

# 611 Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?

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### God's Answers to Life's Questions

The world wonders why a loving, omnipotent God would allow us to suffer. For many people this is a real stumbling block to their faith, but it doesn't have to be. A close look at Jesus helps us to see another side to suffering. Stay with us and we'll talk more about the problem of suffering.

The problem of suffering is universal. Everyone either has faced it, is facing it now, or will face it in the near future. As a minister of the gospel I have spent many years at hospitals, nursing homes, and funeral homes with hurting people. I know how difficult it is for families to lose their loved ones. It is natural to say in our hearts, "If there is an all-powerful God in heaven that loves me, why did He allow this to happen? Why couldn't he have stopped this and kept me from so much pain?" My friend, the Lord knows the deep pain you feel and loves you. We may not know why this particular event has happened, but we know that God can bring good from it.

Certainly the hurts we all suffer are no fun. We can't think of anything good about cancer, hurricanes or fires. Some people assume that the only way God can be "good" is to prevent anything that would hurt us, but we have to wonder if that is really so. Isn't God's love and power seen just as clearly in how He helps us through a struggle as in whether He prevents it. Paul said in Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Not everything that happens is good, but God is powerful enough to take the hurtful in our lives and turn it into something that leads to good.

Sometimes it is the rough bumps in life that give us the courage and determination to make life smoother for others. You can't have lemon aid without lemons. There are many things of comfort and good in this life, because someone who suffered felt the need to make things better. Good arose out of hurt and disadvantage. When people are challenged, they learn to rise above the challenges. I think of Joseph, whose brothers sold him into slavery in a foreign land. Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and spent many years in Pharaoh's prison, but through it all "the Lord was with Joseph" (Gen. 39:2). My friend, you may be going through tough times, but God can help you too.

Years later, Joseph's brothers moved to Egypt along with their father. When Jacob died, these guilt-ridden brothers were afraid and begged for forgiveness. But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them (Gen. 50:19-21). Joseph didn't take vengeance, didn't blame God, didn't lose faith, and grew into a spiritual giant in spite of all of his suffering. Life going sour doesn't mean God has abandoned you.

In the middle of our pain, we often can only think of what has happened to us, not knowing that God has a greater plan. Joseph had had dreams, but he didn't know how God would work out that dream. Becoming a slave and then a prisoner seemed to be exactly the wrong direction for a person who was to be exalted. We might further note that God did not exalt him until God was ready and until Joseph was ready. It was his slavery and imprisonment that prepared him for service to the Pharaoh. He suffered for years before God acted. He didn't know it at the time, but he later understood that God meant it for good—slavery and imprisonment. Yes even slavery and imprisonment.

Joseph never grew bitter, as some people do. He never got angry at God and found the grace he needed to forgive his guilty brothers. Rather than wonder why bad things happen to us, perhaps we should set our focus on what value this suffering has for us. Our suffering may be shaping and equipping us for some greater purpose we may not now understand. It is an assumption on our part that ease and happiness are the greatest good in life. Rather than wonder if God loves us, we perhaps should be asking what is God shaping me to be and to do in His service. Suffering, though painful, may have a value to our lives and may be the very thing that leads to life.

Some "good things" can only be brought about in our lives by suffering. The pearl, for instance, comes not through ease but suffering. Suffering can actually bring a blessing to us. It can help a person know himself. Suffering helps a person learn what is really important or valuable. It can build his character by challenging him to stretch and to grow. It can also help him understand what he can do to bless the lives of others. It teaches him to be thankful for all his blessings and for others who helped him through a tough time. It teaches him to be compassionate toward others. Walking the road of sorrow and pain helps a person to guide another who may find himself forced down the same road.

Paul said in 2 Cor. 1:3-5, "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 affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ." I have always found this passage an encouraging one. Paul is not bitter toward God, not angry for all his burdens, but maturely understands that God's comfort in his affliction equips him to comfort others when they are afflicted. God's people help others when their lives are filled with pain.

In 2 Cor. 11:23-27 Paul had been in "far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."

I don't know about you; but if anyone had a right to complain about his sufferings, Paul did. Yet he didn't complain. He was suffering not for doing something wrong but for doing what was right, for preaching the gospel! God wanted him to share the good news with the Gentile world, and all Paul found was insults, persecution, and problems. One might wonder why God did not keep him from any suffering, so that he could do his work. But God did not keep him from all the devil's hindrances. In fact, Paul faced just about every problem one could face; but he never gave up, never got angry at God, and never took it out on others. What did he do? He drew closer to the Lord.

Paul knew that this life is not all there is. Though he suffered much, he did not give much weight to his suffering. In Romans 8:18, he said, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." When we get to heaven, we'll not be so concerned with all the aches and pains of this life. Suffering will all be over. The glory of being a child of God, of living in the Father's house in heaven, and of rejoicing in the love of God will be so wonderful that we will say "it

was worth” every sacrifice. This life is brief, and eternity is forever and ever and ever. One simply cannot compare with the other. No one will feel cheated in heaven.

Someone says at this point, “Phil, you just don’t understand. I am hurting. If God really loved me, He wouldn’t let me hurt like this.” Are you sure? Is the only way one can love another to remove the heartaches and struggles? Some lessons and advantages of life only come through pain. How can I protect my children from disease painlessly? Do I love them the more by refusing to give them the vaccinations they need, just because I don’t want them to cry over a shot? You see, the little pains we suffer today may keep us from the big pains we could suffer tomorrow. Is all pain really bad? Would the Marine Corps follow that rule of preventing any pain in order to make a better soldier?

One way we grow stronger, more patient, more compassionate, and more steadfast is by going through struggles which challenge us more and more. “No pain, no gain” is true about so many things in life. Paul found that even the worst of pains could teach him something. In 2 Cor. 12:7-10 Paul said, “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul was close to God, used by God as the all-time greatest evangelist, and an apostle. But to keep him humble, God allowed a messenger of Satan to be a thorn in his flesh. That thorn was sharp and painful. There was in those days no aspirin, no Tylenol, no ibuprofen, and no relief. Three times Paul implored, entreated, asked God to take it away; and God said no. Paul didn’t get angry and quit on God.

He learned from the experience that God’s grace was sufficient; it was enough. God’s grace is able to help us through whatever struggle we face. His grace is His favor, His good will and support of us. He did not take away Paul’s thorn, but God taught Him to rely on the strength and comfort of His power. Paul was tempted to be too full of himself. He had to learn that the power for him to do his work was not in Paul’s keen wisdom or intellect but in God. It was God’s Word, not Paul’s ability, that won people to Christ and made the difference in people’s lives. Paul needed to know that along with this thorn was also the power of God to continue in spite of it. God’s grace really proved sufficient.

God won’t allow you or me to be “buffeted” beyond what we are able to bear. Paul said in 1 Cor. 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” The problems we face are not stronger than God who stands beside us. He knows how much we can bear and provides His grace to us as we bear it. If it is stronger than we can

stand, God will provide a way of escape, so that we can endure. I am really thankful for this promise of help in hard times. Our loving God does indeed stand beside us to help us.

In our understanding of love and suffering, there is nothing more valuable to us than a good, long look at the cross. Jesus despised the suffering and begged the Father to “let this cup pass from me” at Gethsemane. In the end, Jesus prayed that the Father’s will be done. Peter said that while He suffered, He kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Pet. 2:23). That is what gave Him the power while He suffered on the cross to endure it. His last prayer was, “Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Jesus never got angry with His Father for commanding Him go to the cross. Jesus willingly suffered for the sake of us all in order to free us from sin.

Jesus had the confidence and the courage to yield to His Father in times of suffering. He endured the terrible agony of the cross by entrusting Himself. We can too. In our suffering, we can put ourselves into the Father’s hands with confidence. Peter said in 1 Peter 4:19, “Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” Knowing that we have not passed out of His watchful care and love—that our souls are His, regardless of what may happen to our bodies—will give us the endurance we need to bear any burden and live with any affliction. Remember always that we belong to Him, and He will keep our souls.

I pray that your soul is right with the living God. If you want God to take care of you, then devote yourself to Him. Believe Him and His Word, repent of your sins, confess the name of Jesus before others, and be baptized (immersed in water) in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. When you do, the Lord will forgive you, give you the gift of the Holy Spirit, add you to His church. We hope you’ll be obedient to Him today.

Receiving love is a wonderful thing, but giving love may cost dearly. God demonstrated to us His great love in the death of His Son Jesus. Jesus demonstrated His love in his cruel, agonizing death on the cross for our sins. You see, suffering and love are not incompatible. Jesus himself said, “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12-14). Giving love to those around us may cost us dearly too, if we love as Jesus loved us. Taking up our own cross and following Him will mean that we too have suffering to face.

Jesus’ death on the cross, however, teaches us that suffering doesn’t last forever; and death is not the end. When God’s people suffer, the Father is near them, sharing their pain, and holding them in His hands. Whether a Christian lives or dies, he never leaves the love of a caring Father in Heaven. Paul said, “not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:7-8). You can never, ever drift beyond the loving care of God. He will always be with you. He won’t give you more than you can handle but will strengthen you for whatever problems may come your way.

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