

## **If there is a good and all-powerful God, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?**

Most people see the world as full of suffering. That is a good thing, not the suffering, but that people see suffering as real. I know some people see suffering as an illusion, but I for one am not prepared to tell Auschwitz survivors that had they just thought the right kinds of thoughts they would have not experienced suffering. I think it is a surprise to people that the Bible very openly speaks of pain and suffering, even its oldest book (Job) is largely about pain and suffering. And then there's the bit about Jesus, God's very Son, experiencing an excruciating and unjust death. If you are in pain, the God of the Bible does not expect you to bury or ignore your anguish. He sees it as real.

But let's get to the question of why God would allow bad things to happen to good people. Most people see bad things coming from two sources, human behavior and natural forces. The first might take the form of murder or rape and the second the form of a hurricane or earthquake. When considering human behavior, it might have been possible for God to create beings who would never harm another, but I am not sure they would be what we call human beings.

Although there are some today who argue there is no free will, most believe we do and everyone acts as if we do. It is free choice that allows us to love. A few years back, a doll was available for purchase called the "Mr. Wonderful Doll." Press the doll's hand and it would say things like, "You look so beautiful in the morning," or, "You've been on my mind all day." I am sure there are plenty of women who would enjoy hearing those words, but not from a programmed machine! God designed us to love him and love others, but love requires volition. Of course, volition means that people can choose not to love. In giving us volition, God opened the possibility for evil, but he did so for the purpose of love.

When some people think about bad things happening to good people, they see a contradiction between suffering in the world and the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God. They ask: if God is all powerful and all loving, wouldn't he stop suffering? I once asked a group if they could think of a time when someone who is able to stop suffering, would still allow it out of love. Immediately a man responded, "Why sure, sometimes I see my son is about to do something that will likely give him a bruise or two, but I let him do it anyway because I want him to learn a skill that can only be learned that way." Similar to this father's answer, I think it is reasonable to assume that God allows some suffering so we can learn good things we couldn't learn otherwise.

Of course, there are times when it is difficult to see how good can come out of certain evils, like a vicious murder. At times like that, we find ourselves, Christian or non-Christian, shaking our heads, unable to make sense of things. If one does not believe in God, the best one can say is that "bad" genes and conditioning produced the murder. The Christian, however, can say the shaking of our heads is what we ought to do. God made us to obey him and enjoy a world where evil and suffering are non-existent. The reasoning capacity he gave us was for that kind of world; it was not for the kind of world that came about when we let evil enter in. So when we find ourselves unable to make sense of all the bad things that happen, we actually affirm what the Bible says is our God-given design.

So far, we've talked about suffering brought about by human behavior, but what of that caused by natural forces? According to the Bible, there are times when God allowed such events to occur as judgment upon particular people, but I think it would be unfair to point to any natural event today and conclusively say it was brought on by God's judgment. It's probably better to understand that just as

God made humans dynamic because of the potential positives, God also made the universe dynamic because of the potential positives. Could he have created a universe that did not have such natural events? I suppose he could, but I am not sure it would be the same kind of universe.

I think when we look at the question of why bad things happen to good people, one thing that bothers us is that there are those who experience more suffering and evil than others do. This is undeniable, but it seems to me that sooner or later we've all been handed a death sentence. If there is no God, it might even be better to die earlier so we don't have to experience suffering over a long period. But if there is a God, perhaps we should recognize death is a penalty due us for the evil we have done. At least, that's what the Bible says. Fortunately, it also says that this death can be overcome by eternal life, if we trust in the forgiveness provided through the sacrificial death of Christ.

I don't expect that the answers above to make suffering and evil more palatable. But perhaps they help one see that bad things and a good God aren't mutually exclusive. Even more than that, the very existence of evil may point to a good God, for if there is not a God who defines good, we must wonder how we can call anything evil in the first place.

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