

If God is good, then why do so many people suffer?

By Jeff Philpott

I've been asked this question a number of times and in many ways. The events of 9-11, a devastating tsunami, the loss of a loved one, evil in the world . . . all of these bring us back to the same question. If God is good, why this? Why this suffering? Even Christians, wrestling with what they know to be true about their God, earnestly seek the answer to this question. Can there be a biblical view of suffering?

I believe suffering to be within the perfect will of our Father. Now, I should pause here and say there is a mammoth difference between suffering being within the will of our Father and it being the desire of our Father. When I say that suffering is within the perfect will of our Father I mean that in His great plan for the universe, it is acceptable for Him to allow suffering within this world. I distinguish this from suffering being the desire of our Father, because that would mean He *wants* us to suffer, which I do not believe to be the case.

Recently, I have been studying and teaching through the book of Acts. I am amazed at the call of God on the life of Paul. In communicating His will regarding Paul, God says to his reluctant servant, Ananias, "...This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must *suffer* for my name." (Acts 9:15-16)

God actually calls Paul to a ministry whose hallmark is suffering. Notice God hasn't said, "I want Paul to suffer in the proclamation of my name." He simply declares a fact — Paul will learn how much he must suffer for the name of the Lord.

Later in the book of Acts, Paul is heaven-bent on getting to Jerusalem by Pentecost (Acts 20:16). However, the Holy Spirit has made it clear that danger waits in Jerusalem. While Paul is with the church in Tyre the Holy Spirit sounds the alarm of danger in Jerusalem. In Acts 21:4 we see that "through the Spirit" the disciples warn Paul not to go to Jerusalem. It *appears* that Paul has been warned by the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem.

We further get this impression when a prophet, named Agabus, comes to Paul shortly thereafter in Caesarea. He takes Paul's belt, ties it around his hands and feet, and proclaims "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" The natural response of the people surrounding Paul, likely similar to the response any concerned friend would have, is, "Paul, don't go!"

Even Luke is in agreement with a change of direction. Reflecting on the event, Luke writes, "When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem." (Acts 21:12)

Suffering Exposes Selfishness

Christians may believe that any warning of danger is a warning to change direction. When we have a friend announce they are pursuing a dangerous profession, such as a law enforcement officer, a firefighter, a soldier, or even a missionary, we sound the alarm. “Don’t do this,” we often urge, “It’s dangerous.” We ask questions like, “What about your safety?” “What about your family?” “What about your income?” It is not that these questions cannot be valid considerations, but I believe they mask something darker.

We believe that we ask these questions out of love. I would agree that concern is part of the motive. However, I would call into question the kind of love we articulate. I believe that what we articulate is a self-centered, self-protecting love. When we declare, “Don’t do this!” I believe we are actually proclaiming, “I am selfish!” It is likely the rare instance that we have the other person’s best interest in mind. It is more likely that what we are saying is, “I don’t want to be without your presence in my life.” “I want you near me.” “I want to have peace of mind concerning you.”

This can take an even darker turn when it comes to parents. If a child declares God is leading them into a dangerous vocation or ministry, parents often panic. They may have convinced themselves that they are looking out for the well-being of their children and/or grandchildren, but I don’t think that’s the case. It is more likely that selfish love has surfaced again. The parents have elevated their desires over that which the Lord desires for their children.

This may even go a step further, such as in my own circumstance. It may be that the parents don’t want to look bad in front of their peers. I grew up in a family of stockbrokers. My dad became a stockbroker in the early 1970s and my mom, not to be outdone by my dad, also got her broker’s license. In the early days my dad had been a Missouri state highway patrolman. (I always thought that was more fun to tell my friends.) Tired of the danger, the low pay, and the lack of appreciation, he switched to the more lucrative, and safe, career. He would often tell me, “Son, I wasted those early years. If you start at a younger age, you will have that many more years to generate income. You could be so much further ahead by the time you reach my age.”

Fortunately for me, and unfortunately for my parents, God had another plan for my life. I was initially pursuing the dream of being a broker. I interned at the home office of Edward Jones in St. Louis, Missouri between my junior and senior years at Appalachian State University. However, when I returned to college I felt like God was asking me, “Do you really want to live the rest of your life centered on the generation of income?”

I still remember the look on my parent’s faces when I declared I was going into vocational ministry. They couldn’t believe it. I didn’t know how much they were going through in regard to my decision until recently. My mom visited our home this past week and in the course of conversation, which centered on my income, she revealed to me a part of their earlier struggle. They had been sharing with some of their friends my career choice and those friends were as shocked as my parents. My mom told me that one of her friends said, “Cut him off. Then he’ll learn that he needs to provide for himself and his family.”

When my mother told me this, it caught me off-guard. Without thinking I simply responded, “Yes, but mom, do you really want to stand before God at your judgment and have to answer the question, ‘Why did you try to prevent my son from doing what I called him to do?’”

It must have been a Spirit-led moment because I am not normally that confrontational. My mother, rarely at a loss for words, froze at the thought. In a state of shock she said, "No, I don't."

Parents can become so worried about their self-image that they try to prevent their children from pursuing what God has called them to do. A parent can sacrifice the calling of God on their children's lives in pursuit of vanity or safety. Every parent wants to say, "My kid is a world-class surgeon." Or, "My son is a wealthy attorney." Or even, "My boy is the starting quarterback for the Kansas City Chiefs." But, who wants to say, "My children live in poverty in China, among a group of people you'll never hear about, teaching them about Jesus."

Paul was among a group of people struggling with similar issues. They certainly had heard from the Holy Spirit. They knew danger awaited Paul in Jerusalem. What they didn't understand was that a warning of danger wasn't necessarily a call to change direction. It may be dangerous, but someone has to run into the burning building; someone has to combat enemy fire; someone has to penetrate an AIDS ridden country for the gospel of Christ. "Danger" doesn't mean "don't go."

Paul answered his critics, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 21:13) The expression of their self-centered concerns wounded Paul's heart. Paul had already declared earlier, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." (Acts 20:24)

As for the warnings from the Holy Spirit, did they really mean Paul shouldn't go to Jerusalem? In Acts 20:22 we read, "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there." Either the Spirit had suddenly contradicted himself, or His warning was, simply, a warning. Paul knew what waited. He knew the warnings. The Spirit had warned him previously. "I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me." (Acts 20:23)

Suffering Brings us to a Crossroad

We hear a warning of danger and naturally we run away. We are always confused by those who are called to run *to* the danger. It isn't natural; it's supernatural, and often misunderstood. When it comes to the possibility of suffering, we naturally want to run away, but some are called to run into suffering. Those who have a value higher than safety, those who take risks and expose themselves to loss, we call heroes.

Now, we never choose this path. No one wakes up in the morning and prays, "Lord, today, heap on the suffering." Oswald Chambers says, "To choose to suffer means that there is something wrong; to choose God's will even if it means suffering is a very different thing. No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he chooses God's will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not." (Chambers, 1992, 223) Paul did not choose suffering. He chose God's will, regardless of suffering.

Consider Jesus, fully aware of his calling to the cross, yet challenged by Peter. In Matthew 16:21-23, Jesus tells the disciples that he must be killed. Peter, full of well-intentioned, yet selfish love, tells him, "Never!" Jesus rebukes him, saying that Peter does not have in mind the things of God.

Could it be that when it comes to our question of God's goodness in relation to suffering, we do not have in mind the things of God? Do we ever need to be rebuked? Do parents ever need to be confronted? The question was raised as to whether Jesus doubted the goodness of the Father when he was called to the cross. John Piper replies, "Never, never did (Jesus) doubt the goodness or power of His Father while confronting the worst evils in the universe. And this did not make Him "inhuman." It made Him perfectly human. His combination of compassion for people and confidence in God is the call on our lives for how to respond to suffering." (Piper, 2004)

God Reveals His Mercy by Allowing Suffering

I believe it is *because* God is good that He allows suffering. Keeping in mind what we've already discussed, let's think about this practically. If God were to end suffering right now, what else would have to end? The answer is simple. Sin. Let us also remember that God is not the author of sin. We are responsible for the presence of sin in the world, and thus suffering is the result of our action. For God to end suffering, He must end sin. If God ends sin, then He must end the world as we know it. This would lead immediately to judgment and every person outside of Christ would be condemned to eternal punishment in hell.

However, while God spares His wrath, they have opportunity. One more people group can be reached. One more neighbor can enter into the grace of Christ. One more family member can step into the forgiveness of the cross. **Thus, it is a sign of God's mercy that He allows something He hates, to save those He loves.**

Suffering is the Place Hope Grows

There is another reason God allows suffering. Hope. In Romans 5:3-5 we read, "Not only so, but we also *rejoice in our sufferings*, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

How many of us would say we "rejoice in our sufferings?"

When we hit hard times in life we immediately turn to the Lord. We examine our lives and pour ourselves into prayer. To our delight, God, through the power of His Holy Spirit, answers our prayers. He may answer in ways different than we'd hoped, but we're reminded that He is good and does love us. This teaches us the value of perseverance, or pushing-through. When we've learned the value of perseverance, it changes our character — who we are on the inside. As we are inwardly transformed, we come into the fullness of the hope we have in God.

Suffering is the broccoli of faith. We may not like it, but it's good for us. It tunes our attention to the heart of the Father. It helps us yield our will to the power of the Spirit. It teaches us that God is good and our hope is in Him.

With every Easter comes a reflection on the "passion" of Christ. This word "passion" isn't a reference to the passionate love Christ has for us. The use of this word in reference to the act of Christ is a reference to

suffering. The *passion* of the Christ is the *suffering* of the Christ. If you look up “passion” in the dictionary you will find among its definitions “to suffer mental anguish . . . to suffer death.”

If the road to God’s grace was paved through the suffering of our Christ, then how much more are we dependant on that same road to reveal God’s grace to this world? It is the suffering Christian whose faith remains fixed on the Father, whose testimony remains steadfast in Christ, who can boldly declare the goodness and hope of our Father to a suffering world.

So, the next time you face suffering, or the warning that it may be around the corner — rejoice. God will teach you something of His goodness and your hope. Praise the Lord for suffering.

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