

A Christian View of Suffering

On 26 December 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean that measured 9.0 on the Richter scale caused a series of massive tsunamis that flooded the coastlines of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, the Maldives, Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania. More than 300,000 people perished and millions more were left homeless, making it the worst tsunami in recorded history. Entire towns and popular tourist resorts were devastated, hundreds of people were washed out to sea, thousands were never seen again or were buried unidentified in mass graves. The tsunami did not discriminate as to whom it swept away. Travelling at 14 metres a second mountainous waves simply demolished everything in their paths, leaving the inhabitants of countless towns and villages in pain, suffering, loss, mourning and a sense of hopeless distress.

One of the most impressive responses was the way Christian aid organisations around the world reached out to affected areas. Those organizations had lost key people on the ground, but they moved quickly to provide experts and financial and material assistance. Churches in Singapore, Sri Lanka and Indonesia mounted massive relief efforts, including in entirely Muslim and Hindu areas. Despite a world-wide response, it will be years before the affected areas recover from just a few hours of destruction.

I moved to South-East Asia within days of the tsunami, as the world asked, "Why was this suffering permitted?" The hackneyed term "Act of God" just didn't make sense. (Atheists could not even go that far. There is no easy answer for those who believe there is "nothing out there"; everything seems so cruel and unjust; but there is no one to turn to.) Nor did the concept of "God's judgment", as tens of thousands of otherwise "innocent people" (including Christians) were struck down by the waves. Such terms were simply too trite, too dismissive of the extent of human tragedy. How could anyone explain this suffering? Was there a Biblical response?

I subsequently met numerous Christians who believed God led them to cancel visits to the affected areas. Otherwise, they would have died. They put their escape down to God's foreknowledge and grace.

Why did God allow the tsunami to occur? How do we, as Christians, respond to those who want to know why a God of love would permit such an event to occur? What is our response to the reality of suffering?

"Why do bad things happen?"

When tragedy strikes, we often hear the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" This is the wrong question. Good things often happen to good people, whilst others who live contrary to goodness suffer predictable consequences. We need to be chary of stereotypes, otherwise we run the risk of jumping to conclusions. The response to the AIDS pandemic is an example. When AIDS began to spread around the world many Christians quickly termed it God's judgment on the sin of homosexuality, largely because it appeared to be confined to practicing homosexuals. What do we say, then, to babies born with HIV, women who contract the disease through being raped, wives who become HIV positive because their husbands are infected? Calling their sickness "God's judgment" is incomplete, cruel and un-Biblical. Jesus confronted the same prejudices when he touched lepers, the social outcasts of his day.

Non-Christian attitudes to suffering

The world's major religious traditions have attempted to explore the theme of suffering over millennia. Hindus believe that bad things happen because of a person's locus in an endless round of millions of reincarnations on the way to perfection. A friend of mine who became a Hindu pierced his body with spikes and went on pilgrimages to wash away his sins and ensure the burden of evil he carried into his next life was mitigated. I have witnessed Shi'ite Muslims beating themselves with whips that made them bleed profusely, because they believed this practice helped them enter into the sufferings of their original leaders and please God. Some of the religious leaders of Jesus day taught that sickness in this life was attributable to punishment for sins in a previous existence (see John 9:1-3). If you believe that to be true, you can afford to be blasé about the "bad karma" people experience, including disease, torture, famine, war and genocide. Such a world view allows you to do nothing, assuming human suffering is not your problem.

"Suffering" means different things to different people, but is none the less real to those who are subjectively involved. Chronic (and life-threatening) sickness, physical pain, forfeiture of a job, amputation of a limb, loss of a family member; dispossession, depression, false accusations, warfare, these can all cause deep grief and anguish.

Suffering often causes people to ask whether there really is a God and whether he cares. Some blame other people. Some deny personal responsibility and feel targeted by life. Typical reactions include: "He deserved it."; "Life's not fair." "Nobody knows the troubles I've seen." "It must be my fate" "Why me?" (Why, indeed?) Without God, hopelessness and helplessness in the absence of adequate explanations lead to the end of hope, suicide, paranoia, retaliation, euthanasia, purging of relationships, family breakdown, loneliness and alienation.

What does the Bible say about suffering?

Despite our best endeavours, things sometimes do fall apart, even if no one is directly to blame. A family member becomes sick, a pet dies, someone we love is diagnosed with a terminal illness. People's worlds are turned upside down. An Iraqi friend watched helplessly as her husband was arrested in their home in Baghdad, before being beaten and taken away to a cell where he was summarily executed without a trial. In a world that looks for answers to events that are beyond peoples' control, Biblical Christians need to have viable answers. If we simply shrug our shoulders and declare that "there are no easy explanations", we are not living Biblically. The New Testament tells us that we are to have an answer for those who ask us to explain our hope (1 Peter 3:15).

God is not indifferent to human suffering. He is not capricious. One entire book of the Bible (Job) is written about a family's suffering. Roughly a third of the Psalms discuss suffering, disappointment, frustration, pain, sickness, rejection, betrayal, doubt, anxiety and disasters that have no apparent cause. Suffering is part of the human story.

Suffering as a consequence of sin

The Bible teaches that suffering exists because of the presence of sin. There is a nexus between suffering and evil in the world. When God made the world and formed man by his own hands he consistently judged it all to be "good" (Genesis 1:31). Creation was

flawless, but innocent. When sin entered, spiritual death ensued as an immediate consequence and physical death eventually followed for the entire race (Romans 5:12-20). The Bible teaches that evil is real. The end result of sin is death. Even if, as individuals, we remain disease-free for decades, in the end we will all die (Hebrews 9:27).

One of my responsibilities, as a parent, is to teach my children that lifestyle choices have consequences. Likewise, suffering in human life is often a direct result of choices. A smoker may develop lung cancer. A chronically overweight person may develop high cholesterol, blocked arteries and suffer a heart attack. A heavy drinker may be involved in a serious motor vehicle accident. A drug user may suffer an overdose and end up mentally retarded or in the morgue. A faithless spouse may lose their marriage and permanently fracture their family's happiness. A home may be broken up when the bread-winner is jailed for breaking the law. Does God feel pain when people suffer? Of course He does. The consequences of sin touch all our lives. The Creator has suffered loss ever since our first parents kicked over the traces and walked out on his promises and love. The Bible tells us that, "What we sow, we will reap" (Galatians 6:7-8).

Much suffering is the result of the actions of others, including greed, abused power, failure to share precious resources such as food, clean drinking water and life-saving medications. The nations of the world spend more on acquiring bigger arsenals and more deadly arms than improving the human plight. In times of war, epidemic, drought, financial hardship, emotionally shattering experiences and accidents that occur around us every day; there does not seem to be a pattern or a reason why some suffer and others do not, the Bible reminds us that at the base of human tragedy is sin. The world is under its curse. The sustaining and guiding power of the Creator who designed it to last for eternity has been partially lifted and disease and tragedy are consequently part of our world.

Because God is "redemptive", that is, He is able to bring eternal good out of negative circumstances, the Holy Spirit often uses (but does not cause) human suffering as a springboard to convince people of the futility of sin and the brevity of this life. Many of my friends have become Christians because personal suffering led them to question the direction of their lives and search for meaning and purpose, which only Christ can give.

Jesus and Suffering

Jesus understood and shared the depths of human suffering. He was perfect but he "learned" obedience through the things he suffered (Hebrews 2:10, 5:8). This is one of the most radical revelations of the New Testament. Jesus came into our world as God in human flesh. He was sinless, but he was exposed to the worst aspects of the human condition. Growing up in an environment of sin he was tempted and pressured like any other man, but turned suffering into character. He was identified as a "Man of sorrows", he was personally "acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), he experienced the sorts of things other people suffer, including rejection, temptation, loss of loved ones in death, excommunication from the synagogue, accusations of being a drunkard and consorting with prostitutes; his family accused him of being mad, he grew up in poverty and he was executed as a criminal after a mockery of a trial (Hebrews 2:10, 18). He died on the cross ("the just in the place of the unjust", cf 1 Peter 3:18), but triumphed over it. Because he lives, "death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). The resurrection of Jesus is the stand-out success of human history. In the light of his empty

tomb suffering assumes new meaning. It is God's will that the followers of Jesus also understand suffering and respond to it out of His Father Heart.

Suffering as a character ingredient

In the Middle Ages, suffering was seen as part of becoming holy or complying with the expectations and teaching of the church, of "virtually" entering into, or sharing, Christ's own pain. Suffering became a badge of honour, something that marked out people as being spiritual, touched by God and exemplary in their obedience and spirituality. Suffering became idealized, linked to prolonged fasting, self-flagellation, pilgrimages on bleeding knees and wearing hair shirts under outer garments, so that the body would be continually aggravated and remind the wearer of their holy orders and promises. People still talk about bearing their own "cross". This interpretation verged on becoming errant theology, because of the link between conditional grace and suffering for sin. The Bible teaches us that Christ died for our sin; he took our place freely and fully. No amount of suffering on our part can ever remove sin or make up for its consequences. Nor can suffering recommend us to God; we are already made acceptable to Him because of Jesus. When we start depending on sharing Christ's sacrifice we stop relying on God's grace and abandon the fundamental Christian message.

God does sometimes allow suffering to function as an incubator, to mould our character, teach us obedience and keep us humble and dependant on Him for everything. When things are going well we tend to become complacent and self-centred. We live as though we are not dependant on God. Suffering is one of God's tools to help us see everything in His perspective. It is not a sign that He is not with us, or is displeased with our lives or relationship with Him. It is a trigger allowed by God to prompt change.

My mother used to quote the adage that "Only the good die young", but there is no truth in such a generalisation. Some people have long lives with many material possessions, while others lack the assumed basic necessities of life and are cut off in their youth, with no discernible reason as to "why". God sometimes permits suffering to remind us we are frail, to focus our hearts and minds on things that endure for eternity, to keep us from become carnal Christians, and to help us have power over our minds, physical senses and sin's deceits (cf 1 Peter 4:1, 2).

How we mature as Christians depends to a certain extent on our attitude to suffering. We can become resentful, paranoid and self-centred, or we can follow Jesus' example and trust God with our lives? There have been difficult times in my life when I have literally thrown up my hands because of circumstances I have not understood. In such periods, all I have been able to say is, "God, I trust you".

Suffering for following Christ

Countless numbers of Christians are persecuted for their faith (whilst others, usually Western, insist that genuine faith is a guarantee and key to financial prosperity. - the contrast between the two is stark.) "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Christians in dozens of countries experience deep rejection, poverty and pain because of their commitment to Jesus and because Satan is opposed to the Body of Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus said that we would have tribulation in this world (John 16:33). Peter warned the church that suffering would occur and encouraged believers under attack because of their

faith not to act surprised, but to deepen their commitment to Christ and not give up (1 Peter 4:12-19).

Jesus said that persecution would lead to blessing (Matthew 5: 10-12). This is surely ironic, because few of us enjoy experiencing pain and rejection because of our Christian testimony and lifestyle. (Can it be that we misunderstand the meaning of the word “blessed”? After all, the word originally came from a term meaning “wounded”.)

Suffering as a consequence of right living

I have witnessed genuine suffering on the part of Christian refugees. Let me tell you about a good friend of mine named Joseph. He is a pastor from the south of Sudan, and a member of the Sudanese Council of Churches. For more than thirty years his country has been riven by civil war caused largely by the attempted Arabisation and Islamisation of the population by the Government in Khartoum. The majority of people in the south of Sudan are Christians or animists (followers of traditional folk religions). From an early age Joseph followed Christ and when he was a young man he made a commitment to serve God as a pastor. One day, jihadists from the north of Sudan swept through his village and nearly everyone in his family was massacred. After initially escaping to Kenya he linked up with Sudanese church members and returned to Sudan to help them reestablish a Christian community, only to discover that the brutalisation was continuing. Finally, he fled to Syria, then Lebanon, where he pastors a Sudanese fellowship. He is unable to obtain more than piecework, so he lives a hand-to-mouth existence. Only the generosity of Christians who buy him food and clothing enables him, and many like him, to keep going. Because he has not been able to document his story, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has not been able to make a positive finding about his refugee status, so he has not been able to resettle. He has been arrested several times for living in Lebanon illegally, but he does not have a passport to enable him to travel home, or re-settle elsewhere. The Sudanese Embassy in Beirut has told him he will not be granted a new passport because he is not a Muslim, so he is effectively stateless.

Joseph’s story is repeated, in one form or another, in the lives of more than 5,000 Sudanese Christians illegally living in Lebanon. What I admire about Joseph is his love for Christ and his passionate belief that the things that have happened to him can serve to glorify God. There is no easy way to trivialize Joseph’s suffering, but to talk to him about his faith in God’s goodness and faithfulness in the face of adversity is inspiring.

The Scripture says that righteous people will suffer many afflictions, but God is able to deliver us, in one way or another (Psalm 34:19). I have had the privilege of knowing Christians for whom such “deliverance” was being set free from this life into the presence of Jesus through martyrdom.

Coping with suffering

What makes us different, as Christians, when it comes to responding to suffering? How does following Jesus help us cope when others find it hard to manage? How can our faith equip us when family, friends, professional counselors cannot do so?

The first thing we can do is turn our circumstances over to God. He can help us handle loss and change. That does not mean running away, or feigning that the situation is not

acutely real, but casting the burden of our circumstances on Him, “because he cares for us” (1 Peter 5:7).

As believers can also resort to strong Christian friends who can be supportive and help us keep our eyes on Christ (a vision of the risen Christ can fill our landscape with hope and change our perspective in a way no other human technique can do).

There are many things we don't understand. However, there is no sense denying adverse circumstances, pretending they don't exist, avoiding them; or bottling them up inside, stoically living in denial. It is easy to be tempted to escape, to be judgmental; indignant and frustrated by what we go through. By contrast, the Scripture models Jesus' life in times of suffering as compassionate, empathetic and patient, with absolute faith in God's sovereignty and trustworthiness (Luke 23:46).

We cannot control everything that happens around us; but we can master what happens inside, where God's faithfulness, presence and promises can give us super-human strength. Knowing God has allowed our circumstances, wants to move on our behalf, answer prayer and give us wisdom and direction gives us an edge in times of stress and strain. The Bible reminds us that our eternal inheritance is richer by far than anything we experience in this life (Romans 8: 18).

Using suffering to make a difference

Suffering is real. It does change us. It is not, however, the end of serving God. It serves to show us where our security and hope lie. The Biblical view of suffering is different from everyone else's.

The Bible says that nothing can ever separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35-39). When God feels a long way off, He is still there. He feels it when we suffer; because we are his children. God has a purpose, even in our human frailties and weaknesses (1 Peter 1:7). The Holy Spirit in us can bring the peace and comfort of God (so that we can comfort others in turn, cf 2 Corinthians 1:3-7). He can lift us up out of a sense of helplessness that can be overwhelming and debilitating. He can make everything work for our good (Romans 8:28) and give us hope for eternity. He has promised to wipe away all our tears (Revelation 21:4).

If we are going to make a difference, as Christians, as churches in the new century, we need to know how to address suffering in a Biblical way. Not like legalists, who shrug their shoulders and identify fault and blame as the basis for what people go through (“it serves him right”). Nor like the priest and Levite in Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan, who didn't know how to respond and looked the other way instead of being inconvenienced by getting personally involved (Luke 10:31, 32). Jesus never pushed suffering away because it was “their problem”. We must dare to pray for healing or deliverance and believe God has the power to remove suffering and set people free. We can affirm the will of God where he allows suffering to continue, regardless of persistent faith and prayers, without being fatalistic, angry, judgmental or shrugging indifferent shoulders. Finally, if those who suffer are not Christians, we can be used by God to present Christ, who alone can transform their hearts and give them hope for eternity.

With the help of the Holy Spirit we can have a sense of God's presence and a vision of the triumphant Christ in the midst of our own circumstances. The resurrection changed

everything. The promise and assurance of eternal life, of a home in heaven, in God's presence are ours because of Christ. If we suffer, physically, emotionally, or financially, we all belong to Him and his promise is greater than them all.