

Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People?

Questions People Ask About the Christian Faith

"We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago. With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our fathers; you crushed the peoples and made our fathers flourish. It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them. You are my King and my God, who decrees victories for Jacob. Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes. I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame. In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever. But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies. You made us retreat before the enemy, and our adversaries have plundered us. You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations. You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale. You have made us a reproach to our neighbours, the scorn and derision of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations; the peoples shake their heads at us. My disgrace is before me all day long, and my face is covered with shame at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me, because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge.

All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant. Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and covered us over with deep darkness. If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart? Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love". (Psalm 44: 1-26 NIV)

The Psalm that I have just read is a reflection of the questions that many of us ask. If our God is so great and so powerful, and we are faithful to him and we are living the way he wants us to, why does he abandon us in times of trouble? I first asked that question at 15 years of age, when I was told my mother was dying. My mother was one of the most gentle, Godly people I knew. Why did she have to suffer? I can remember as a 15 year old, ranting at God, and telling him that that if this was his idea of reward for following Jesus, it sucked! For seven years I watched my mother suffer until she died. I can identify with the sentiments of the Psalmist when he says "Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?"

A few years back I did a little exercise for myself, analysing what I knew of my church family. I had been their pastor for 11 years. I had shared my life with theirs for a long time and so I knew most of the people pretty well. I had been with them in times of sickness, at the birth of their babies and had taken funeral services for many of the families in the church. When I went through the church list, I found a catalogue of suffering.

I took a few pages of our Church directory and listed the people that I knew who were suffering in different ways. It was a pretty staggering list. There were people with arthritis, cancer, Parkinson's disease, strokes, spinal problems, hearing difficulties and failing eyesight. Then there were people whose partners were losing their mental faculties. There were those struggling with mild and severe depression. There were people with disabled children. But there were some wounds and scars that were not so easy to see from the outside. The pain of bereavement. The couples who couldn't have children. The women with an alcoholic husband. The couples grieving over their rebellious children. Women and teenagers suffering the effects of a broken marriage. The businessman whose company went under because someone else didn't pay their bills. The senior manager made redundant in an afternoon after 35 years service with the company. The teenagers whose parents hop from one relationship to another.

The father left to bring up small children his own because his wife decided to abscond to Australia with her boss.

The amount of pain and suffering represented by people in this room today would be almost overwhelming if we were to catalogue it all. What can we say in the space of 20 minutes that will address a question like "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Pain has a purpose?

I could tell you that pain and suffering have a purpose. The person with leprosy who has lost all sensation in their fingers and hands would say "thank God for pain". Why? Because without the sensation of pain, they burn themselves in the fire, or use a screwdriver and tear their hands to pieces. These people would love to feel the pain that you and I do. I could say you, "thank God for pain." Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

I could tell you the story of Joni Erickson Tada. She was a vibrant teenager who was paralysed while diving from a raft in 1967. She was suffering so much she prayed to God to let her die and was so paralysed she couldn't even take her own life. I could tell you that out of that tragedy came triumph for Joni. Today Joni speaks at conferences around the world, appears on TV, records a daily radio broadcast and has starred in a movie about her life. She has written books, made best-selling CD's of her singing, and paints pictures holding a brush in her mouth. I could finish with an inspirational story like that which gives meaning and purpose to suffering. Such a story would make a chapter in "Chicken Soup For the Soul".

But that's not the whole story. What do we say about Brian Sternberg? Brian was the world pole - vault champion in 1963. You broke his neck on a trampoline and he has been paralysed ever since. Brian hasn't written books or made movies. Since 1963 Brian has prayed that God would heal him. Thousands of prayers later, he is still in a wheelchair. His story will never be printed in "Chicken Soup For the Soul". Where is God when it hurts?

Where is God?

Elie Wiesel was a 15-year-old Jewish boy when he was forced to stand with thousands of other prisoners in a concentration camp and watch two men and a young boy put to death by hanging. Elie Wiesel says that the boy was so young that his face was like the face of an angel, and his body was so light that he didn't die immediately. He died in slow agony before their eyes, strangling to death on a wire. As they were standing watching this horror, someone behind him was asking out loud "Where is God? Where is He now?" Elie Wiesel said that that was the day he knew that there was no God.

God forbid that we ever try to give trite answers to questions borne out of such agony.

A World Without Pain?

Let me try to view suffering from another dimension. What if God made a world that was designed to protect us from all pain and suffering? No one would ever be able to injure anyone else. The murderers' bullets would turn into thin air. Fraud, deceit, conspiracy and treason would never leave any one hurt. No one would be injured in an accident. The child falling out of the tree would float unharmed to the ground. The drunken driver would never kill anyone. We would never need to be brave and rescue someone because no one would ever come to any harm.

To have that kind world, the laws of nature would have to be suspended. The ground under the child's tree would have to be made so soft that the tree couldn't grow. Because it would be impossible to harm someone, there would be no concepts of right and wrong. There would be no need of courage because there would never be danger or difficulty. All the ethical qualities we value so highly - generosity, kindness, prudence, love, unselfishness - wouldn't be able to be formed in us. If God made a world for us where we were totally wrapped in cotton wool, there would never be any heart aches, and never any suffering. But what kind of people would we be?

We need general, dependable laws of life, or else we couldn't cope. We need to know that when we get out of bed each day, our feet will hit the floor and not the ceiling. We need to know that when we put a hand in the fire, it will burn us, and it will do the same thing

tomorrow and the same thing next week. The dangers, difficulties, sorrows and frustrations that we face are what make us who we are.

God's Puppets?

Imagine a world where God rewarded every good deed with a pleasure sensation, and punished every wrong deed with a mild electric shock. You fill in your tax return honestly and get a pleasant buzz from God. You attempt to steal something and he gives you a nasty shock. You and I would become like animals at the circus, with God being the animal trainer.

Has it ever occurred to you that God might have something more important for us than a life free from suffering? Most of us imagine that God wants us to be happy. But that's not what we read in the scriptures. What we read in the Scriptures is that God wants us to become mature.

If I become so projective of my children that I never let them climb trees unless they should fall, and never let them have water fights in case they catch cold, and never let them drive the car in case a drunk driver should injure them, and never let them risk relationships with the opposite sex for fear that someone might break their little hearts, then as a parent I'm preventing my children from growing into maturity.

Will we love God even if we suffer?

God wants us to love Him, not because he makes everything go right for us, but He wants us to love Him because of who he is. Many people think the book of Job is a book about suffering. It's not. The issue in the book of Job is "Will Job love God, even if it all goes wrong?" If Job loses everything - his house, his wife, his children, his cattle, his sheep - everything he has - will he still love God? Will you still love God even if you suffer?

One of the most moving experiences of my life was to walk around the remains of Dachau concentration camp near Munich. For two hours I didn't want to speak. At times I couldn't speak. I walked around that camp on that grey, cold, foggy morning, and I was crying inside. Even though I couldn't hear the shrieks of those who were tortured in that place, or see the faces of the 12,000 Russians used for target practice on the SS rifle range, or smell the corpses being burned in the crematoriums, it wasn't difficult to imagine the hell of Dachau.

But in this hell hole a miracle took place. For four years Christian Reger survived life in Dachau. Christian Reger was the pastor of a church that opposed Hitler. His church organist betrayed him to the SS. He spent four years surviving in hell. He saw all the horrors that the SS could devise. After the war Christian Reger went back to Dachau. He made it his mission in life to greet visitors and tell them that God's love is deeper than the depths of hell. That in the midst of almost indescribable suffering, God could still be found.

When we suffer, God is there.

In his first month in Dachau, this Pastor abandoned all hope in a loving God. Then in July 1941 something happened. He got a letter from his wife, and on the bottom was a Bible reference. Reger had smuggled a Bible in with him and so he looked up the verses and read them over and over. That same afternoon he was to undergo interrogation, and he was terrified, for he knew he would have to name other Christians on the outside. As he was going into the interrogation, another Pastor slipped a match box into his pocket. He found a piece of paper in the match box, and on the piece of paper was the same scripture reference that his wife had sent him.

The scripture was part of the speech delivered by Peter and John just after they got out of prison. It comes from Acts chapter 4 verses 26 - 29. The last part of that verse says, "Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." That incident transformed his life. He realised that God was even in Dachau with him. And that truth, that even in the depths of indescribable suffering, God is there, made all the difference.

God's love is deeper than the depths of hell. He is there when it hurts. No matter how much you are suffering, He is with you. Ask Him to show Himself to you.

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland