

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Background

Suffering, pain and trouble were among the results of man's original sin: the Fall. The world became disordered because mankind disobeyed the Creator. (See Genesis 1:31; 2:16–17; 3:16–19.)

Some pain we might call 'suffering' serves a useful purpose. For example, if heat did not lead us to flinch from a hot surface we might be burned. But much human pain and suffering appears to be rather random. So believers are sometimes asked why God permits such suffering, whether at the hands of other people or as a result of events in nature such as earthquakes and tsunamis. Of course, Christians themselves are not immune to suffering – whether caused by natural disasters, sickness or direct human agency (as when people commit violent acts against others).

Basic beliefs about how God acts

There is a division between those who believe that God's relation to the universe is essentially that he set it all in motion and then left it to carry on without his direct intervention (a view called 'Deism'), and those who hold to the biblical perspective: that God not only created the world (all things, the universe), he also holds it in existence and he does intervene because he is actively in charge and, as scripture attests, he does miracles which glorify him.

The righteousness of God and the sinfulness of mankind

The puzzling question the unbeliever may ask as to *why God allows suffering* is best answered by looking at a characteristic of God: he is perfectly just, righteous, fair. The Bible witnesses to this at many points. The Bible student can search the prophetic books and discover a great many passages that reveal this. Jesus himself taught disciples about judgement, the punishment of the wicked in hell and the vindication of the righteous. The epistles and the book of Revelation attest to the coming righteous judgement.

So some suffering of mankind can be deserved, or may have a purpose in the divine plan; and, if some suffering is undeserved, we can be assured that God will right all injustices ultimately. Sinners will be punished in hell following an utterly just judgement. Wrongs will be righted at last. We might think that this will be wonderful: all the very bad people won't have got away with their evil deeds, and how good that will be for the rest of us! The problem with such thinking is that it means we are regarding ourselves as inherently, naturally good and deserving of divine approval. As has been indicated in other Units, the epistles (not least the opening chapters of Romans) spell out clearly the witness that runs right through the whole of scripture: sin is man's *natural* condition. Therefore all deserve to be punished by a good God, because we have *all* sinned. Only Jesus lived a perfect life. We have too high a view of man's goodness. We need to see the human race as God sees us: a race of fallen, disobedient, rebellious sinners. It is only because God is graciously giving mankind opportunities to repent and live righteously that we are being spared. That is not a right, it is a mercy.

Genesis 18:25; Psalm 100:5; 103:1–14; 119:67, 71, 75; Isaiah 59:1–21

Corporate effects: people harm each other

In one sense, the 'problem' of suffering becomes less acute when we are aware of the sin operating among us. We can begin to see why things are as they are. Nonetheless, simple compassion makes us recoil at the suffering, for example, of sick or injured small babies who are too young to have committed deliberate sins. Then we come up against the fact that sinful human beings not only harm themselves, they harm others, and a climate of sin exists on earth in which those who are not personally directly culpable for a specific wrong are nonetheless getting hurt. There is a corporate dimension to man's disobedience which is hard for many people to understand because we tend to be individualistic in our thinking. (See Psalm 10:1–11.)

God entered our suffering world

God may allow some suffering. Mankind has a measure of freedom to reject God's will and ways, and disobedience has consequences, some of which may occur in this life. Indeed, God can even use suffering for a good purpose. The formation of virtuous character and spiritual development may be energised by some suffering. God's good purposes might not always be understandable to the sufferer. (Job was unaware of some of the events described

in chapters 1–2 of the Book of Job), but we can trust the Lord always to do right. In Christ, God himself has entered into our suffering. Jesus has taken sin and its punishment onto himself on the Cross so that there can be salvation and healing as foretastes of a final day of reckoning, the righting of wrongs and dealing with death.

Job **37:13**; **40:1–8**; Isaiah **25:6–8**; **53:3–5**; **55:9**; Matthew **10:29–30**; **13:41–43**; **25:31–46**; Mark **10:18**; Luke **13:1–5**, **22–30**; John **4:38–41**; **9:1–3**; Acts **3:1–8**, **9:36–42**; Romans **8:20–23**; **8:28–30**; 1 Corinthians **2:16**; **15:21–26**; 2 Corinthians **1:3–4**; 1 Timothy **5:23**; 2 Timothy **4:20**; Hebrews **4:16**; **12:5–11**; James **1:2–4**; **5:13–16**; 1 Peter **1:6–7**; Revelation **21:1–4**

How can Christians deal with personal suffering?

So Christians face suffering with faith, enduring even when they cannot fathom all the whys and wherefores, drawing strength from the Lord, accepting that suffering may even spring from their loyalty to Christ. (Jesus warned disciples that in this world they would have trouble; John **16:33**.) We believe that God may choose to heal and deliver us even now, in his good purposes. We look to the Lord to bring good even in the midst of the suffering he permits. The faithful take courage from the knowledge that God will ultimately wipe away every tear. So, for a believer, suffering is only a passing problem: one day we shall share in the full salvation won for us at Calvary. Those who persevere in faith will triumph!

Genesis **45:5–8**; **50:19–21**; Job **1:21–22**; **5:7**; **23:10**; Psalm **9:9**; **27:5**; **91:15**, **94:12**; **121:1–8**; Isaiah **35:10**; **50:10**; Matthew **5:11–12**; **8:16**, **10:8**; Mark **16:17–18**; John **10:27–29**; **11:25–26**; **14:1–3**, **27**; **15:18–21**; **16:33**; Acts **14:22**; Romans **5:3–5**; **8:28–30**; 1 Corinthians **12:9**; 2 Corinthians **4:17**; **7:10**; **12:7–10**; 1 Thessalonians **3:2–4**; 2 Thessalonians **1:4–9**; 2 Timothy **3:11–12**; Hebrews **11:34–39**; **12:6–13**; **13:5–6**; James **1:2–3**, **12**; **5:14–15**; 1 Peter **1:6–7**; **2:20–24**; **3:14–17**; **4:12–19**; **5:10**; 2 Peter **2:9**; Jude **24–25**; Revelation **1:17–18**; **3:12**; **21:4**