

# The Problem of Human Suffering

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One of the most puzzling of all problems is the problem of human suffering. Why must humanity suffer? Why must there be heartache and disappointment? Why must there be disease and death? Even more, why must the innocent suffer? Some of us have especially wrestled with this problem. We have wondered how it is that God, who loves us so much, could allow suffering to come into homes like ours. Sometimes our questionings come at the death of a parent upon whom we have depended through the years. Sometimes it is through a long and severe illness that we come face to face with the problem of human suffering. Sometimes it is in connection with a beloved child.

## **An Illusion**

Many answers to the problem of human suffering have been given, and many of those answers are very wrong. One of the answers given glibly by a few people of our time is that suffering is just an illusion. Mary Baker Eddy and her followers tell us that all suffering is a product of twisted thinking, rather than an actual reality in the physical world.

Most of us find it difficult and even impossible to accept this point of view. When a loved one, who has been an intimate part of our home, is taken from us, it is very difficult for us to believe that it is not real but simply twisted thinking. Such a description of suffering is, to say the least, unrealistic. When someone who has been in good health for many years finds his life blighted with painful and incurable

cancer, it is rather unconvincing to tell him that it is all in his mind, simply a product of the wrong kind of thinking. The great masses of people are too realistic to accept this explanation of evil.

## **A Result of Sin**

Another explanation sometimes given is more plausible because it has in it a large element of truth: Suffering is a result of our own sin. This has so much truth in it that it is easy for us to feel that it is the whole answer.

There are many evidences of suffering as a result of the sins people have committed. The man who drinks heavily, after awhile, pays the price in his own body and in the tangled strands of his own life. The person who misuses his body in any way will eventually pay the price. The liar, the cheat, the hypocrite also inevitably suffer. But to say that this is the explanation of all suffering is to speak too quickly. It explains much suffering, but it certainly does not explain all suffering. Think of the innocent people who suffer.

Job in the Old Testament is an example. Most of the book of Job is devoted to the arguments of his friends who said, "Job, you must have sinned grievously, because you are suffering grievously." The answer continually came back, "But I have not sinned; I am innocent. There must be some other explanation of suffering." Job was right.

In the thirteenth chapter of the gospel according to Luke our Lord faced this question. *"Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish'"* (Luke 13:1-5). He is simply saying that these catastrophes did not come upon them because they were more wicked than the rest.

In the gospel according to John the same subject is discussed briefly. *"As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him'"* (John 9:1-3). Taking the word of Christ as final authority, we turn from the idea that sin in one's own life is the full explanation of suffering. Much suffering comes to the innocent without the person having deserved it in a special way.

### **God Cannot Prevent It**

There is another explanation of suffering: God cannot do anything about it. It is the idea that God does not want suffering here, because he is an infinitely loving God, but that he is powerless to put it out of the world. There are impressive reasons behind such a belief. If God does infinitely love his creation, and if God is all-powerful, it would seem that there would be no suffering. Yet we must look a little deeper, for there are many other factors in the story. We have a number of express statements in the Bible that indicate that God is

powerful beyond our comprehension. For example, the three Hebrew young men who were cast into a fiery furnace made the statement, *"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us"* (Dan. 3:17). Their meaning was that God was able to do anything that he wanted to do. In Matthew in the New Testament, there is a sentence, *"With God all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26). We are not ready, therefore, to take the explanation that evil and suffering are in the world because God is unable to cast them out.

Having suggested some inadequate explanations of the problem of suffering, let us now notice some principles that are in the right direction. We would not want to say, in wrestling with this problem that has been a concern of thinking people through all the centuries since the beginning of time, that we have an easy, fully satisfying solution. We do believe, however, that there are some principles that will help us. There are some observations, at least, that can help to explain why suffering is in our world. The first of these observations is: God is all-powerful to accomplish that which is according to his own will and according to his own nature.

### **God Limits Himself**

This limitation is not a limitation imposed upon God by some external force, for there is no external force in the universe that can limit God's power. The only limitations upon God's power are placed there by himself. The very nature of the universe which God designed and created makes it impossible for him to do things that are mutually opposed. He cannot be present and absent at the same time. He cannot create a mountain that he cannot climb. He cannot dig a hole that he cannot fill. He cannot make a square circle. Actually, these are childish conundrums rather than real impossibilities. These are certainly not limitations placed upon God by Satan or by some other force, but are simply limitations

which he has included in the makeup of the universe.

The Bible speaks of certain impossibilities for God. For example, in Hebrews 6:18 we read that it is impossible for God to lie. By the very nature of God it is not possible for him to lie. In James 1:13 we learn that *"God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone."* This is another impossibility with God. Back in the Old Testament in Habakkuk 1:13 there is the statement that God himself cannot look upon, or approve, evil. All of this simply means that when God created the universe he created it in such a way, his own nature being what it was, that certain things are not possible. This is not a limitation upon God in the ultimate sense; it is merely a limitation because of the nature and the will of God.

This background prepares us to understand that when God created humans he made them creatures with freedom of choice and freedom of will. When God chose to make us creatures of freedom an inevitable result was that we could choose evil as well as good. God determined that we should not be merely automatons, but creatures of freedom who could choose good. Thus, when we choose to love God, it has real significance. When the decision that we should have freedom was made, it was necessary that this freedom include the possibility of choosing evil as well as good. Because humans have freedom of will, there have been mistakes, blunders, and wrong choices. The events of history give ample evidence of the fact that we have often chosen wrongly and have suffered as a result.

### **Nature of the Universe**

The second observation that we wish to make is the very nature of the universe helps to explain suffering. Let us think for a moment of what we call the laws of nature. As we look at the whole universe it is a system of law and order, a system in which everything is faithful. Scientific investigations made in one part of the

world can be verified through the same experiments in another. There is uniformity throughout the natural laws of our universe. There must be, or our world would not work. Principles true today must be true a year from today. Principles true in one part of the world must be true in another, or else we will not know how to build a civilization.

This uniformity, this system of law and order, also has much to do with man's suffering in the world. For example, take the subject of fire. The natural laws of the universe which God has created include certain principles which enable us, if we use the right elements and the right processes, to create fire. We now do it through the striking of a match, which is simply a cooperation with the laws of the universe. The same law that enables us to have fire for the cooking of our meals and the heating of our homes also enables us to have fire which will burn our houses and destroy our lives. The law that made it possible to have fire for constructive purposes may be misused for destructive purposes.

Two of our greatest achievements have been the production of the automobile and the airplane, but along with these fine uses, there are also tragic uses. Similarly, steel which makes possible great buildings can also be used for guns and tanks which destroy lives in war. The principles of nature, if used properly, result in good; but, if used improperly, they have within themselves the power of destruction.

### **Rules Are Necessary**

It is a bit like a football game. A ball-carrier running down the sidelines is pressed closer and closer toward the edge of the field. He would like, suddenly, for the boundary line to move over a yard or two, so that he could stay within the field, but the rules of the game say that the boundary line is fixed and cannot move. To move the boundaries at the whim of either team would make the game of football impossible. The only basis on which a game

can be played is that there are rules and that those rules apply in every instance. Similarly, the only way in which a world can possibly work is for the laws to be constant and faithful. When we use God's laws of nature as we ought to use them, we prosper and are happy. When we misuse those laws, we suffer. The law of gravity is a very wonderful and necessary thing, but its misuse can bring death. So it is with the other laws of our universe.

Let us apply these observations to the problem of suffering. When God made us creatures of freedom, he opened the door to suffering. It could be no other way. When God made the universe, he made it possible for us to use our freedom to find the good, but this inevitably included also the possibility of evil and suffering. Why do we suffer? It is because we, or our ancestors, or our neighbors, have misused this freedom. In some way we have violated some of God's laws and have thus destroyed that which God wished to be perfect and whole.

### **Is Suffering Always Evil?**

When the subject of human suffering is mentioned, people generally assume that all suffering is evil. Let us examine this presupposition to see if it is true. Is the negative value which we put on suffering its real value? Our primary purpose in existence is to honor and glorify God and to become as God-like as it is humanly possible to become. Now this being so, everything that takes us away from God is evil, and everything that brings us toward God is good.

When we have accepted this standard, we can see the events of our world in a different light. It is quite possible that the riches, the honors, and the pleasures of this world are actually hindrances, rather than helps. It is quite conceivable that illness, loss of money, or even the loss of friends might ultimately serve some good purpose. Under certain circumstances poverty is better than riches. Jesus once said,

*"For not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions"* (Luke 12:15). All too often the material things of our world blind us to the spiritual things and thus become curses instead of blessings, not just for a time, but for eternity. Riches, honors, and pleasures are not necessarily evils; they can also be blessings. It depends on our attitude toward them; it depends on how we use them. Do they draw us closer to God or pry us away from God? No one would claim that suffering is good in itself, but what is good is that through suffering we are often brought into submission to God's will.

It is quite possible that the frowns of the world are better than its honors. It is quite possible that illness is better than health. Many would consider this completely unreasonable, but remember, our primary concern in living is to honor and glorify God. Those who spend some time on their back in a hospital room often see things in a clearer light than they ever saw them while they were going through life without a care. We do not say that when we become sick we are to rejoice, but we do believe that if we accept illness in the proper manner, it can be a blessing.

### **Suffering Is Remedial**

Much of the pain that we suffer is remedial in character. It is a part of the deceitfulness of sin that so long as things are going well with us, there is little disposition to give up error and sin. It is when we are hurt that we feel a need for God. It is by suffering that we overcome. The one who has no sorrow in life is immature. It is through the suffering that accompanies hard work that we develop physical stamina. It is through suffering that we learn to overcome the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and pride of life. Things that looked so glamorous before, after a period of crisis in which we come face-to-face with the real issues of life, look like tinsel and glitter, mere ornaments on a Christmas tree.

There is a passage in the letter to the Hebrews in which God tells us that he allows us to suffer because of his love for us: *"For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness"* (Hebrews 12:6-11). This is also what David meant when he said, *"It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I may learn Your statutes"* (Psalm 119:71).

### **Suffering Builds Character**

Suffering also has the power to beautify and ennoble the character and the spirit of the sufferer. Some people seem to feel that the love of God guarantees that they will be able to have everything they wish for. This is an unreasonable expectation, for God's love for us is never described in the Scriptures as the soft, indulgent, humoring of the child in the manner that is sometimes attributed to grandfathers. Rather, the figures of speech which the Bible uses to convey the infinite love which God has for us are of such a nature as to indicate discipline, rather than license. For example, God is described as a potter who works carefully and painstakingly to make out of the shapeless clay a vessel of honor. He is pictured as a builder who cuts and places stones in such a way as to make a beautiful edifice. He is a shepherd who devotedly cares for, but also guides and restricts his flock for their own safety. He is a father who disciplines and

corrects every child whom he receives. A human father who genuinely loves his children must from time to time cause that them to suffer through the administration of discipline, lest the children destroy themselves and bring upon themselves greater suffering by their own blunders. Loving care involves discipline.

If God promised immunity from suffering to those who follow him, people would serve him out of self-interest. As a kind of cosmic insurance policy they would become followers of God. It would be foolish not to do so, if to follow God meant that one would automatically be protected from illness, death, and disappointments of every kind. But this would defeat the real essence of religion, i.e., the earnest and genuine offering of worshipful love and devotion to God. If God offered immunity from suffering to all those who followed him, it would also rob them of the means of developing the beauty and strength of character for which all should strive. No, God does not promise his children that they will be immune to all suffering, but he does promise, *"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"* (Romans 8:28).

### **Because People Live Together**

The answers that are already given indicate that even when suffering comes to those that are innocent, there may be the possibility of great good within that suffering. Further explanation of why the innocent must suffer lies in the fact that people live together. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, *"For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself"* (Romans 14:7). The second of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament had indicated much earlier that the iniquity of the fathers would have its painful results upon their children, even to the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5). The nature of the universe is such that when certain causes are put in

operation, certain effects must inevitably follow.

Sin, which is essentially rebellion against the will of God, inevitably causes suffering. Sometimes the sin of parents must be paid for in part by their innocent children. Sometimes the sins of a drunken driver on the highway must be paid for in part by innocent travelers who had never met the sinner until in the agonies of painful death. When it was decided that humans should live together upon the earth, it was inevitable that the innocent should sometimes suffer. It should be remembered, however, that living together also brings many of the most cherished blessings that mankind knows. To live alone and thereby miss the sufferings that one sometimes must bear because of connections with other human beings would be a price too great for most people to pay. Most people, were they given the chance to make the choice, would choose to cast their lot among their fellow citizens, accepting the sorrows and suffering along with the joys and blessings.

### **Look Up Toward Heaven**

The Bible describes our existence on the earth as a temporary sojourn through which we are prepared for a better and more permanent abode in heaven. We read that Abraham *"was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God"* (Hebrews 11:10). In the same chapter we also read that Moses made his choice to live and work among God's people, rather than to enjoy the pleasures of Egypt, *"for he was looking to the reward"* (Hebrews 11:26). At another time the apostle Paul said, *"For our citizenship is in heaven"* (Philippians 3:20). Paul also said, *"Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.... For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house*

*not made with hands, eternal in the heavens"* (2 Corinthians 4:16-17, 5.1).

God has prepared for us a home, and he wishes us to come to that home. Were it not for the heartaches, disappointments, and sufferings of this world, we might forget the greater destiny that lies before us. Perhaps the sufferings of this world were designed, in part, to cause all of us not to be satisfied here, but to lift our eyes toward the more wonderful world to come. Beyond this life with its toils and tears, its struggles and disappointments, lies a realm of pure delight, of which John wrote, *"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away"* (Revelation 21:4).

The problem of human suffering is beyond our fullest comprehension. After all is said, there are questions we cannot answer with full satisfaction.

These suggestions and observations, however, should aid in the life-long endeavor of understanding why all people must suffer.

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