

If God is So Good, Why Does He Allow So Much Suffering?

by Bryan Gibson

This question has perplexed and troubled many people, causing some to even doubt the existence of God. There are many sides to this question, but let's start with this simple point. God allows suffering, at least in part, because of its many benefits. That's right. Suffering is not all bad, as we can see from the following points.

Suffering keeps this world from becoming too attractive. When we consider the many forms of suffering we face in this world, it becomes clear that God has so ordered things that this world soon loses its attraction. A young person may dream of living forever on this earth, but give him a few years and his tune will change—after he has seen his share of suffering and heartache, and after his body has begun to break down. This world is not our home; we are but strangers and pilgrims on this earth (1 Peter 2:11; Hebrews 11:13), and sometimes it takes some suffering to make us realize that. Thankfully, God has prepared a much better place for us (Hebrews 11:14-16; 13:14). Yes, we have our share of sorrow in this life, but it's this sorrow that makes us say, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest" (Psalms 55:6).

Suffering can bring out the best in us. People can sometimes be at their best spiritually when they have been weakened by suffering (see Paul's comments about his thorn in the flesh—2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Suffering tends to wake up the spiritual side in us; it turns our focus to those things that really matter, the things that endure. We can actually learn to "glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4). Suffering can also bring out the best in those who rally around those who are suffering. Perhaps some of our readers have been through some tough times. Were you overwhelmed by all the gestures of kindness and sympathy? What you went through may have been bad, but it sure gave others an opportunity to do good.

Suffering offers an occasion to silence the enemies of God. That's exactly what happened in the story of Job. Satan wanted to prove God wrong about Job, that he served God only because God had blessed him (Job 1:6-12). But Job's endurance silenced Satan! Satan may think the same thing about us, but we know how to shut him up—"by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men" (1 Peter 2:15). Doing good in the face of suffering is the very subject discussed in the verses that follow (vv. 18-23). We cannot allow suffering to make us bitter, or in any way affect our faithfulness to God—that would be playing right into the hands of the devil!

Suffering makes us more appreciative, more thankful. "Blessed be the Lord, who daily loads us with benefits" (Psalms 68:19). God has blessed us abundantly, but we often take these gifts for granted, especially when things are going real well. Suffering can make us realize just how good we had it. Experiencing bad health for a time makes us much more appreciative of good health. Getting mistreated by some people makes us more appreciative of good friends and a loving family. Quite often in the New Testament Paul mentions by name people who

ministered to him, comforted him, refreshed his spirit, etc. There can be no doubt that the tough times he endured made him appreciate these folks even more.

Suffering makes us more dependent on God. Here's what Paul learned from the trouble he and his companions had in Asia: "**that we should not trust in ourselves but in God** who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). His thorn in the flesh had the same effect—it humbled him and made him depend more on God's strength (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). We all want prosperity, but too much of it can have the same effect on us that it had on King Uzziah: "But when he was strong his heart was lifted up, to his destruction..." (2 Chronicles 26:16).

Suffering helps to purify us. Our faith is often "tested by fire" (2 Peter 1:7), by the various sufferings we have to endure. These sufferings may be the very thing we need to purify our faith, to burn away any impurities that may be revealed. We tend to do very little self-examination when things are going well, but when times get hard, that's when we begin to look a little deeper, to search our souls for any wrongdoing. "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:2-4).

Suffering makes us more sympathetic toward others. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, **that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble...**" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). We can sympathize with someone's suffering, even when we haven't experienced it ourselves, but we can sure do a better job when we've been through the very same thing ourselves, or at least something very similar. It makes it much easier to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15).

Suffering teaches us how to pray. It may take some suffering before we truly learn how to pray "earnestly" and "fervently" (Colossians 4:2, 12). It may only be then that we see the need to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Our experience could be very similar to that of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: "Being in agony, he prayed more earnestly" (Luke 22:44).

Can we at least begin to see why a loving God would allow suffering, even to the innocent? It may be the very thing we need to prepare us for eternity. Let us resolve to serve him faithfully, no matter how much suffering we have to endure. He will reward us with a home in heaven, a place where suffering will be no more.