



You Can Help the Hurting

By Lynn Gardner



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Part 3:

Seeing God's Role in Suffering

What is God's role in human suffering? If God is loving and all-powerful, why does He not stop suffering? Why does He let good people suffer? These profound questions deserve careful thought. The fact of suffering is the most common objection to belief in a loving God. A national survey revealed the question people would most like God to answer was, "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?"

Deep grief and intense suffering force us to think about our relationship with God. Before we can effec-

tively help others who are hurting, we must find our own answers to these questions. It is important that we have a sound biblical view of God's role in suffering.

Blame God or Trust God

God gets the blame for terrible things that happen in our world. For example, many turned against God because of the atrocities of the Holocaust. Alister McGrath states,

Instead of acknowledging that there seems to be something wrong with

human nature causing people to inflict suffering on others, they have taken the easy way out, blaming God for all the ills of the world. . . . Trying to pin the blame on God is a crude evasion of human responsibility; it is as unfair as it is unrealistic.¹

It was human beings, not God, who planned and conducted the death camps.

Many blame God even for their own evil behavior. A boxer who had killed his opponent in the ring said, "Sometimes I wonder why God does

the things He does.” A woman who became pregnant by her boyfriend said she asked God, “Why have You allowed this to happen to me?” The South Carolina mother who purposefully allowed the car containing her two sons to roll into a lake, drowning both boys, said she screamed, “Oh God! Oh God, no! What have I done? Why did You let this happen?”

Philip Yancey asks, “Did God arrange these incidents?” He answers, “To the contrary, I see them as spectacular demonstrations of human freedom exercised on a fallen planet.”²

Who is responsible for the bad things in the world? If God made the world, isn't He ultimately responsible? If not God, should the blame be placed on the devil? Or are human beings to blame for evil and suffering? In spite of devastation, disease, and death in the world, do we have a basis for trusting in a loving, all-powerful God?

The Cathedral and the Architects

Before World War II, A. E. Wilder-Smith frequently visited the impressive Gothic cathedral in Cologne on the Rhine River in western Germany. He admired its flying buttresses, high-domed roof, two towers, and stained-glass windows. He also admired the architects and masons who over the centuries had planned and built the cathedral. Its sturdy endurance and beauty gave testimony to the excellence of their craftsmanship.

During World War II Cologne suffered extensive bombing. A number of bombs hit the cathedral and did considerable damage. When Wilder-Smith returned to Germany after the war in 1946, he was shocked at the sight of the cathedral. Most nearby buildings were destroyed, but the cathedral stood. The gaping holes in the towers revealed the massive masonry that kept the building from collapsing. Though badly damaged, it was not destroyed.

While he observed the chaos and remembered the former beauty, he said he never once connected that chaos with any defect on the part of the architects and masons. They did not make it for this ruin. Observing the damaged building, he did not doubt the existence of the architects or the masons. Even as it stood in ruins it bore testimony to the intelligent design and masterful workmanship of its builders.

No one would accuse the builders of producing the ruins. The mixture of chaos and order did not lead one to assume it had no architects nor that its creators were responsible for both its construction and destruction. Something had happened between its

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creation and its condition in 1946.³

In our world today we see evidence of a grand designer, but we also see much disorder. All around us we find beauty and ugliness, hope and despair, health and sickness, life and death. It is a wrong conclusion to decide that, because bad things happen in this world, God does not exist. It is a wrong conclusion to decide that He caused evil to happen.

Creation and the Fall

When God created the heavens and the earth, He said it was good. When He created man and woman, He declared that good. We are made in the image of God with the ability to understand, the ability to choose, and the ability to love. Adam and Eve had the freedom to respect God's role as the supreme authority in the universe or to commit the supreme evil, rebelling against God. They chose to obey themselves rather than God. God did not

create evil, but He did create freedom. Adam and Eve had the option of obeying God and enjoying perfection or rejecting God and experiencing a world of evil and suffering.

C. S. Lewis said,

... badness is only spoiled goodness. And there must be something good first before it can be spoiled. ... evil is a parasite, not an original thing.⁴

If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.⁵

Lewis observes that when you have a self, there is the possibility of wanting to be the center, in fact, wanting to be God. Satan put into the minds of our first ancestors

that they could “be like gods”—could set up on their own as if they had created themselves—be their own masters—invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.⁶

True happiness apart from God does not exist.

Sin changed everything from the original creation. Man's sin brought devastation, pain, disease, and death to a good creation (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12-14). The blame for evil in the world rests with human beings, not with God. Sin is rebellion against God. We are not imperfect people who need to be improved; we are rebels who need to unconditionally surrender. We still bear the image of

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God, but what God created as good has gone bad. Our physical world also has suffered disruption because of the fall and groans in this current condition (Romans 8:19, 20, 22).

As sinners we are abnormal in contrast to what God originally created. God did not make the world as it now is. The chaos in our world has resulted from man's rebellion against God and his inhumanity to man.

Yancey asks, "Is God somehow responsible for the suffering in this world?" Yancey answers that, in an indirect way, He is. "But giving a child a pair of ice skates, knowing that he may fall, is a very different matter from knocking him down on the ice." Yancey observes,

Any discussion of the unfairness of suffering must begin with the fact that God is not pleased with the condition of the planet either. . . . To judge God solely by the present would be a tragic mistake. . . . The Bible communicates no message with more certainty than God's displeasure with the state of creation and the state of humanity.⁸

The Balcony and the Road

McGrath uses an analogy of a balcony on the second floor of a house and the roadway below. The balcony is the perspective of the observer who watches people in the road struggling with their suffering. Those on the road have the experience of the participant. They struggle with difficulties that at times seem insurmountable. To stand on the balcony is to learn from the wisdom of those who have gone before us. You are on the road when pain, suffering, and death enter your life and your family. You are forced to wrestle with the deep issues of life and your relationship with God.⁹

God gives us much information in the Bible to help us see the big picture—the creation, the fall, and His plan and program of redemption. This is the view from the balcony.

When the Israelites suffered captivity in Egypt, God heard their groaning and rescued them (Exodus 2:25). God knew exactly what was going on, and He cared. The prophets indicate that God sees the evil done on the earth and hears the cries of the distressed, and He cares. The book of Hosea teaches that when people sin, God suffers, and His compassion seeks their return (Hosea 11:5-9).

Where is God in suffering? He came down from Heaven and joined us on the road. Jesus was God in human form facing the temptations and sufferings that are common to life on this planet. He faced the frustrations and difficulties of everyday life. He was despised, betrayed, rejected, tortured, and killed, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. To those who ask, "Why doesn't God do something about suffering?" we must answer, "He did. He became a man and suffered and died to save us from our sins."

A small boy heard the story of Jesus dying on the cross and he protested, "If God had been there that wouldn't have happened." But God was there; He was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Charles Wesley sang:

Amazing love! how can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

The divine Son of God suffered on the cross to give us the victory over suffering and evil.

Cornelius Plantinga Jr. has said,

We do not refer each other to the cross of Christ to explain evil. It is not as if in pondering Calvary we will at last understand throat cancer. We rather lift our eyes to the cross, whence comes our help, in order to see that God shares our lot and can therefore be trusted.¹⁰

God does not explain why we have specific suffering, but He does share our suffering with us as a loving Father. God demonstrated His love for

the world by becoming a man and dying on the cross. Christ's death and resurrection give us the ultimate answer to sin, which is the ultimate cause of suffering and death. God did not give us only a balcony view. Jesus came not as a tourist observer but as a fellow struggler on the road.

Cling to Jesus

A young man struggling with the problem of suffering was told by a wise philosophy teacher he would not find the answer in philosophy. The Christian philosopher said he too had struggled with suffering but his advice was to "Hold on to the person of Jesus." God does not offer us a logical argument to deal with suffering. The problem of suffering is not solved by reason, but is resolved by faith.

The best answer is the person of Jesus. He can identify with us. Cling to the person of Jesus Christ. He deserves our absolute trust. He is the ultimate help for the hurting.

¹Alister McGrath, *Suffering and God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 18, 19.

²Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 56, 57.

³A. E. Wilder-Smith, *The Paradox of Pain* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1971), 46-50.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 35, 36.

⁵*Ibid.*, 37.

⁶*Ibid.*, 38, 39.

⁷Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 65, 66.

⁸*Ibid.*, 67.

⁹McGrath, *Suffering and God*, 11-16.

¹⁰Quoted in Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, 230.

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