

# Challenging Questions

## *How can a good God allow suffering?*

"These days it seems that we can not open a newspaper or turn on the television without being besieged by news of yet another natural disaster or horrendous criminal act. The first question that most people ask is "WHY?". Why is there so much pain? Why is our world in chaos? And more often, why doesn't God simply end the pain?"



These are all good questions. I've asked them. You've asked them. Indeed there are those among us who have no doubt at one time wondered how an all loving and all powerful God can actually exist in the face of such suffering. I know I have. In today's age of reason and accountability the denial of God on this basis alone is not uncommon. But is our "logic", in historical terms, relatively new? Could the teaching of our ancestors have something relevant and revealing to say to make sense of all this? Are we really aware of what the Bible says about Jesus Christ and the existence of suffering?

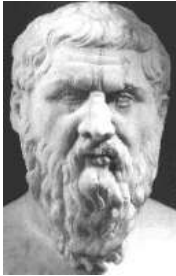
The purpose of this session is to open our minds on this subject of God and suffering.

Everyone is entitled to their own conclusion at the end. Let's look to a few signposts along the way.

## 1.1 QUESTIONS THAT MATTER IN THE 21st CENTURY

### 1.1.1 PRE 17TH CENTURY

Let's begin by thinking of the history of the questions about suffering and God. From the time of Plato, the existence of pain, suffering and evil in the world have been recognized and acknowledged. Christian theology has learned to live with the reality of pain and evil. We shouldn't think suffering was a well kept secret, and has suddenly been sprung upon a world that did not believe it existed. Some scholars believe that the **dramatic shift** in thinking that took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century accounts for the origins of modern atheism. This significant period of change was also a time when a number of Christian apologists, (those who defend or vindicate a system of belief), decided that the best defense of Christianity was to be provided by way of philosophy. Instead of putting the case for Christianity **via the significance of Jesus Christ according to the bible**, such writers of the time believed it would be better to argue for the **existence of God primarily on the basis of human reason**. Instead of testifying to the experience of God through the Holy Spirit, an appeal was to be made through **nature**. **Reason and nature** became the key testing grounds for the credibility of Christianity. As a result, "Christianity entered into the defense of the existence of the Christian God without appeal to anything Christian" (Michael J. Buckley).



### 1.1.2 THE INFLUENCE OF DESCARTES

On the back of this 17<sup>th</sup> Century influence, **Descartes** put human reason to work in his theological conclusions. His views have had a lasting effect. No doubt you know of Descartes famous quote, 'I think therefore I am'. Descartes' primary reliance on reason to define God resulted in an emphasis on **the perfection of God**. As a result, such an emphasis and abstraction of God prompted a major philosophical problem. The undeniable existence of suffering and evil raised an obvious inconsistency and opposition to his assertions. How could a perfect being permit such imperfections seen in the world to exist?



The product of this 17<sup>th</sup> century development of thought in theology was view of God **not consistent with the God of the bible**. Alistair McGrath writes on this saying: "The god of the philosophers' is basically little more than a perfect, ideal and abstract being, constructed out of the distilled elements of human benevolence. The characteristics of this god are primarily its omnipotence, omniscience and goodness" (*Bridge Building* p.140).

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Q. If you were God, what would you do to deal with suffering and pain today?

If you intervened supernaturally to eliminate evil, where would you draw the line- to prevent murder? Child abuse? Theft? Slander? Evil thoughts?

Q. If you were God, how would you design the world and humans differently?

As you remove suffering or evil and tinker with people's free will, in your design, think through the consequences:

- How would people form character in your world?
- How would people be motivated to seek God?
- How would love be experienced as an outcome of your changes to the world's make-up?

Q. Thinking of the Time Magazine photograph of the woman and baby in the drought situation mentioned earlier, which of the alternative explanations of suffering from other religions offers the more adequate remedy and help? Compare what a Christian response to her suffering might be. Discuss.

READ the following passages about God's way of dealing with suffering:

- Hebrews 2:9,10
- Isaiah 53:4-6
- 1 Peter 2:21-25
- Romans 8:26-28
- Revelation 7:13-17

*These notes were prepared by Rev. Steven Webster for use in St. Columb's Hawthorn Christian Education courses, 2004.*

that God has made a way for himself to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. When Christ died for our sins and rose again, God's honor and God's righteousness were vindicated. And in the very same act, Christ became my substitute: he bore the punishment of my sin, and he completed the demand for my righteousness. He has done what I never could do: bear my sins and be my righteousness."

Have you, the reader, experienced this gift of God through Jesus Christ? To do so, the bible tells us we must receive that gift of God by

1. Say Sorry: turn away from your independence and ignorance; from your self-determination of your destiny. Admit that you have wronged God and others and that you need a new start and forgiveness for the past.
2. Say Thank You: offer God thanks in prayer for what Jesus has done by his death and resurrection to make your forgiveness possible and to restore your relationship with God the Father.
3. Say Please: Ask God to give you the gift of the Holy Spirit to energize you with the new life that is eternal and the power to change the way you live; to live for God and to be content with God, no matter what comes your way in life.
4. Say Hello: join a local Christian church. Meet with some other Christians and learn what it means to "love one another" as Christ has loved us. Learn from other Christians how to read the Bible, how to pray, and how to serve.

Remember, the Bible promises:

"As many as *received Him* (Christ), to them He gave the right to become children of God, ... to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12).

The apostle Paul said,

"By grace you have been saved *through faith*, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

SOURCES: *Bridge Building*, Alister McGrath, IVP; *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel, Harper Collins; *Searching Issues*, Nicky Gumbel, Alpha; *Philosophy for understanding theology*, by Diogenes Allen, John Knox Press; *If I were God I'd end all the pain*, John Dickson, Matthias; *The problem of pain*, C.S. Lewis, Collins; plus, various articles

### 1.1.3 19TH CENTURY TO TODAY

This gives us a window into why our discussion of the problem of suffering and God today is highly charged. Alisdair Macintyre, in his book *The religious significance of Atheism* wrote: "the god in whom the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to **disbelieve** had been invented only in the seventeenth century." (*A. McGrath, Bridge Building* p.140)

Believing in a religion or god that is primarily the product of our own reasoning is as good or bad as our ability to know anything. Although the influence of the Enlightenment is being overtaken today steadily by postmodern relativism and pluralism, our thinking on these matters is still greatly influenced by the moderns of the last 300 years. This must lead us to question what our presumptions and current assertions about God are based upon.

The God Christians worship is described in the bible as a **living** and **loving** being who makes Himself known to us as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, through the work and witness of the Holy Spirit. Our experience of God's love is found even amidst the experience of suffering (see 1 Peter 1:3-5).

### 1.2 Q. WHAT DO PEOPLE SAY ABOUT SUFFERING AND GOD TODAY?

**Exercise:** Have people list some common sayings about the problem of suffering and God today.

### 1.3 THE LOGIC OF THE PROBLEM

People's questions about suffering are significant. But before providing a response, it's important to address the philosophical assumptions that lie behind the problems we perceive about suffering and God.

There are at least two equally valid arguments that **cannot** be proved conclusively that may form our assumptions. Most people who object to Christianity on the matter of the existence of suffering have only argument #1 below as their starting point. Consider these two different, but legitimate assumptions:

**Argument 1:** An all-powerful God would be able to end suffering – an all-loving God would desire to end suffering – suffering exists – an all-powerful, all-loving God therefore, does not exist

**Argument 2:** An all-powerful God exists – An all-loving God exists – suffering exists – God must have loving reasons (which He is able to achieve) for permitting suffering

Let's consider the logic of 3 classic assumptions carefully...

- a. God is all powerful and all knowing
- b. God is completely good
- c. There is suffering and evil in the world

These 3 propositions above hold no necessary logical inconsistency.

It may be difficult to comprehend how all three could be consistent, but they are not mutually exclusive as they are without other presumptions at work. There would, however, be a potentially fatal flaw in the Christian statements of a, b, and c, **if we were to add** one of two further propositions shown below:

- d. A good and all-powerful God could eliminate suffering altogether now

OR

- d. There are no morally sufficient reasons for God to permit suffering

have been so different”, and when we look forward into the future we can feel so much dread. What are these deep feelings of failure and fear? God has mercifully “wired us” to seek an answer to our yearnings and to discern that we need a Savior. We have sinned. And we will sin again. God is holy and just and pure and must deal with sin. As a result, we are estranged and alienated from the very One to whom we were designed to be united with. This is the explanation of the great turmoil of the human soul. This is what makes the Bible ring so true. Its identification of who we are and its diagnosis of our condition is so accurate.

**Third**, the Bible shows us **what God has done**. God's love and mercy can save us from our sin and reconcile us to God. God offers us freedom from the curse of remorse and fear, and offers us an eternal hopeful option. In sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to die and rise again as the perfect remedy for our sins God provides the forgiveness and new life we need. We are promised that we will rise with him someday into the unshakable permanence of the children of God. This temporary and perishable life will be superceded.

The Apostle Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:15, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”

John 3:16 is very clear: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” 1 Peter 3:18 also confirms God's action: “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God.” And the letter to the Romans spells it out: “For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” (Romans 5:6-10)

John Piper concludes the study well by saying, “There is no other religion whose diagnosis of our condition is more penetrating and true to life than Biblical Christianity. And there is no other religion that offers a remedy for real guilt and real remorse and real rebellion and real, deserved alienation from God, and real, deserved fear of the future. Only Christianity shows us

## Conclusions

**Jesus' own path of suffering** is the best window for us of the connection between God and suffering. The Jesus of the bible defines for us what God's attitude and action is regarding our situation, and makes sense of our world.

These bible passages tell the story:

*Rom 5:8*

8 *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

*1 Pet 2:23-24*

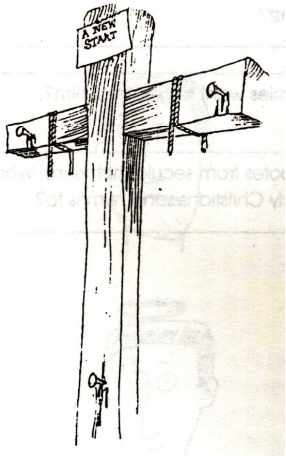
23 *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

24 *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

Let's summarize some of the important truths the Bible teaches:

**First**, the Bible teaches that you and I are **created in the image of God**.

Genesis 1:27, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." This is why we are so different from the animals. This passage distinguishes humanity from the animal world. Your life is personal, rather than functional. All your love and all your sense of justice and duty and right and wrong and all your regrets and dreams are the echo of the image of God in you and prove to your own conscience that you are a person in the presence of a living Creator. This wars against the view that you are an accidental accumulation of chemical reactions. John Piper says: "The Bible answers this huge question of why and how we are different from the animals, and have such struggles in our souls between the passing of time and the presence of eternity. We are in God's image and were made for God."



**Second**, the Bible teaches that we have **sinned against God**, and so it gives us an explanation of hindsight and regret. We often think, "It could

Can we really assert d. or e. above?

1. How do we know that there cannot be morally sufficient reasons for God to permit suffering?
2. What sort of world is being spoken of where suffering could be eliminated in its entirety in the present?

If we really became convinced as critics of Christianity on points d. or e. above, we would put ourselves in the position philosopher David Hume and others have criticized. We would be, as C.S. Lewis put it, "declaring that a better world than that which we know would be possible" now (CS Lewis, *The problem of pain*, p. 14).



The **KEY** according to writer C.S. Lewis, is to carefully clarify what is meant by the terms **"all-powerful"** and **"all-good"**.

According to Lewis, the Bible gives us a framework for an understanding of these terms in the light of Jesus Christ:- who he is and what he has done. It helps us make sense of the real world and the truly Christian revelation of God.

Having exercised omnipotence (all-power) in creating the universe, and having endowed humans with the potential for freedom and love (God's goodness), God might not then remove the essential aspects of freedom and love- which includes the possibility of suffering.

**Q.** What is *your* definition of All-powerful & All-good?

Lewis says: "try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free-wills involve, and you will find that you have excluded life itself." (CS Lewis, *The problem of pain* p. 22)

We will return to these philosophical questions and presumptions in the discussion questions for small groups later in the session. However, next it's important to move away from philosophical considerations to what matters to everybody, irrespective of their assumptions.



## 1.4 THE SUFFERING OF THE INNOCENT

Philosophical arguments don't usually satisfy in the face of photographs like the one of this woman and her babies in a drought situation.

All of us are moved deeply and troubled by the suffering of the innocent.

Charles Templeton, a contemporary of Billy Graham, was said to be a more gifted speaker and evangelist. He is responsible for one of the largest youth ministries in America. Both he and Billy Graham emerged from the 1950's in the United States, **but history will record that Templeton lost his faith in God.** His most recent book "Farewell to God: my reasons for rejecting Christianity" is a book that one reviewer called "Bible bashing at its finest- five stars". "He will .... show you", says the reviewer, "how cruel God is in the scripture and how God is really painted as worse than Lucifer himself."

Lee Strobel, an ex-journalist, now evangelist at Willow Creek Community Church, thought an opportunity to meet and interview such a fallen evangelist was too good to miss. He turned up at Templeton's door with the latest of Templeton's books under his arm. Strobel, who works for one of the biggest churches in America, was visiting the man who'd written that Christianity was "outdated, demonstrably untrue, and often ... deleterious to individuals and to society." Furthermore, Strobel knew that Templeton was now suffering quite badly from Alzheimer's disease and was dying. Strobel's own family was ravaged by the same condition. Templeton had been recorded to say that **Alzheimer's would not exist if there were a loving God. And because it does exist, that's one more bit of persuasive evidence that God does not.**

It was ultimately a photograph in a magazine, like the one above that had turned Templeton from his faith in God. However, the photograph that became the turning point of his belief was of a black woman in northern Africa was holding her **dead** baby in her arms. "She was looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression," he said in the interview. "I looked at it and thought, 'Is it possible to believe that there is a loving or caring creator when all this woman needed was rain?' For me", he said, "**it is not possible for an intelligent person to believe that there is a deity who loves**" (see *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel, p.7ff).

People like Charles Templeton exist all over the world. Questions and doubts like those Templeton espouses are common to people in all lands.

Instead, God has set a day of judgment and a transformation of the world, and has given fair warning that it will surely come. In the meantime, God seeks to save all people from the logical conclusion of their sinfulness. And this is to our profit- we have been given time and help and room to change our ways. Furthermore, God has offered this gift of salvation to all people of all times who would seek his mercy and reject their own autonomy as sinful. God has not merely selected a few, but has offered to all the way that is open in Jesus. The Apostle Peter learned this lesson, having believed previously that God would only accept a select few (Acts 10:34).

Some people find the idea that God's justice, and the wiping out of suffering at the appointed day in the future (when Christ returns), as inadequate; or even unjust. They say, "Justice delayed is justice denied". But wouldn't you say that the benefits of God's patience now, compared to the difficulties of waiting for evil to be fully wiped out in the future, is a situation that has far greater opportunities for good?

Paul says in Romans 8:18-28:

- 18 *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*
- 19 *The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.*
- 20 *For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*
- 21 *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*
- 22 *Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*
- 23 *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?*
- 24 *But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*
- 25 *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*
- 26 *And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.*
- 27 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Professor Swinburne helps us to connect the idea that suffering can be seen in the light of purpose and goodness, and therefore, this permission God gives for suffering to be part of the human experience is not “all evil”.

### 1.5.5 GOD’S PATIENCE AND PERMISSION PROFITS US

Lastly, the Bible explains why there is a delay between the finished work of Christ on the cross, and the final event when God will establish harmony and renew all things.

READ the following bible passages and note God’s purpose in permitting suffering:

1. 1 Timothy 1:15,16
  - 15 *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst.*
  - 16 *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*
2. 2 Peter 3:9,13-15
  - 9 *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.*
  - 13 *But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*
  - 14 *So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.*
  - 15 *Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means as salvation, just our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.*

The bible implies that if God were to wipe out suffering today at its cause, the Apostle Paul himself would not have been able to continue living and do the great works he did- he was the “worst of sinners”. The same is true for you and me. I know my own sins, and if God used that simple solution of “wipe out suffering”, I would be a “goner” because it is clear that I am part of the cause of much suffering to others.

We experience or observe suffering at several levels:

- globally (e.g. The Sudan)
- in communities (e.g. Farmers), and...
- at an individual level (e.g. personal illness and loss)

My own experience of a severe skin disorder over a period of 10 years made the issue of suffering and God **my question too**. I tried many paths for healing, and yet it was in not in being healed, but in not finding a solution that I was able to make a more thorough search for an adequate understanding of the world in which I live. We cannot simply argue for people to have a better philosophical framework and just get over their suffering; especially those who are innocent sufferers. In fact, I’m not satisfied with a worldview that cannot adequately explain the complexity of the world I see and experience. A God who is distant and dispassionate is extremely unattractive, and not like the God I see in Jesus Christ. A God who cannot sympathize with and provide solutions for my suffering is not going to cut it in this world for me, and bears no resemblance to the God that the Bible presents.

Therefore, if one can accept the premise that I’ve argued so far, that **the existence of suffering and evil does not necessarily and conclusively discount the existence or goodness of God**, let’s move on to the next stage: What, then can Christianity tell us further that makes sense of this great and difficult question of suffering?

## 1.5 WHAT CHRISTIANITY TEACHES ABOUT SUFFERING

### 1.5.1 SUFFERING IS NOT GOD’S FAULT

**Anyone** with an insurance policy is familiar with the clause that refers to “**Acts of God**”. We often hear people questioning why God has punished them or dealt them a poor hand. However, human suffering, according to the Bible, was **not the intended experience** for human beings in God’s original created order. Genesis 1-2 is written to explain that all that was created in the beginning was “good” (Gen. 1:10,12,18,21,25).

Harmony between God, humans and the environment was the norm in the beginning (Gen. 1:24,25). The events described in the opening chapters of Genesis point the finger, not at God, nor at Satan (God’s spiritual adversary), but at the man and the woman who rejected God’s goodness and love for selfish gain.

Genesis chapter 3 describes the **breakdown of the harmony** between God, humans, and their environment. There is, as a result of those origins,

a continuing propensity for independence from God in the human heart. We now experience severed ties to our Creator and to one another. We all suffer because of such a breach of trust and dependence.

“**Sin**” can be described as “missing the mark” (Rom. 3:23). It is where our thoughts, words and actions oppose God and we seek to serve our own ideals. Genesis gives us a picture in chapters 3 and 4 of every dimension of the social order subverted from God’s original plan and purpose- all as a result of human sin. By chapter 11 of Genesis, sin has so reaped its rewards that the whole world is in opposition to God. The story of the **Tower of Babel** with its symbol of a human city with one language and one independent purpose shows the logical end of all human rebellion- to be without God.

Genesis 11 describes how God, in an act of grace, scattered humanity and confused their language. Only through this intervention could they avoid the ultimate self-implosion through their own sinful designs. We see that pattern repeat in the history of nations, and what is obvious to those who read the Bible is that the world’s suffering has a clear origin- it starts with us. In addition, the forces of evil entice, enhance and cooperate with our sin.



There’s no doubt that the Bible describes occasions in history where God allowed, or even permitted suffering. Sometimes suffering is viewed as warranted due to sin. In particular, we can say that God caused the suffering of His own Son, Jesus Christ. **Jesus himself** was a willing participant in the suffering that was “for us”.

But in the original sense **suffering is a result of human sin, DIRECTLY or INDIRECTLY.**

**INDIRECT: Not all suffering is directly** related to the sins of the sufferer. So the Bible appreciates and addresses the fact that there is innocent suffering in the world:

- ❑ In the book of **Job** in the Bible, Job’s friends thought Job’s suffering must be the result of his sin- but they were wrong (Job 42:7-8).
- ❑ **Jesus’** own direct teaching on the matter expressly repudiates the idea that a person’s own sin and suffering is automatically and necessarily linked (John. 9:1-3)

He answers his own question in part by saying, “When one takes into account those whose evil state is the means of great good to others (and of course often to themselves) thereby also receive this enormous benefit, it becomes plausible to suppose that God has the right to cause the evil.” He goes on to say, “If... any life on Earth is still on balance bad, God has a duty to compensate for the bad in the after-life so that the total life of such an individual will be on balance good. Than, in His omnipotence, He can do.”

For Jesus, this idea that suffering for the good of others is purposeful and that it is perfectly just for God to allow it is a characteristic of his teaching and action. In Mark 10:42-45 Jesus connects greatness with sacrificial service.

Note too how there is a sense of great privilege in the book of Acts for those who suffered in the course of spreading the Gospel. Acts 5:41 tells us “that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name.”

Romans 5 tells us that life under pressure produces greater good in people. Rom 5:3-4 states: “ Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

Professor Swinburne poses a small thought experiment on this topic: “Suppose that you exist in another world before your birth in this one, and are given a choice as to the sort of life you are to have in this one. You are told that you are to have only a short life, maybe a few minutes, although it will be an adult life in the sense that you will have the richness of sensation and belief characteristic of adults. You have a choice as the sort of life you will have. You have either a few minutes of very considerable pleasure, of the kind produced by some drug..., which you will experience by yourself and which will have no effects at all in the world (e.g. no one else will know about it); or you can have a few minutes of considerable pain, such as the pain of childbirth, which will have (unknown to you at the time of the pain) considerable good effects on others over a few years. You are told that if you do not make the second choice, those others will never exist– and so you are under no moral obligation to make the second choice.... But you seek to make the choice, which will make your own life the best life for you to have led. How will you choose? The choice is, I hope, obvious. You should choose the second alternative.”

Let's assume that **God's infinite wisdom** might be greater than our finite knowledge (as the Bible tells us e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:18-21). "Imagine you are walking in the forest and come across an animal with its leg in a trap. You want to help the creature, but he thinks you're out to get him, so he fights you all the way every time you get close. Finally, you have to shoot him with a tranquilizer gun. Now he really thinks you're out to hurt him! Then, to get his leg out of the trap, you first have to push it deeper into the trap to release the tension on the spring. If the animal is still semi-conscious he would be even more convinced you were out to hurt him. But he would be wrong! He can see the situation only from his limited perspective, so he wonders, 'Why are you making me suffer?'" [adapted from "A bear, a hunter, and God" *The Case for Faith*, p.42 [youth edition, p.18] by Lee Strobel).



One writer on these matters says "I believe all suffering contains at least the **opportunity for good**" (*Making sense out of suffering* by Peter Kreeft). In concert with this idea, the Bible makes the outrageous claim that: "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). In Romans 5:3-5, Paul the Apostle wrote: "... 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."

**Jesus' own suffering**, of course, was the most purposeful of all. Our suffering for the sake of others can also be of good moral value. It's worth considering found in the total lessons of life, that suffering can be purposeful.

Professor Richard Swinburne, Emeritus Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Religion at the University of Oxford asks the question: Does God have the right to cause or allow evil to occur to humans (and animals) for the sake of some greater good?

- ❑ He even points out in Luke's Gospel that **natural disasters** are not necessarily a form of punishment from God (Lk. 13:1-5)
- ❑ The Apostle Peter also draws a distinction between suffering that is your due and suffering that is in **innocence** (1 Peter 2:19,20)

**David Watson** was a wonderful bible teacher and evangelist. Despite the obvious blessing of God upon his ministry, he suffered and died of cancer at age fifty. He also suffered from chronic asthma. He wrote a book reflecting on God's love during this time of suffering and wrote:

"Sometimes I have thought of my asthma or cancer as punishment for sin..." But he accounts for this from a very poor image of God. He goes on to write, "Is it conceivable, when we see Jesus healing the sick and forgiving the sinful, that God should say, 'Ah, there's David Watson. He slipped up rather badly last month so I'll afflict him with asthma for the next twenty years'? Or later, 'He's upset me again, so this time I'll destroy him with cancer'? Such thoughts are not only ridiculous", writes Watson, "they are almost blasphemous, and utterly alien to a God of infinite love and mercy as we see him so clearly in Jesus."

The Bible is fully aware of sin's indirect contribution to suffering.

**DIRECT:** Clearly there are other circumstances quite prevalent in the world where suffering is identifiably **the result of our own sin**, or the sins of others. Even the global and community disasters we lament are most often the result of the sin of people:

"It's pretty easy to see how human beings are responsible for a lot of the suffering in the world. Drive-by shootings, for instance. Philosophers call it "moral evil"- the immorality and suffering that come because people choose to be selfish, arrogant, uncaring, hateful, and abusive. Some people estimate that 95% of the world's suffering results from human actions. For example, people look at famine and wonder where God is, but the world produces enough food for each person to have 3,000 calories a day. It's human corruption and self-centeredness that keep people from being fed. But what about the drought that caused the famine in the first place? Or other natural disasters, like earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes, that hurt people? Insurance companies sometimes call these 'acts of God.' Philosophers call them 'natural evil'- bad stuff that humans experience but which can't be directly traced to some

human action. Or can they? Here's how Cliffe Knechtle explained it in a book *Give me an answer*: 'when we humans told God to shove off, he partially honored our request. Nature began to revolt. Genetic breakdown and disease began. Pain and death become part of the human experience.'



We're realizing more and more how interconnected everything in the world really is. Cutting down rain forests leads to higher CO2 levels, leading to a thinning of the ozone layer, leading to global warming, leading to increased melting of the polar ice caps, leading to increased flooding.... You get the idea. Is it so strange to

think that human action and the natural world are connected in ways that we may not see so clearly?" (Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, youth edition, p.16 "Droughts and drive-bys")

As Nicky Gumbel puts it, "So much human suffering is caused by murder, adultery, theft, sexual abuse, unloving parents, reckless or drunken driving, slander, unkindness, or selfishness of one kind or another." (*Searching Issues*, p. 14).



This leaves a small portion of the world's suffering to be explained by the indirect consequential change to the order of things after what Genesis 3 describes as sin's breach of relationship with God.

Perhaps we tend to focus on the apparent fault of God for fear of being too heavily implicated in the cause of suffering ourselves. I know I all too often look for someone else to blame. That was the pattern described in Genesis 3 also: Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the Serpent, and the Serpent didn't have a leg to stand on!

In the making of the feature film **Amistad**, by Stephen **Spielberg**, the camera crew was asked to help in preparing one of the scenes. The black African actors playing the part of the slaves on the slave-trade ship were lined up in the studio to be chained together for a scene where they were to be thrown overboard to depict their drowning together. The white skinned crew were kneeling down to chain the feet of the actors and hovering over their black faces to lock the shackles around their necks. And as the crew did this, one by one they began to sob uncontrollably. Suddenly they could not escape the realization that these actors represented a powerful truth about human sin. They were in no doubt as to who had been at fault history for the suffering they were documenting.

For many, the resurrection promised in the Bible is the only immediate hope that lays before them, such is their plight. But even death is not the end, according to the Christian hope. Peter, the Apostle, who witnessed Jesus resurrection himself writes in his first letter:

- 3 *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,*
- 4 *and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you,*  
(1 Peter 1:3-4)

If God can raise the dead and give new life in a renewed creation, then we can say that the Bible offers solutions applied to the **NOW** (changed heart, new community of faith, healing and strength and comfort through the Holy Spirit). We can also assert that the Bible provides a solution applied to the **FUTURE** (new and eternal life in the new heaven and earth where suffering will be no more).

#### 1.5.4 SUFFERING CAN BE PURPOSEFUL

Fourthly, it is our own experience that not all suffering is senseless and meaningless. Suffering can be purposeful. C.S. Lewis wrote, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasure; speaks in our conscience; but shouts in our pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Lewis called pain "**God's megaphone**" to humanity. He was pointing out that pain helps ignorant and self-centered human beings to question their control and autonomy. It points us to a need for connectedness with God. He taught that pain and suffering highlights the gap between what God intends, and what is.

The small group discussion questions invite you to think about this important part of being human. Even now, think of how difficulties, challenges, even pain, have shaped your character and values? How different are you now because of problems you have faced?

Our presumptions about God and suffering can often exclude the possibility that pain and progress are linked. Yet daily illustrations abound in sport, in work, in relationships- no pain, no gain. Why then, could their not be morally correct reasons for suffering in the current circumstances of the world?

The **hope of the resurrection** is unique to Christian teaching and brings new considerations to what may be understood of our present situations.



The film **Amistad** recounts the coup engineered by African slaves on a slave ship bound for Cuba. Though the slaves successfully take control of the ship, the planter sails them, not back to Africa as they think, but to America. There they are imprisoned.

One particular scene towards the end shows the men scattered about their prison cell, looking despondent (1:35:30 from the *DreamWorks* logo). But one sits in the corner reading a bible given him by a missionary. Cinque, the fearless leader, glumly looks over at Yamba (reading the bible) and says, "You don't have to pretend to be interested in that. Nobody's watching but me." But Yamba is engrossed in the book. Momentarily he glances up from it and says, "I'm not pretending. I'm beginning to understand it" (though it is not in English, it is illustrated with many pictures).

Cinque sidles over, intrigued. "Their people have suffered more than ours. Their lives were full of suffering." Yamba flips the page to the birth narratives of Jesus. "Then he was born and everything changed." Cinque asks, "Who is he?" Yamba doesn't know who the child is, but knows he must be special. "Everywhere he goes he is followed by the sun (referring to the halo over Jesus in each picture). He flicks through the scenes of Jesus caring for people. But this is not the end of the story. Yamba explains, "Something happened. He was captured, accused of some crime." Cinque shakes his head back and forth and insists, "He must have done something." Yamba says, "Why, what did *we* do?" Looking back to the book he says, "Do you want to see how they killed him?" Sensing Yamba's emotions, Cinque assures him it is just a story.

Yamba protests that the man's death was real. And with renewed enthusiasm he turns the page, "Look. That's not the end of it. His people took the body down from..." Yamba draws a cross in the air. "They took him to a cave. They wrapped him in a cloth, like we do. They thought he was dead, but he appeared to them again- and spoke with them." Peace settles over Yamba. Looking at Cinque he says, "Then, finally, he rose to the sky." Gazing intently at Cinque, Yamba insists, "This is where the soul goes when you die here. This is where we are going when they kill us." Stroking the picture that depicts heaven, Yamba concludes, "It doesn't look so bad" [from *Movie-based illustrations* by Larson and Zahn, p. 101.]

**Human sin** must be considered as a significant cause of a lot of human **suffering**.

### 1.5.2 WIPING OUT SUFFERING IS TOO SIMPLE A NOTION

If, as the Bible shows, sin is the problem, some people simply say to God, "Just wipe out suffering!"

This is just like the **child's idea** of an adult. It seems *so* logical:

"They make the rules (the child says to himself)- *that's* power for you! And *they* have money...-there's freedom! What couldn't I do, if I had all the freedom of an adult; all their money? Simplicity seems to have so much power in an argument.



**C.S. Lewis** warned: "It is no good asking for a simple view of God and the world. After all, real things are not simple. They look simple but they are not."

Our own lives illustrate how hard it is to correct the wrongdoing that causes suffering. Take our justice system for example. We know that the mob cries for simple solutions: 'Sack the coach', ... 'Bring back capital punishment' .... Think of the influx of illegal immigrants in smuggling fiascos in the past two years and the simplistic solutions offered by the general public.

- **'Play it cool'**, one school of thought urges the legislators, back off and let the facts of life bring people to their own senses in their own time.
- **'Play it tough'**, one party says: bring in stiffer laws and savage penalties (fundamentalists love this solution: 'legislate, legislate,' they cry).
- Yet another school suggests: **'Play it tenderly'**; appeal to people's better feelings; encourage and trust the strong in society to act with moderation.

Each of the above 3 ways of dealing with the causes if used in isolation cuts vital corners and is too simplistic. Alone, **one path might lead to chaos, and another to a bullies' paradise**.

**The right mix of all three is needed; a complex answer to a complex situation** is required.

