



Why does God allow suffering?

Introduction

Purpose: to grapple with the question of suffering. For some this will be live question for you; others want to know how to answer questions from friends; many will be both in some way

People will have various different positions on this, so don't assume. You can stay quiet if you want to.

The question "Why does God allow suffering?" is not just an intellectual one. I find that most people ask this question not only because of the abstract suffering around the world. But they also ask it because they have encountered suffering and loss personally. So when we are discussing this question, we need to be mindful of this. It's not a debate to win points, it's a question of grief and pain for many.

There is no easy answer to this question. Sometimes the best and most honest way to tackle it is to simply say "I don't know." But we should wrestle with this question too, so let's dig a bit deeper while acknowledging our limitations.

Assumptions

Whenever we encounter a question - even if it's a question we have ourselves - we need to ask ourselves: what are the assumptions behind this? What does this question assume about the world, ourselves and about who God is?

What are some of the assumptions behind this question?

Assumptions are often some of these: Suffering is bad. God is good. God ought to be able to stop suffering. God wants to stop suffering.

One key assumption behind the question is that God actually exists!

The more detailed version of this question is: If God is good and all-powerful, why doesn't he end suffering?

The presence of suffering raises some further questions: Is God all-powerful but not good? Is God good but not all-powerful? If he is both, why doesn't he act?

God will put an end to suffering

What exactly does that mean? If God were to 'end suffering' what would that look like?

What does it mean to 'end suffering'?

The best picture of an end to suffering is the one God gives us in the Bible.

He promises to bring an end to war and violence; to put right what is broken in this world; to comfort all those who mourn; to end sickness, disease and even death.

Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.
(Isaiah 35:10)

He will wipe 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.
(Revelation 21:4)

God's purpose is to bring justice where there is evil, comfort where there is pain and healing where there is brokenness – to put an end to suffering.

So the Bible's answer to the question "Why does God allow suffering?" is to say, he doesn't. Not ultimately. But that simply changes our question, doesn't it. It is now the question "Why does God allow suffering *now*? What's taking him so long?"

God works in suffering

Let's consider Job's answer to this question. You can't really look at the question of suffering and God without considering Job's story. Here is a righteous man who goes through intense suffering. His 'friends' try to make sense of what is going on and fail miserably. Eventually God shows up and helps Job to see God's glory and majesty.

Job understandably asks "Why?" to his suffering. God doesn't give him an answer to Why, but helps him to see that God is way bigger than both his suffering and understanding.

Job's answer to the question of suffering is that there is much that we won't be able to understand about God and his working, and suffering is one of those things.

God is bigger than we understand. We need to be careful that this isn't a glib or naive way of approaching suffering. But it does have the humility to say perhaps God is doing something in suffering that we don't yet fully understand.

Yet we know that God wants to put an end to suffering. So why does he delay?

Consider that goal of an 'end to suffering'. To fully complete that goal, God would need to renew his creation. He would need to deal with evil, violence, injustice. He would need to deal with hatred, envy, jealousy and strife. He would need to deal with lies, lust, pride, selfishness and greed.

And that means he would have to deal with me...

The problem of suffering runs through the heart of every person. We may not be a mass murderer but for God to deal truly with suffering he would need to deal with the rebellion and self-centredness in our lives.

And he will. One day Jesus will return and bring in God's kingdom completely with an end to suffering. But he delays so that we might respond to his offer of forgiveness.

So consider Peter's answer to this question in 2 Peter 3:9. People in Peter's day were saying, "Ah God isn't going to deal with all the mess in this world." To which Peter answers:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

God will not allow suffering forever. He will deal with the problem of pain and evil. But he is patient for our sake, waiting for us to respond to him. But he won't wait forever.

God meets us in suffering

So how does this help us here and now? What should we think if we are going through suffering?

There is one final piece of the puzzle to add. God will not allow suffering forever, and God works in suffering. The third part is that God meets us in our suffering.

I said at the beginning that this question is rarely an abstract one. It usually links to some suffering that we, or someone we know, has gone through. But this question is not an abstract one for God either.

God is not far away and distant from the question of suffering. He has entered into it. He has suffered. In Jesus, God takes on human form and suffers. He experiences hunger and thirst. He experiences grief and loss. He is betrayed by a close friend. He is unjustly arrested and unfairly tried. He is tortured and beaten, spat on and mocked. He is executed by one of the most vicious means ever known in history and dies.

Jesus's story does not end in death, but he knew suffering. He knew pain. As Isaiah writes about Jesus many years before his birth:

He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. (Isaiah 53:3)

Again, we need to avoid glib and superficial answers to the question of suffering. Sometimes the best answer we can give is an honest "I don't know." But I also do know that God knows what it is like to suffer and meets us in the midst of our suffering, whatever it may be.

Questions

Conclusion

Next week: Don't all religions lead to God?

Resources

<https://www.bethinking.org/would-a-good-god-allow-suffering/why-does-god-allow-suffering>

<https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2016/July-2016/3-reasons-why-God-allows-suffering>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/do-tummy-aches-disprove-god/>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/july-online-only/doesgodallowtragedy.html>

<https://www.bethinking.org/would-a-good-god-allow-suffering/suffering-if-god-is-good-why-is-there-so-much-evil-in-the-world>

<https://www.bethinking.org/would-a-good-god-allow-suffering/answering-questions-about-suffering>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BENoJGkne4Y&feature=emb_title

https://www.bethinking.org/suffering/suffering_problem