

Reason to Believe: If God is Good and Powerful, Why is There So Much Suffering?

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Romans 8:35-39

This morning we return to our summer series on Apologetics. We're opening up God's Word to guide us on one of the deeper questions of human life: Why is there so much pain in this world, and how does God fit into it?

I was 6 years old and in first grade when this problem came home for me. One of my classmates in Denver had fallen off a forklift he was riding. And he was run over and killed. His name was Andy. I can still picture my mom's face and the edge of our garage door where she was standing when she told me what happened.

Such things should not happen. And yet they do. This thorn in our fragile flesh has kept sincere Christians and faithful scholars busy over the centuries. Philosophers and human communities going all the way back to Job's friends have tried to answer this question logically. They've tried to justify God's ways in terms human minds can understand.

'God, if you are good, and if you are paying attention, if you are powerful-then why don't you stop the suffering? Why does this world hurt so very much?'

The question of how a good God can seem to stand by and watch as his creatures suffer is a rocky coastline where Christian faith can run aground, where the boats of our souls can get swamped. So, it's important to say at the outset that the best time to build the scaffolding of our convictions about God in the face of suffering is when we're **not** currently suffering. If you are in deep distress today, I do not pretend that these reasons we explore will be satisfying for you. I do pray that you will hear in them the good news of a God who never leaves you, no matter what.

So we turn to one of the most beloved chapters of the Bible, Romans 8, which includes sentences like these: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who^[a] have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). These verses are profoundly comforting when we're bone-deep convinced that nothing we endure in this life is outside the control of a good God, when we trust that he is bending the arc of history toward his good purposes.

Yet honest believers and readers of Scripture can also be deeply troubled by these ideas. If we can't *see* how God is working something troubling for good, whose problem is that-ours, or God's? Is it our perception of bad circumstances simply wrong? Is it a sign we don't love Jesus enough if we can't identify how he is working something bad for our good? Or, is it possible that somehow God isn't the all-knowing, all-powerful, "overflowing source of all good" that we thought he was?

One deceptively attractive option is to respond to the problem this way: "Bad things happen in this world. But it's because out there alongside the loving-kindness of God is Satan, the roaring lion, seeking somebody to devour. Tragedies in this life come from the struggle between the opposing forces of God's goodness and Satan's designs."

For Christians eager to defend God's goodness, who want to avoid any hint that God is the author of suffering, this idea seems to make some sense. But it strips God of another character trait that we want to hold up alongside God's goodness: his power, his omnipotence.

Saying that God's power doesn't extend even over the miseries of this life gets us in the ballpark of a 3rd century belief system called Manicheanism, which saw good and evil as equal opposing forces in the world. The early church rejected this view as heresy.

So if we want to say, and we do, that God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful, we have to look somewhere else to try to shed a little light on the suffering in this world.

The most compelling response to this problem is called the Free Will Defense. It says that humans aren't puppets manipulated by a God who pulls all the strings. Instead, God created people genuinely free, capable of morally significant decisions-including the choice to turn against him and against each other. This genuine freedom is a great good that can only result from the real possibility that humans could choose against God. Riding the coattails of moral evil/human sin came natural evil/disaster and disease, what Paul and Christians after him call the 'groaning of creation.'

"Why," CS Lewis asks in *Mere Christianity*, "did God give [humans] 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. A world...of creatures that worked like machines-would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other...And for that they must be free. Of course, God knew what would happen if they used their freedom the wrong way: apparently He thought it worth the risk."

By the time we get to the 8th chapter of Romans, Paul has sounded the clear message that despite the groaning of creation and the human sufferings of this life, God is neither powerless nor inattentive while his good creation devolves under the consequences of sin. Nope, Paul says-God in Christ has already acted definitively to rescue his people from themselves, from their sin, from their inability to keep God's law, from the suffering that comes from that shadow side of human free will.

In Christ, God has been patiently working over the whole course of history to show how much he is 'for' us, despite the suffering that we've endured.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul gushes. "Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"

And then Paul goes on in a startling way. Two stark little lines from Psalm 44 about sheep waiting to die. They feel like an interruption in the flow of his thought: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."^[a]

Why did Paul pluck out these lines from the Old Testament and insert them right here? Psalm 44 paints a vivid picture of disorientation on the part of faithful believers. The writer protests the suffering of God's people at the hands of enemy armies. He wonders why God seems to have abandoned his people-especially because in his view, the people have faithfully kept the covenant. The Psalm ends by saying, in effect, "Wake up, God! Stop sleeping. Get up and help us! Rescue us because of your unfailing love" (Ps. 44:23-26).

In his reference to the Psalms, Paul tells a true story that bears acknowledging: the old, old reality that the suffering of God's people isn't new. It was a part of life for the first singers of the Psalm; it's part of life for the Roman Christians who have been kicked out of their city under Emperor Claudius, and it's still part of life for Christians all over the world.

Yet quoting the Old Testament also allows Paul to draw a sharp contrast between life before Jesus and life ever after. In Jesus, God has shown like never before how awake and aware he is to rescue his people! How determined, how conclusive, how far-reaching is his never-

failing, never-stopping love. Paul says those who are suffering and looking to God for rescue need look no further than Jesus.

Romans 8:31: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” There is no doubt in Paul’s mind about God’s commitment to see us safely home in Christ. Because this God in Christ suffered terribly himself-for us. In Jesus, God entered history, stepped into the frailty and muck and confusion and pain of human life, freely chose sacrificial love and bore the weight of the shadow side of free will-our sin.

God’s goodness, power, and knowledge have his creation so fully in hand that *even in these terrible things*, God is working to accomplish our greatest good: the restoration of properly functioning hearts, minds, and hands, and a restored relationship with him through Jesus.

All this brings us back to our initial question for Romans 8. Does Romans 8:28, the conviction that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,” mean that we should be able to perceive God’s good purpose in each and everything, even those things that bring great pain? More pointedly, does it mean that the tragedy of Andy’s death was actually somehow a good thing?

No. Biblical faith has the resources to tell the truth about suffering and hold that up alongside the ultimate good purposes of God.

Calvin Seminary philosophical theologian John Cooper describes the case of Christians who seek for years to find what good thing God is up to in some instance of suffering. Cooper asks, ‘If they can’t find an answer, are they blind?’ No, he says. Paul’s reference to “all things” in Romans 8:28 probably doesn’t mean “each and every thing”.

“More likely it means “the totality of things” Cooper writes. “God may allow some instances of evil and suffering that do not lead to greater good. But his whole plan, ordained from before the foundation of the world, does work together for the good of those who are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).” Cooper goes on: “[God’s] plan includes bad things that God does directly turn to our good. It includes perplexing things whose purpose takes a while to figure out. It includes awful things that are much worse than any good that comes from them. But all of these things work together for the ultimate good according to God’s plan. (“The Problem of Evil: The Shipwreck of Faith?” *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum*, Winter 2006, 7).

The Bible gives us lots of space to tell the truth about how bad things can be. And it also gives us great reason to affirm how good he still is.

One of the gifts of Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection is the coming of the Holy Spirit. The very presence of God with us, come what may. C.S. Lewis testifies to God’s silent presence in the face of unspeakable pain. Lewis first published his book *A Grief Observed* under a pen name because the cries of his soul in the wake of his wife Joy’s death were so profound he did not want to be identified as the author. In his writing, Lewis asks God: “Can I meet [my wife] again only if I learn to love you so much that I don't care whether I meet her or not? Consider, Lord, how [that] looks to us...When I lay these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort of 'no answer.' It is not the [silence of the] locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal, but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child; you don't understand.' Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think.”

In the end, brothers and sisters, we can’t argue our way through the problem of pain without taking steps of faith. But we can hear from others and testify ourselves to the presence of

a loving God who is with us and for us, come what may. Thanks be to God.

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