

Suffering and a God of Love

By Dr. Rhiannon Lloyd

The Effects of Suffering on Faith

Questions may arise in our hearts: "Does God really love me? Then why does He let bad things happen to me?" We may sing songs about God being loving and good and kind, but we seem to be experiencing something different. Though our lips are singing, our hearts may be silent, or even angry. We are, however, afraid to express our doubts in case we are condemned, rebuked and told to repent.

What are the effects of having unvoiced doubts in our heart?

- Loneliness
- Struggling in the heart
- Wearing a mask – a lot of pain underneath with no means of expression.

People can feel differently in their hearts to what they communicate outwardly. Because these feelings are uncomfortable, we may even deny to ourselves that this is what we really feel. But Ps 51:6 tells us that God desires truth in the inmost parts.

Four Questions That Could Be in the Hearts of Many People Today:

- I. Is God just? If so, why is there so much injustice in the world?
- II. Is every thing that happens in the world the will of God?
- III. If God is all-powerful, why doesn't He stop evil people from doing evil things?
- IV. If God is a God of love, why does He let innocent people suffer?

I. IS GOD JUST? IF SO, WHY IS THERE SO MUCH INJUSTICE IN THE WORLD?

God is a just God who hates injustice (see Appendix for Scripture references). It's life that is unjust.

To understand how it can be that God is just while life is unjust, we need to answer the next question.

II. IS EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS IN THE WORLD THE WILL OF GOD?

A. Freedom of Choice/Free Will

When God created man, one of the main gifts He gave man was freedom of choice. This was an important part of making us in the image of God. We have dignity, value, etc. through freedom of choice. Dt 30:15-19 says God wants us to choose life.

Why did God take the risk of giving freedom of choice? If we were like string puppets and could never do anything wrong, we'd never sin or wound one another. We could only do what the "master" of our strings allowed us to do. But what can string puppets not do?

Free will equals freedom to love

God wanted people He could love and who would love Him in return. Without freedom of choice, there is no love. Machines can't love. In order for there to be such a thing as love, God had to take the risk of giving us freedom of choice, even if that meant we would then make the wrong choices. If we were all string puppets, there would be no love and no value to our lives.

Where does Satan come in?

Can we say, "Satan made me do it?" If we say it was all Satan's work, we become Satan's string puppets.

Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed Satan. God didn't respond with, "Oh, it's okay Adam, it was really Satan's fault!" God said, "because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree... cursed is the ground because of you" (Ge 3:17).

Man always wants to shift the blame somewhere else. Satan deceives and tempts, but it is man who is responsible for his own choices.

Each person is tempted when he is carried away by his own lusts (Jas 1:14-15).

No temptation is too great to have victory over us. With temptation God always gives a means of escape. God will not let Satan tempt us beyond what we are able to bear (1 Co 10:13).

God knows how to rescue the godly from temptation (2Pe 2:9; Rev 3:10).

Everything is not the will of God

If we say everything that happens is the will of God, God becomes responsible for sin. Sin is not the will of God. There is a difference between God willing something and God allowing something to happen.

Jesus told us to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10). There is no injustice in heaven, no killing, no suffering. God's will is done there. Jesus wants His will to be done on earth also. If He's asking us to pray for God's will to be done, this means that everything that is happening can't be God's will. When will God's will be done? The prayer says, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done". When people submit to God's Kingship, they do His will. When they reject Him as King they don't do His will. Rather they follow their own rebellious hearts.

BUT – God is stronger than Satan and He has the last word! His sovereign power transcends all Satan's scheming and He turns everything to work for the good of those who love Him. (Ro 8:28) This is NOT a God who has lost control of His universe, but a God whose ultimate purposes are more wonderful than we can ever imagine

B. How God Feels When We Make the Wrong Choices

The pain in God's heart

Genesis 6:5-6 shows the reaction in God's heart when we make wrong choices. His heart is filled with PAIN. God saw that giving man freedom of choice is too costly.

"I'm sorry I made man. Let's flood the earth and stop creation". But then He said, "Look at Noah. I like Noah! I want heaven to be full of Noah's. If I stop creation, I won't be able to enjoy relationships with people like Noah."

Scripture shows God's heart is torn. God makes a decision to start all over again through one good man - Noah - but this time if man does evil, He won't flood the earth again. He makes a commitment to man not to bring the world to an end prematurely. His rainbow is in the sky as a sign of his commitment. He'll let the time of man run until the final day when the work of redemption is complete and the new heaven and new earth are ready, whatever the cost - even the cost of His Son (Ge 6:7-8; 9:11-16). (Note – there must be incredible glory ahead of us to make God decide to pay the cost of letting creation continue, I believe that one day, God and man will look back and agree that it was worth it all!)

All through Scripture we hear the cry of God's heart.

Ps 81:10-14 If only they would listen! Then they could experience blessing.
Isa 48:17-18 If only you had paid attention! Then your peace would be like a river.

See also: 1 Sa 15:10-11; Isa 42:14; Jer 48:30-32

What God hates

God takes no pleasure in any kind of death (Eze 18:32; 33:11). For people to say that any injustice in a nation is the will of God is not in line with the character of God. He hates all forms of injustice, so therefore can never be the author of injustice (Pr 6:16-19; Zec 8:16-17).

God cannot be tempted by evil nor does He tempt anyone. Every good and perfect gift is from above (Jas 1:13-17). God is holy, there is no darkness in Him (1Jn 1:5; Un 2:16). See also: ps 5:6; 50:16-21 ; Jas 4:4

God suffers with His creation

In all our suffering, God also suffers (Isa 63:9). Traumatized people need to know this--that God hated what was happening and it wasn't His will. God took no pleasure in anyone's suffering, rather God is with us in the middle of our suffering (ps 139:7-8; Isa 43:2)

C. Some Objections to These Truths

"God knows it's going to happen"

People say it must be God's will because He knew it would happen. The fact that God knows everything doesn't mean it is His will. The place we see the heart of God most clearly is in Jesus.

Lk 13:34 Jesus was looking over the city saying, "How often I have longed to gather your children together... but you were not willing." God's will was to love and protect them.

Lk 19:41-44 Jesus, weeping, said, "If you, even you, had known what would bring you peace, but it is hidden from your eyes." Who hides things from our eyes? The god of his world - Satan (2Co 4:4).

Jesus had told them what would bring them peace - to love their enemies and bless those who persecute them (Mt 5:44). But they rejected this message and prepared for war. Jesus knew that their choices would have tragic consequences. History says in the year 70 AD there was an insurrection against Rome. The Jews tried to fight their enemy (Rome) but lost. Jerusalem was flattened; there was great suffering; innocent children were slaughtered. And God wept!

Whenever leaders in a nation don't listen to the voice of God, many innocent people suffer. This isn't the will of God - it breaks His heart to see suffering because of unrighteous leadership. Leaders of a nation have an awesome responsibility to protect their citizens.

"But God allows it to happen!"

Because God created man with a freedom of choice, He must allow the consequences to occur. God gives us over to the consequences of our choices so we can learn from our errors. He hopes by allowing us to experience these consequences, we will turn back to Him (Ro 1:18-32). God keeps giving people over to their own choices.

Sadly, it's not only the consequences of our own sin that we suffer, but also the consequences of the sins of others. God cannot intervene to prevent the sin of the guilty from having consequences for innocent people. This is a price we have to pay for living in a fallen world. But God can redeem the suffering and use it for our good (see later).

"But some Scriptures are hard to understand!"

Consider the Islamic concept of 'in-shallah'. In Islam, Allah sends good and evil and everything is Allah's will. This appears to absolve man of all responsibility for his own actions.

Some verses in the Old Testament seem to agree with this view. How can we understand these Scriptures?

Isa 45:7 says, "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things." How can darkness be created in a room? We can block out the light but can we create darkness while the light is still there? The only way to create darkness is by removing light. Darkness is an absence of light. God sent His light to the world but men loved the

darkness more than the light. When men don't want the light, God withdraws it, and darkness remains. Similarly He shows us the way to peace and blessing. But if we reject it, God withdraws His blessing. In this sense we can say God sends both, but one is the absence of the other when we refuse to follow the ways of God (La 3:38 is a similar Scripture.)

People often cite Pharaoh as an example of God being responsible for man's choices. "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Ex 7:3-4). Subsequent verses stress Pharaoh's responsibility in his decisions (Ex 7:14; 8:32't. As we go through the story of the plagues, the first instance of God hardening Pharaoh's heart comes in Ex 9:12 after Pharaoh had repeatedly refused to comply with God's request. Maybe the best way to understand Pharaoh's situation is that God confirms him in his own choices, and uses the situation to show His sovereign power over all the gods of Egypt

"But what about Job?"

Take another look at what is really happening in this Scripture. It was Satan's idea, not God's, for Job to suffer. God was boasting about Job (Job 1:8-9).

Satan said Job was following God only because he was being blessed. "I'll prove to you if the blessings are taken away, he'll no longer serve you."

What if God had said, "No, that must not be done!?" Satan would respond, "You're afraid I'm right because you know what I'm saying is true You know no one will follow You.' without a guarantee of blessings!"

Even though it hurt God, He had to allow it or else Satan's accusation would always stand against Him. No one on earth knew this accusation stood. So Job's friends said Job must have sinned even though Job protested. saying. "I'm a righteous man" His friends did not know what was happening in the heavenly realm.

In the end God did appear to Job, but even then God couldn't explain everything to him. God couldn't say, "Satan is tempting you, stand strong" It had to be Job's choice, without receiving explanation, to trust God. All God could say was, "Job, I'm God, the One who created everything. Will you trust me?"

The story of Job is a special situation. Job isn't a model for all believers. Job proved he loved God for God's own sake, Satan was silenced because of Job's victory

III. IF GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL WHY DOESN'T HE STOP EVIL PEOPLE FROM DOING EVIL THINGS?

When innocent people are murdered, many people are angry with God. saying, "God could have stopped people from killing. God should have done something!"

Illustration: Person attacking another. What could God do? He could:

- Prevent him from doing this. But where, then, is freedom of choice?
- Paralyse the person. But what if God paralysed every person about to sin?
- Strike the person dead before he kills. But then there would be no opportunity for that person to repent. (There will be a day of judgement, but it is not yet. This is still the day of grace. 2 Pe 3:9)
- Speak to someone else asking him to intervene, either by trying to prevent the killing or by providing a safe refuge for the victim.

Examples of God using other people :

Lk 10:30-37 Good Samaritan

Ex 2:4 Miriam watching over Moses

Est 4:14-16. Mordecai counselling Esther

Mk 12:31 "love your neighbour as yourself"

I believe God is always speaking to us, but what if His promptings are not obeyed?' There are tragic Scriptures showing God looking for someone to stand in the gap, for someone to help, but He finds no one (Ge 4:9; Isa 41:28; 59:15-16; Isa 63:5; Eze 22:30).

- Make provisions for a new heart. He has done this through the Cross but can't force anyone to receive a new heart.

Why does God intervene in some cases and not others?

Prayer is significant. When we pray we are giving God an invitation to come into the situation. When God's people pray, God can intervene (2Ch7:14).

In Genesis 1:28 He told us to subdue and have dominion over the world "The earth He has given to man" (ps 115:16). God will not force Himself into a situation, but He longs to be invited in through our prayers. He does not want to work independently of us, but with us. Prayer is our opportunity to learn how to rule with God. Most miracles in the gospels happened when people had faith and approached Jesus

But there were many times when people prayed and there was no miraculous intervention. This is hard to understand. But even in Scripture everyone was not delivered. In Acts 12:2-11 James is killed in prison but Peter is delivered from prison. Most of Hebrews 11 speaks of miraculous deliverance by faith. But from vs. 35b onwards we read of people who suffered terribly with no miraculous intervention. We cannot say they had less faith. Verse 39 says "These were all commended for their faith." There is still much mystery and many unanswered questions this side of heaven.

There is one thing we can be very sure of, that God did not love those who survived any more than those who did not survive. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the blood of His saints (Ps 72:14; 116:15). God will never let their deaths be wasted (Jn 12:24-26).

IV. IF GOD IS A GOD OF LOVE, WHY DOES HE LET INNOCENT PEOPLE SUFFER?

Should God protect every righteous person so that they don't suffer? No, we live in a fallen world where we have been told to expect suffering. It's only in Heaven that we will be free of all suffering (Rev 21:4).

Why does God allow suffering ?

- If Christians never suffer, how could they comfort others (2Co 1:3-4)?
- Suffering strengthens our character (ps 119 67, 71; Ro 5:3-5; Jas 1:2- 4: 1 Pe3:14-17; 4.12-14).
- Eternal glory far outweighs suffering (Ro 8:17-18; 2Co 4:16-18; 1Pe 1 6-9).

GOD CAN REDEEM SUFFERING

Look at Romans 8:28. This doesn't mean God plans everything but He can use everything to fulfill His good purposes. Jn 10:10 states that "the thief comes only to steal and kill", but Jesus says "I have come that they might have life and have it to the full." (Amplified version: "... have it in abundance, till it overflows.") Jesus wants to give us more than we lost in the first place: The wonderful victory for the Christian is that God does more than simply restore us. He can actually turn our tragedies around and redeem them so that we end up better off than if they had never happened. We cannot have our departed loved ones restored to us in this life, and we may not have material things restored, but in our hearts, we can be in a situation of gain. Instead we find the heavenly treasures mentioned above. These are the only things that have eternal consequences.

Lev 27:15,19, 27 gives us the principle of something's value being increased when it is bought back or redeemed This is how God redeems our tragedies – He increases their value to us as He does so !

It seems there is a wonderful pattern in all God's dealings with humanity :

Biblical examples:

- The physical creation was good, but then death came in. The new creation will be a spiritual one which is much better than the first.
- Naomi goes to Moab and there loses her husband and two sons. Later she returns to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law and gains Boaz, and a grandson who was one of the forefathers of Christ Himself (Book of Ruth).
- Dt 30:1-5 After being banished to exile for disobedience, the returning penitents have their fortunes restored, and end up being more prosperous and numerous than their fathers.

- Joel 2:23-27 After a time of famine and great loss, see the words that are used for the time of restoration: abundant, filled, overflow, plenty to eat until you are full, wonders, never again will my people be shamed.
- Php 3:7-8 Paul loses much but then gains "the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ."
- See also Isa 61:7 and Zec. 9:12.
- Where sin abounded, grace abounded even more. The amount of grace is not in proportion to the trespass (Ro 5:15, 20). Our final state is better than our first
- Jesus suffering is the greatest example of redemptive suffering (Heb 2:9-10. 17-18, Php 2:8-9).

Joseph

A good example of God using evil intent for good is the story of Joseph (Ge 50:20). Was what happened to Joseph God's plan - that his brothers would sell him into slavery: that Potiphar's wife would tell lies about Joseph; that Joseph would be put in prison? (See Jas 1:13-17" God didn't put the idea into the minds of his brother or Potiphar's wife, but God was watching saying. "I'll use this for good." He wasn't causing it but He used it in a redemptive way to save His people, and to bless everyone concerned! Joseph's names for his children are significant (Ge 41:51-52). He was able to forget his troubles (Manasseh is symbolic of "to forget") and see that fruitfulness had come out of his sufferings. (Ephraim is symbolic of "fruitful".) I believe that God can redeem every tragedy! Nothing is too bad for God to be able to use for the greater good. This wonderful news! No wonder we can be "more than conquerors through Him who loved us". (Ro 8:37)

Conclusion

God's intentions are good!

God's intentions toward man are always good. Never once has He had unloving thoughts toward any man. God grieves and takes no pleasure over man's suffering.

God can redeem all of life's tragedies! Instead of suffering loss, we can emerge from life's suffering having gained something very precious and of eternal significance!

To whom was God speaking when He said, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"? (Jer29:1) Perfect people who got everything right? No, He was speaking to a rebellious people in exile.

What does God want to say to the people of your nation?

What does God want to say to you as an individual?

Jer 29:11 is God's word to every one of us.

Understanding God's character and heart toward us is the foundation of all healing.

Personal Application

Where have you doubted the love God has for you? Do you have any hidden accusations against God?

Ask God to reveal His feelings for you, particularly in your times of suffering. Invite Him into the suffering of your life so that He can redeem it.