, accidents, and emotional agony? What kind of gain can come from those? Is the gain *really* worth the pain?

Let’s consider what a fellow-sufferer had to say in Romans 5:3-4. The apostle Paul wrote, “We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

Paul introduced his statement about the benefits of suffering by saying “we also glory in tribulations.” How could he say that we should rejoice or be happy that we are having to endure some painful tragedy? He certainly was not telling us to celebrate our troubles; rather, he was telling us to rejoice about what God can and will do for us and for His glory *through* our trials. Paul’s statement encourages us to celebrate the end product, not the painful process itself. He did not mean we are to get some sort of morbid joy out of death, cancer, deformity, financial reversals, a broken relationship, or a tragic accident. All these things are awful—a dark reminder that we live in a world that has been corrupted by the curse of sin’s effects.

The apostle James also wrote about how we should rejoice in the end result of

our troubles. He said, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (1:2-4).

As we combine the truths of these two passages, we can see how the good and praiseworthy products of suffering are patient perseverance, maturity of character, and hope. God can use the hardships of life to shape us to be more mature in the faith, more godly, more Christlike.

When we trust Christ as our Savior, the Lord does not suddenly zap us so that we become perfect people. What He does is remove sin’s penalty and set us on the road that leads to heaven. Life then becomes a time of character development as we learn

more about God and how we are to please Him. Suffering has a way of dramatically forcing us to deal with the deeper issues of life. By doing so, we grow stronger and gain maturity.

“Let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”
—James 1:4

My grandfather, Dr. M. R. De Haan, spoke about the shaping process of our lives in his book *Broken Things*. He wrote:

The greatest sermons I have ever heard were not preached from pulpits but from sickbeds. The greatest, deepest truths of God’s Word have often been revealed not by those who preached as a

result of their seminary preparation and education, but by those humble souls who have gone through the seminary of affliction and have learned experientially the deep things of the ways of God.

The most cheerful people I have met, with few exceptions, have been those who had the least sunshine and the most pain and suffering in their lives. The most grateful people I have met were not those who traveled a pathway of roses all their lives through, but those who were confined, because of circumstances, to their homes, often to their beds, and had learned to depend upon God as only such Christians know how to do. The grippers are usually, I have observed, those who enjoy excellent health. The complainers

are those who have the least to complain about, and those dear saints of God who have refreshed my heart again and again as they preached from sickbed-pulpits have been the men and women who have been the most cheerful and the most grateful for the blessings of almighty God (pp.43-44).

How have you responded to the difficulties of life? Have you become bitter or better? Have you grown in your faith or turned away from God? Have you become more Christlike in your character? Have you let it shape you and conform you to the image of God's Son?

How Do All Things Work Together For Good?

Perhaps the most quoted part of the Bible during a time of pain and suffering is Romans 8:28. It reads, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who

are the called according to His purpose." This verse has often been misunderstood and perhaps misused, but its truth can bring a great deal of comfort.

The context of Romans 8 emphasizes what God is doing for us. The indwelling Holy Spirit gives us spiritual life (v.9), reassures us that we are children of God (v.16), and helps us with our prayers during our times of weakness (vv.26-27). Romans 8 also puts our sufferings in the bigger picture of what God is doing—that God is working out His plan of redemption (vv.18-26). Verses 28 through 39 reassure us of God's love for us, that no one or no thing could ever keep God from accomplishing what He wants to do, and that nothing could ever separate us from His love.

Properly viewed in the context of Romans 8, then,

verse 28 powerfully reassures us that God is working on behalf of all who have trusted His Son as Savior. The verse does not promise that we will understand all the events of life or that after a time of testing we will be blessed with good things in this life. But it does reassure us that God is working out His good plan through our lives. He is shaping us and our circumstances to bring glory to Himself.

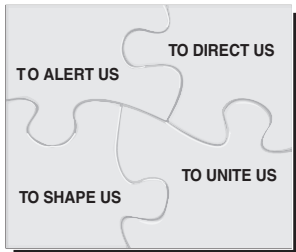
Author Ron Lee Davis writes in his book *Becoming A Whole Person In A Broken World*, “The good news is not that God will make our circumstances come out the way we like, but that God can weave even our disappointments and disasters into His eternal plan. The evil that happens to us can be transformed into God’s good. Romans 8:28 is God’s guarantee that if we love God, our lives

can be used to achieve His purposes and further His kingdom” (p.122).

“But,” you may ask, “how can God be in control when life seems so out of control? How can He be working things together for His glory and our ultimate good?” In his book *Why Us?* Warren Wiersbe states that God “proves His sovereignty, not by intervening constantly and preventing these events, but by ruling and overruling them so that even tragedies end up accomplishing His ultimate purposes” (p.136).

As the sovereign Lord of the universe, God is using all of life to develop our maturity and Christlikeness, and to further His eternal plan. In order to accomplish those purposes, however, God wants to use us to help others, and He wants other people to help us. That’s what the next section is all about.

WHY SUFFERING?



TO UNITE US

Pain and suffering seem to have a special ability to show us how much we need each other. Our struggles remind us how fragile we really are. Even the weakness of others can bolster us when our own strength is sapped.

This truth becomes very real to me each time I meet with a small group of church friends for prayer and fellowship. During those regular times together, we have shared one another's burdens for a sick child, the loss of a job, workplace tensions, a rebellious child, a miscarriage, hostility

among family members, depression, everyday stresses, an unsaved family member, tough decisions, neighborhood crime, battles with sin, and much more. Many times at the end of those meetings I have praised the Lord for the encouragement we have given to one another. We have been drawn closer and we have been strengthened as we have faced the struggles of life together.

These kinds of personal experiences in light of Scripture remind me of two key truths:

1. Suffering helps us to see our need of other believers.
2. Suffering helps us to meet the needs of others as we allow Christ to live through us.

Let's take a look at each of these ways God uses pain and suffering for the purpose of uniting us with other believers in Christ.

1. Suffering Helps Us To See Our Need Of Other Believers. In describing the unity of all believers in Christ, the apostle Paul used the analogy of a human body (1 Cor. 12). He said that we one another to function properly. Paul described the situation this way: “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (vv.26-27).

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul spoke of Christ, “from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16).

When we begin to recognize what other

believers have to offer us, then we will realize how much can be gained by reaching out for their help when we are going through a time of struggle. When troubles seem to knock out our strength, we can lean on other believers to help us find new strength in the Lord’s power.

2. Suffering Helps Us To Meet The Needs Of Others As We Allow Christ To Live Through Us. In 2 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (vv.3-4).

As we saw in the previous section, we need one another because we

have something valuable to offer. We have spiritual insights and wisdom that we have learned as we have undergone trials of all sorts. We know the value of the personal presence of a loving person. When we experience the comfort of God during a troubling situation, we then have an ability to identify with those people who undergo similar situations.

While preparing to write this booklet, I read about the experiences of people who have suffered greatly, and I spoke with others who were familiar with pain. I searched to find out who helped them most in their time of trouble. The answer again and again has been this: another person who had undergone a similar experience. That person can empathize more fully, and his or her comments reflect

understanding that comes by experience. To someone who is burdened down, it often sounds shallow and patronizing to hear another say, "I understand what you are going through," unless that person has gone through a similar situation.

Even though the best comforters are those who have undergone similar situations and have grown spiritually stronger through them, that does not mean that the rest of us are off the hook. All of us have a responsibility to do all we can to empathize, to try to understand, to try to comfort. Galatians 6:2 tells us, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." And Romans 12:15 states, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

Dr. Paul Brand, an expert on the disease of leprosy, wrote,

When suffering strikes, those of us standing close by are flattened by the shock. We fight back the lumps in our throats, march resolutely to the hospital for visits, mumble a few cheerful words, perhaps look up articles on what to say to the grieving.

But when I ask patients and their families, “Who helped you in your suffering?” I hear a strange, imprecise answer. The person described rarely has smooth answers and a winsome, effervescent personality. It is someone quiet, understanding, who listens more than talks, who does not judge or even offer much advice. “A sense of presence.” “Someone there when I needed him.” A hand to hold, an understanding, bewildered hug. A shared lump in the throat

(Fearfully And Wonderfully Made, pp.203-204).

It’s clear—God made us to be dependent on one another. We have much to offer those in pain, and others have much to offer

“In short, there is no magic cure for a person in pain. Mainly, such a person needs love, for love instinctively detects what is needed.”

—Philip Yancey

us as we endure troubles. As we develop that unity, we will experience greater comfort when we recognize that God uses suffering to alert us to the problems of sin, He uses difficulty to direct us to Him, and He can even use problems to make us more like Christ.

HOW CAN WE HELP?

Right now you may be overwhelmed by pain. The thought of trying to help someone else may seem impossible. At some point along the way, though, as you receive God's comfort, you will be ready to give comfort (2 Cor. 1). In fact, reaching out to help others may be an important part of the process of your own emotional healing.

Or maybe you have read this booklet with the hope that you will be better able to help a hurting friend or loved one. The suggestions in this section are designed for you as well.

Helping others is risky. Our help may not always be welcomed. We may sometimes say the wrong things. But try to help we must. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-

37) reminds us that we are responsible to help the hurting people we encounter.

Here are some suggestions:

- Don't wait for someone else to act first.
- Be physically present with them if possible and touch their hand or give an appropriate hug.
- Focus on their needs and not on your own discomfort with not having adequate answers.
- Allow them to express their feelings. Don't condemn their emotions.
- Learn about their problem.
- Don't pretend that you never struggle.
- Keep your words brief.
- Avoid saying, "You shouldn't feel that way," or, "You know what you should do."
- Assure them of your prayers.
- Pray! Ask God to help you and them.

- Keep in touch.
- Help them dispel false guilt by assuring them that suffering and sin are not inseparable twins.
- Help them find forgiveness in Christ if they are suffering due to sin, or if they become aware of some sin as they reflect on their lives.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”
—Romans 12:15

- Encourage them to recall God’s faithfulness in times past.
- Focus on Christ’s example and help.
- Remind them that God loves us and cares for us and that He is in control.
- Encourage them to take

one day at a time.

- Encourage them to reach out for the help they need (friends, family, pastor).
- Help them to realize that coping with troubles takes time.
- Remind them of God’s shepherding love (Ps. 23).
- Remind them of God’s control over the universe, both the big and small events of life.
- Don’t ignore their problem.
- Don’t be artificial in trying to “cheer them up.” Be genuine. Be the friend you were to them before trouble hit.
- Show them the love you would like other people to show you if you were in their situation.
- Be a good listener.
- Acknowledge how much they hurt.
- Give them time to heal. Don’t rush the process.

BETTER THAN ANSWERS

We cry out for complete answers. God offers Himself instead. And that's enough. If we know that we can trust Him, we don't need full explanations. It's enough to know that our pain and suffering are not meaningless. It's enough to know that God still rules the universe and that He really does care about us as individuals.

The greatest evidence of God's concern for us can be found by looking at Jesus Christ. God loved our suffering world so much that He sent His Son to agonize and die for us, to free us from being sentenced to eternal sorrow (Jn. 3:16-18). Because of Jesus, we can avoid the worst of all pain, the pain of separation from God—

forever. And because of Christ, we can endure even the worst of tragedies now because of the strength He puts within us and the hope He sets before us.

*We cry out
for complete
answers.
God offers
Himself instead.*

The first step in coping realistically with the problem of suffering is to recognize its roots in the universal problem of sin. Have you recognized how much Jesus suffered on the cross for you to free you from the penalty of sin? Put your trust in Him. Receive His free gift of forgiveness. Only in Him will you find a lasting solution to the problem of pain in your life and in the world.