

Things they never told me when I became a Christian...

“A Good God Does Let Suffering Happen” – Lk 13:1-13

KAC 18/4/'99

Recently the author of one of my favourite modern hymns on Psalm 96, was cut down by cancer in his mid 30s. It was pancreatic cancer – which kills you quick. He left behind a young wife and several young kids. I knew him from his kindness to me as a Leader, when I was feeling on the outer at a Christian camp just after leaving school. We had a few chance meetings and encouraging conversations since then. He'd been a doctor, in a pain control clinic, dedicated to easing the suffering of others. Yet he now is gone, cut down in his prime, leaving a young family to battle it out.

How can a good God allow suffering? If he's so powerful, why doesn't he stop the pain we see in the world? People ask this question the world over. Many non-Christians try to prove God doesn't exist this way. Of course, they forget that if God doesn't exist, they have no right to be upset about suffering. You see, if there's no God, it's just a random universe of chance. It's survival of the fittest. So there is no reason to say suffering is unfair. Blind chance has no sense of justice. So I actually think the fact people feel so strongly about the suffering may well be evidence that deep down they know God is really there. Otherwise, why are they so offended by the existence of suffering?

But what about those who believe in God, especially Christians? Most of you here today are Christians. You believe in a loving and powerful God, so the question of suffering causes doubts. Why does he let it happen? Maybe God is not as good or as powerful as he's made out to be. Some people have even been told that once you've become a Christian your problems should be over. Things will get better now. Other so-called Christians teach that, if you have enough faith, you can be healthy and wealthy. On their view, if you are suffering, it's probably your fault. Maybe God is trying to tell you something. Others just try to forget the question. They ignore the huge amount of suffering in our world... Because somehow it doesn't seem to have affected them - yet.

But none of this is very helpful when a school friend is killed in a car smash, or cancer strikes a loved one. How on earth could God let it happen to them? Why not someone else? Is God trying to tell them something? Is he giving their families a lesson? It just doesn't seem fair.

Well first of all, tonight I admit I do not have all the answers. I am not God. But I do assert that a loving God does sometimes let suffering happen. Maybe they never told you that when you became a Christian. But it's true. God is so powerful and wise that he can bring good even out of suffering. And we'll explore some philosophical issues that raises. But I also want to make some practical suggestions about how we should act, when someone we know personally is in the middle of suffering.

But first, let me give you a couple of examples to illustrate my point that, at least to a degree, pain can have positive uses, which may help suggest why, in his wisdom, God allows suffering in the world. Firstly the example of Hansen's Disease (a.k.a. leprosy).

With Hansen's Disease, the problem is that the patient's nerve endings do not function properly, so they cannot feel pain. And *not being able to feel pain is bad*, not good. For the experience of pain tells you something is wrong. You place your hand on the hot plate and the sensation of pain instantly tells you to remove your hand. But a leper will only know the hot plate is on when they smell their own flesh burning, too late to avoid serious damage.

Now Genesis chapter 3, and other places in the Bible, make it clear that God has allowed pain and suffering to enter the world to show us that something has gone wrong. Paradise has been lost. The suffering we experience is a result of the fact that humans have rebelled against God, ignored his Word, and tried to run life their own way without him. Genesis 3:17-19 records...

To Adam [God] said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Those 'thorns and thistles' let us know something is wrong. It's not how it's meant to be. The author, C. S. Lewis knew suffering personally through the death of his wife by cancer. He put it this way. "Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world." You see, it's easy to ignore God when things are going well. In fact, many people view God like an aeroplane pilot views his parachute. There for emergencies but you hope you never have to use it. Well, pain shatters the illusion that all is well in the world. It makes us realise that we can't treat God like the parachute you hope you never have to use.

That is a 'philosophy of pain'. But be careful in applying it. When someone is in the middle of suffering, it's not the time to dump a philosophy argument on them to explain why it happens.

So let's now look at how Jesus handled the question of suffering. Turn with me to Luke, chapter 13. There, recorded in verse 1, some people came to Jesus and informed him of an atrocity. The Roman governor had butchered Jews while they were making sacrifices to God in the temple. Jesus asked, verse 2, "Do you think they were worse sinners than other people because they suffered in this way?" He then raised the example of another tragedy, verse 4, of the eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them and again asked, "Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?"

In this particular situation, it seems Jesus realised he wasn't dealing with direct examples of suffering right there in front of him. It was more like when we see famine in Africa or war in Kosovo, or an earthquake on TV. Even though it's still shocking, it's a little bit distant, because you're not right there. Jesus knew it was more appropriate to teach about suffering at that sort of time, rather than when it involved someone personally.

So he goes ahead and teaches. That's why he twice asked, "Do you think they were worse sinners than other people because they suffered in this way?" And twice his answer was, vv2 & 5, "I tell you, no!" His point was that these men had done nothing unusually bad to deserve their fates. God was not trying to send a specific message. This is different from Islam and reincarnation. They say that if you are suffering now, God must be punishing you for specific past sins.

God does allow suffering to exist. As his megaphone, pain in general has a merciful purpose: to alert us that humanity has ignored the manufacturer's instructions. But unless we have a specific message from God, don't assume God is trying to tell us something specific each time we hurt.

Jesus then makes a related point. He says that when disaster strikes, it's not a time to say the victims are getting what they deserve. Unfortunately today, I often hear people saying that about AIDS victims, or the unemployed. "Well they've obviously brought it upon themselves. They're only getting what they deserve." Of course, no one would dare say that about my song-writing, doctor friend. Why then are we so quick to judge others?

Instead Jesus says disaster is a chance to look at yourself – and not just to think you're better than others. Rather, as Jesus went on to say, verses 3 and 5, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

So when you see the suffering in this world, Jesus wants you to ask this question of yourself, "Am I right with God? Or have I been ignoring him?" Again, it's the same point as Genesis 3. Suffering tells us something's wrong with this world. Sin, our sin, has mucked it up. We need to admit this and turn back to God for forgiveness, each one of us, personally. Otherwise we'll be like the fig tree that Jesus spoke about next in Luke 13, verses 6-9. You can only give a fruit tree so many chances to bear fruit. Eventually you chop it down, if it keeps on failing. Suffering reminds us of the unpleasant but entirely just truth that we need to turn back to God or we'll fall under God's final judgment.

But what about when suffering hits someone you know? What will you do then? Well, before asking lots of philosophical questions, I reckon the first thing is to listen. And then see if you can do anything about it. Can you help relieve the suffering? If so, do it! That's exactly what Jesus did in the next section of Luke 13, verses 10-17. While others were arguing the religious toss over what to do, he used his power as God the Son, and healed the woman. Now we can't perform miracles on request like Jesus did. But often there are practical things we can do to help when suffering strikes: cooking a meal, mowing the lawn, holding a hand, just being there and listening. Don't by any means expect this to solve everything, but certainly be practical, before being philosophical.

But what should we say? That's the hard thing - all of us struggle with knowing what to say, when confronted with a suffering friend... Can I suggest that you don't need to say much... Job's friends did well up *until* they opened their mouth. But I don't think that means remaining totally silent either, out of fear of saying the wrong thing. Almost always, suffering people do not want you to avoid the issue!

One day, just before I went to work at Grace Bros, I heard a good friend's 18 year old sister was killed in a car smash. I felt terrible as I got on the bus. But I decided the first thing I would do at lunch was to ring my friend. I didn't know what to say. The few things I did say seemed so weak. I spent half an hour standing at a public phone, crying, with my friend at the other end. I felt so stupid and useless. But I know the fact I was willing to be there, even over the phone, was some small comfort at least.

What about when it happens to you? It's too late to work out what you'll do then. Now is the time to think about it, while things are calm, *before the storm hits*. Some people say you never know what it's like 'til someone close to you actually dies, or the doctor says those words you didn't want to hear. But I believe you can prepare in part. And the Bible says several things to help us prepare for suffering.

Let me begin with the part that most people find hardest. For example the bit in James 1:2-4. It says, "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*" (Romans 5:3-4 says the same thing.)

This can sound like a "Look on the bright side!" pep talk. But look closer, and you will see that the Bible does not say to grin and bear it, or to act like nothing happened. It does not suggest we should enjoy the pain. It does not say it is wrong to want the suffering to stop. But it does say that suffering can create in us a deep sense of dependence on God, and mature Christian character.

But during those times, the Bible, by the example of Job and in the prayers of the Psalmists, encourages us to *cry out to God* and to *tell him how we're feeling*; to tell him how unfair it seems; to tell him we're upset and confused. The example of these prayers tells us it's OK to be angry when we're hurting. Just so long as we *turn to, not away from* God. For he will be our comfort. Psalm 46:1 declares, "*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.*"

Another thing the Bible says is that we must accept there will be times when suffering continues and God does not intervene, at least not this side of heaven. But then, as Revelation 21:4 says, there will be no more pain or sorrow or tears - God will *wipe away every tear*. But until then, suffering does not always stop and people are not always healed when we pray for them.

And it's not because we don't have enough faith. The Bible says faith the size of a 2mm mustard seed is big enough. So again, it's not "blame the victim" time.

Sometimes, even when we pray to avoid it, God's will is to let suffering happen: even to his own Son. Jesus prayed in the garden to God asking if he could avoid suffering on the cross if possible. But God his Father chose not to rescue him, Jesus, from his most painful hours, for our sake.

So any discussion of how suffering fit into God's world must not forget the cross. Jesus knows what it is to suffer, more than we can imagine. On the cross, he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

Yet 1 Peter 2:24 says "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." There, he suffered for our sins that we might be finally released from the effects of our sin, including the suffering it causes. This is the hope of heaven, of the wiping away of those tears.

Many religions have gods. But only one has a God who cared enough to become a man and die. As English author Dorothy Sayers put it,

"For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is - limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death - He has the honesty to take His own medicine. He has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death... He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile."

The image of Jesus' dead body suggests defeat to some. What good is a God who does not control the suffering of his own Son? But there God is actually crying out to humans, "I LOVE YOU."

It's true that in the middle of suffering, God sometimes does not seem to hear. Perhaps you think your cries of pain fade into nothing. But God is not deaf. He has promised to set things right. That's why his Son died. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16.)

These are matters of philosophical depth and difficulty. Some of us may never see pain as a gift. Some will always accuse God of being unfair for allowing suffering. So as we continue to wrestle with those questions, there's one lesson we can all agree on. The Bible says, "Bear one another's burdens," (Gal 6:2); and, "Mourn with those who mourn," (Rom 12:15). If we are to become like Jesus, we must follow his example here. We can't take the pain away, but we can be there.