



Purpose

in

Pain

by Keith Glasgow

Cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, bushfires, tornados and floods seem to be a regular occurrence in our 21st century world. Senseless gun massacres, terrorist bombs, horrific wars with millions killed, maimed or displaced. Violence on our streets and in our homes. Everyone at some point faces a health crisis, a relationship breakdown, serious financial loss or the death of a loved one.



The “Pulitzer” prize-winning photo taken in 1994 shocked the world. Taken during the Sudan Famine, it depicts a malnourished child crawling towards an United Nations food camp, located a kilometre away. The vulture is waiting for the child to die because it too was hungry.

Thomas Huxley wrote: *“If our hearing were sufficiently acute to catch every note of pain, we would be deafened by one continuous scream”*

The problem of evil and suffering confronts every philosophy and world-view. It is not a problem unique to the Christian faith.

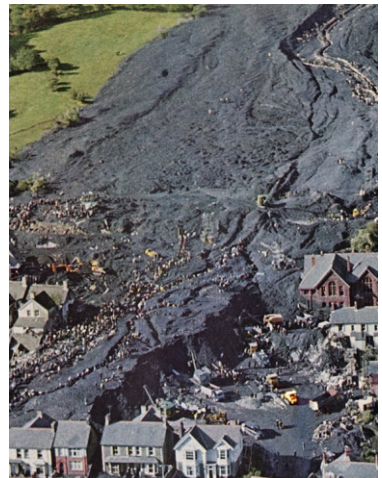
John Wenham wrote: *“Evil constitutes the biggest single argument against the existence of an Almighty, loving God”*

There are answers, but not all the answers – at some level the problem of evil remains a mystery.

“With God there are a lot of rational answers ... answers that satisfy your heart. Without God there aren't any answers” (Michael Willessee).

1. The Problem of a good God allowing evil and suffering

It was 9:15 am on the 21st October 1966 and the first lesson at the Aberfan Primary School had begun. The small mining village in South Wales greeted the morning as any other work day. Then tragedy struck as an immense flood of black coal-sludge gushed down a man-made hill and engulfed the classrooms.



Five teachers and 109 pupils were unable to escape and drowned in the thick slime.

An interviewer on B.B.C. television asked a clergyman how God could allow it to happen. "*Well,*" he answered, "*I suppose we have to admit that this one of those occasions when The Almighty made a mistake.*"

Does God make mistakes?

Suffering and evil raises questions about God's nature, not His existence. Allowing evil in the world He created seems to be inconsistent with being loving, powerful and good.



Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book "When bad things happen to good people" writes: "*We are forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, and a powerful God who is not totally good.*" He prefers to believe in a good God who finds it "*too difficult to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.*"

The Bible teaches that God is both. He is totally good and all-powerful. Why then does He allow suffering? His goodness would surely be the motive to bring an end to all the injustice, disease and evil in His world, and His power would surely mean He has the ability to do something about the problem! Why does He not act to give His created beings relief from sorrow and pain?

I. God could not create evil (and suffering)

Evil cannot be created as it is not something in itself. You can have good without evil, but you cannot have evil without good. Evil is a lack of good, or a corruption of that which is good. Darkness is a lack of light, disease is a lack of health, death is a lack of life, and evil is a lack of good.

Evil is a parasite. Like rot in an apple, evil can corrupt something that is good. But evil cannot be 'made good' with good. A person with the flu can pass on the germs



to all the healthy people in the room, but a healthy person cannot impart that health to a room full of people suffering with the flu!

II. God's 'problem' with removing suffering

To stop all suffering requires the complete removal of all evil. Most of the world's troubles would cease if people were good!

Injustice, exploitation, corruption and careless or selfish management of resources, and self-serving political advantage, have all been major reasons behind millions of deaths in our generation. World military expenditure is estimated to have reached over \$1.6 trillion per year which represents over \$200 for each person in the world. If this money was spent on food and medicine ...!

A recent communiqué from the UNICEF reveals that currently 21,000 children under the age of five die each day from preventable disease, often caused by malnutrition, unsafe drinking water, or from the lack of very cheap medicine.

If God were to remove all evil from the world, He would have to remove all the people, as all are guilty of greed, envy and selfishness! If you were God, where would you draw the line?

Would you remove a person who tells a lie, or leave an Adolph Hitler?

III. God created humans with a free will

The only way for God to destroy evil is for Him to destroy our freedom to choose. We were created by God "in His image". We were given the dignity of individual freedom to choose between good and evil.



Without this freedom we would be no more than living robots, programmed to be good. Remove our freedom to do evil and the ability to love goes with it! We would have a peaceful world, but would be forced to live by God's laws whether we like it or not!

God created us to experience life at its very best: a life of love and respect for each other. Selfishness (sin) seems to have ruined God's intentions, but God has not given up on humanity! He cannot rid the world of evil without removing everybody, so He has devised a plan to change people from evil to good.

The principle of responsibility

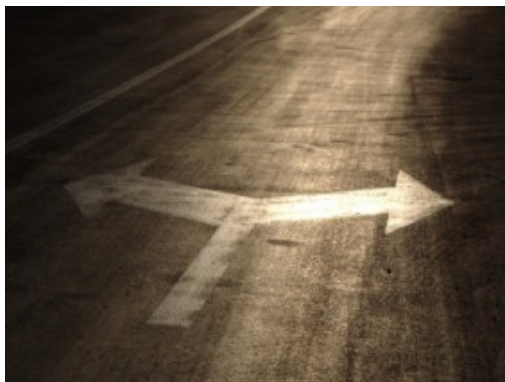
Our freedom of choice carries total responsibility when the wrong choice is made. If God says "Thou shalt not kill" and you decide to shoot your boss, God is not going to reach out of the sky and shield him from the bullet! If God always stopped evil happening we would live in an unreal world.

He has chosen to teach us that we are responsible beings. We reap what we sow. If an airline pilot ignores the rules and flies too low over a mountain range, the resulting disaster cannot be blamed on God!

Perfectly made

God is good and His creation therefore was also good. *“God saw everything that He made, and behold, it was very good”* (Genesis 1:31).

As Creator, God had the right to expect love and obedience from those He made. But love that is forced is not true love. Parents want their children to obey them out of love and respect, rather than out of fear. Similarly God did not interfere with man's free choice but warned him that disobedience would bring death.



The original choice

In Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve were confronted with a basic choice whether to believe God's Word or listen to Satan's lie. They ate the forbidden fruit in the belief that in so doing they would become like God. Their act of disobedience to God resulted in a number of unavoidable consequences.

A new ruler

Adam and Eve placed themselves under the rule of Satan. God was no longer their King. The devil claimed authority over

them and their descendants because they had given in to his subtle temptation. The Bible says that the world is still under the devil's rule: *“We know that the whole world is in the power of the evil one”* (1 John 5:19). Earthquakes, droughts and violent storms are evidences of the evil world ruler behind the scenes. Man is fully responsible because he originally chose to rebel against God.

Paradise lost

God warned Adam that disobedience would result in death: *“You will surely die”* (Genesis 2:17).

Death involves separation from God, and that separation carries the seed of decay causing the aging process, sickness, deformity and physical death followed eventually by eternal separation from God's presence in hell.

“When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned” (Romans 5:12 NLT).



The only thing good about death

Death brings to an end our existence in a weak, sinful body, which would otherwise continue forever to cause suffering and pain. Death allows for the provision of a new body which the Bible says will not be subject to decay. The end of the one must precede the beginning of the other, just as a seed must be buried before it sprouts into a new plant.

A new opportunity

God could not reverse mankind's mistake, but in His great wisdom and mercy allowed a period of time before physical death, for all people to turn back to Him.

God does not destroy evil, He defeats evil

Can God defeat evil without destroying freedom? **YES!** The genius is that God allows evil while He works for our ultimate good, and will one day ultimately defeat evil.

2. The purpose of God in allowing evil and suffering

• God's wisdom

Suffering and evil seem to be inconsistent with God who is loving, powerful and good.

But God is also wise!

We don't stop a person mid-sentence and say "You're not making sense"

Justice delayed is not justice denied!

In 1984, Johanne Hatty, a beautiful, intelligent young Sydney woman was strangled. Only recently, many years later, DNA technology has helped convict her killer. A Supreme Court jury took two hours to find David Fleming guilty of her murder.

We don't read half a novel and criticise the author for not resolving the plot!

Paul Harvey, a young man dying of cancer, said these words to his grieving family:

"Don't worry, as I do not believe that the Divine architect of the universe ever builds a staircase that leads to nowhere."

"Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)



- **God's warning**

Some forms of cancer have no warning pains. They can end up quite advanced before they prompt investigation. But if symptoms appear early, a diagnosis can be made and treatment started before it's too late. If God removed suffering, mankind would lose one of the greatest warnings of a greater evil facing us.

2 Peter 3:9 "God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"

Suffering in this life, due to mankind's wrong choice, is evidence of the truth of God's warning that there is eternal suffering ahead.

True love can legitimately cause pain

A parent shows love by disciplining a misbehaving child. God allows pain **because** He loves us!

Lam 3:32-33 NLT "Though He brings grief, He also shows compassion because of the greatness of His unfailing love. For He does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow"



Pain and death have a remedial purpose.

Pain is one way God has chosen to show us that something has gone wrong with His creation. It's His means of getting through to us!

Suffering forces us to think soberly about life, and the eternity that follows. C.S. Lewis wrote: *"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pains: it is God's **loud-speaker** to rouse the ear of a deaf world"*

Without pain or death, most people would go on with no regard for God and face a far worse prospect!

Jesus spoke to those who spend all their effort making this life comfortable at the expense of preparing for the eternity to follow: *"What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his own soul?"* (Mark 8:36).

God doesn't finally deal with evil and wrong in this life. He is storing all things up for a future day of judgement. Before that day, every person has the freedom to choose their destiny.

Acts 17:31 "God commands all men to repent for He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead"

Revelation 21:14,15

"Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from His presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire"

C S Lewis in 'The Great Divorce' writes: *"There are only two kinds of people in the end - those who say "Thy will be done O God" and those to whom God says: "Thy will be done."* The only people in hell will be those who choose to be there.

God's love in action



But God did become involved with us in our suffering.

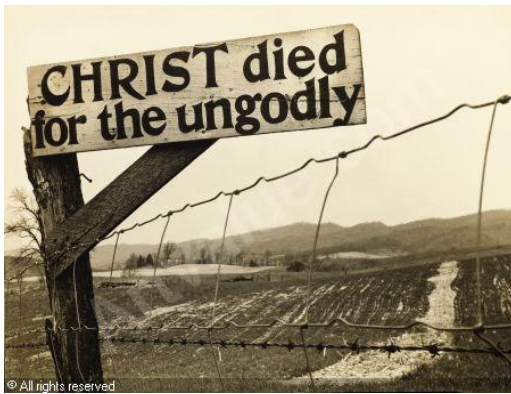
"For God so loved (cared for) the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Though it was our sin and evil that caused all our pain and sorrow, Jesus Christ showed His amazing grace by taking upon Himself our punishment. He died so as to make a way for us to be forgiven and eventually live with Him in heaven where there is no sorrow, pain or death.

"God shows His love towards us in that, while we were still sinners (unworthy), Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

A man was beating his wife and child in a wild temper. He left the house and drove recklessly through the streets of the neighbourhood. He eventually smashed into a tree and was admitted to hospital in a serious condition. He needed blood urgently. Upon examination it was found that his blood was a rare type and his daughter was the only one who could give blood to save his life. She bravely lay down on the bed adjacent to her dying father and the direct transfusion was commenced.

The child went to sleep and had to be wakened when the life-saving procedure had finished. She looked up, quite surprised, and said *"Do you mean I didn't have to die"*? So free and so spontaneous was her love that she willingly lay down her life (or so she thought) to save her unworthy father.



God's love moved Him to give His life to pay for our sin. He continues to allow suffering because He *"is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9).

In one sense God does stand back and not act to stop sorrow and pain. If people are happy and contented, but at the same time going to eternal hell, they would never listen to God's voice and turn back! The Great Physician recognizes that the disease, not the symptoms, must be treated if a lasting cure is to result.

God cannot change your will. Only you can do that! But He can allow the trials of life to be a warning signal of the disease of sin and its fatal result.

3. God's providence in allowing suffering

In Psalm 119:71, we read *"It is good for me to be afflicted"*. God's providence is shown in the way He works behind the scenes in His constant care for all creation. He uses people's evil words and actions, natural disasters, pain and suffering to bring about a good end.



God always has a good end in view

"In all things God works for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28).

A survivor of a shipwreck managed to build a small hut from pieces of debris and driftwood on a small deserted island. He returned from the other side of the hill one day to find that the hut had burned down, and his few precious possessions had been destroyed. Angry and bewildered he began accusing God of not caring. Within a few hours he saw a ship steaming towards his beach. The captain later explained: *"We saw your smoke-signal and came to rescue you."*

War and famine do not increase the death-rate, but God often uses them to awaken people to their need of Jesus Christ. God also uses suffering to build into our lives the qualities of faith, courage, patience, humility and sympathy.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

The Christian can confidently face the severest suffering with faith and hope

"We do not lose heart. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).



4. God's promise in allowing suffering

A brand new baby in its mother's arms more than compensates for the brief but acute pain of childbirth. Because the mother knows the purpose of her suffering and the joy which will be the outcome, she finds strength and perseverance. Similarly, the Christian can rejoice in spite of the very severest trials, because of a hope which far outweighs the sorrows of this life. Allegiance to Jesus doesn't automatically protect you from suffering, in fact often the opposite is true! But the hope of the Christian is certain. It springs from faith in the promises of God.

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory which is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" (Romans 5:3-5).

Paradise restored

We are not spared from suffering in this life, but God has planned a future home for all who love Him. Heaven is where God lives. It is a place where *"God Himself will be with them (His people) and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away"* (Rev.21:3-4).

God shows that life on earth is futile in itself. Heaven is the eternal home God has prepared for us. Earth is just the foyer in which we remain until we are ushered into the King's palace.

"For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor.4:18).



God's point in suffering

Jesus said, *"What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life"* (Mark 8:36)?

When all our effort is spent in making this life comfortable and happy at the expense of preparing for the eternity to follow, our energies are wasted.

Is hell a certainty?

God is loving and compassionate, yet He allows suffering and death to afflict mankind, often tragically. Why? Because of Adam's original sin.

If then God allows suffering and death today as a result of man's original wrong choice, it is not difficult to believe that He will allow suffering and eternal death in hell as a result of man's unwillingness to change.

Suffering is intended by God to be remedial, to cause people to turn from sin and humbly seek God. However, if any are unwilling to change their ways, there is nothing further God can do. People will only be in hell because of their own wilful choice.

The ultimate choice

Our choice today is essentially the same as that which Adam and Eve were confronted with originally. However, God was able to intervene and bring salvation after the original sin, whereas your choice now will determine your destiny for all eternity. It is final!



Your choice is: Will you believe God's Word and turn in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ as your own personal Saviour? Or will you choose to do nothing about it?

God's Word says: *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, but God's wrath remains on him"* (John 3:36).

How to get right with God

The Bible says *"Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved"* (Acts 2:21). You must trust Jesus Christ to save you, because He died for your sins and rose again to be your personal Saviour and Lord.

What to pray

(Read through the prayer below one sentence at a time, and check that you agree with what it says before praying it in faith to the Lord).

Dear Lord Jesus,

I admit that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness.

I am willing to turn from my sins, and I trust You to be my Saviour.

I believe that You are God, and that You died for my sins and then rose again.

Please forgive me all my sins.

I now invite You to come into my life. With God's help I will follow and obey You as Master of my life. Please help me face difficult days with Your strength and help.

Amen.

"For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Trusting God

Some marine plants floating at the surface of the ocean grow from a depth of up to 70 metres. Severe storms with surging waves cannot wrench them from their place. They are fastened to the rocks in the still, deep waters below. Everyone has to face times of pain or sorrow. On the surface the fury of the elements seem to show no mercy. But God is a rock in quiet waters. Those who trust in Him can experience a deep security and peace amidst the fiercest storms of life.



God will not allow His children to suffer more than they are able to bear. He has promised *“God is faithful, He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear”* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Plimsoll was a wise man. He was concerned that many ships were being lost at sea because they were overladen. He devised a means to estimate the limit of freight a ship could carry safely, and arranged for shipbuilders to paint a line on the hulls of all ships. Today we call this the "Plimsoll line". Each ship is not permitted to load any more cargo on board once the Plimsoll Line is level with the water. God has placed a "Plimsoll Line" on your life. He will not allow you to be loaded with burdens too heavy for you to carry.



Turn to Him and trust Him. He is faithful and good. *“Cast all your anxiety on Him, for He cares for you”* (1 Pet.5:7).

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