

Finding comfort in suffering

Suffering, pain, trauma, devastation and hardship can disillusion one's relationship and trust with a loving God. It can usher in doubt of whether he is truly benevolent and has the best plans and intentions for human lives. In the midst of pain, we ask, "Where is God and why does he allow this to happen?"

The core issue is about God's goodness and whether he still loves us. We need to digest scriptural passages about the character of God. When we are in pain, we need to remind ourselves that God is "*compassionate and gracious...slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin*" (Ex. 34:6-7).



We are precious in God's eyes, and honored, and he loves us such that even while we were sinners and unbelievers, Christ died for us. His love for us is so complete and powerful that no matter what happens—whether we experience trouble, trauma, illness, hardship, unemployment, loss or injury, it cannot separate us from the love of God.

The presence of pain and adversity does not mean that God does not love us anymore. He is always with us, even when we are suffering. When Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, Jesus stayed where he was for two more days even though he loved them (John 11:6). Jesus knew that the sisters needed to grieve in order to grow. He allowed their pain *because* he loved them. When we consider how much the father loves the son and yet he allowed Jesus to undergo the excruciating pain of the cross, we begin to grasp that God's love and our suffering can and do coexist.

God's ultimate answer to the problem of evil and suffering is Jesus Christ. He came in the flesh to endure trauma and atrocity to a degree that was unmatched by anyone else in history. Jesus took the sins of the world upon himself, suffered betrayal, violence, rejection and overcame them. Because of Christ's passion, we can be consoled that he understands our pain. Moreover, Jesus is omniscient. He knows the parts of us that we do not even understand about ourselves. His words in Matthew 25:40 indicate that he completely identifies with us, that whatever is done to the least of us, it is being done to him. As our Immanuel, Jesus is the God that is always with us, suffers with us and understands (Matt. 1:23).

We all desire calamity-free lives, but the Bible reminds us that trials, hardships and suffering are common for the lot of God's people. Jesus told us that in this world we will have trouble and to expect abuse, violence, trauma, persecution and even death (Matt. 10:17-19). However, we can take heart because he has overcome the world. We learn that joy and pain are not mutually exclusive. We are encouraged in knowing that no matter what happens, God can bring goodness out of the greatest evil; he will be present with us through adversity and he will empower us to overcome (Heb. 13:5-6).

To the question, "Where was God?" the answer is that he was with us and he continues to be with us in the suffering. To the question, "Why did he allow this to happen?" considerations are manifold, including human free will, the work of Satan, the effect of sin, the testing of our faith and god's sovereignty to accomplish a greater purpose beyond our understanding. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, evil, sin and death entered human life and all persons born after them experience the consequences of their disobedience (Gen. 3:1-24). God gave individuals the freedom to choose between good and evil but we all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

When we ask God to stop a bad situation and it continues, we must not think that he does not hear, he does not care or that he is weak. The Lord hears and answers us. He may even answer us before we call and he will hear while we are still speaking (Is. 65:24). Although he may not always give us a quick "yes," he does hear us and we need to trust his timing and his plan. God is sovereign and he is in control. He is not slow to act but he wants to give everyone time to repent. When the time is right, he will powerfully judge (Rev. 9).

Finally, God uses pain and suffering for the testing and refinement of our faith. Through each trial, our faith is strengthened in experiencing that his grace is all sufficient even in our weakness. Furthermore, God comforts us in our troubles such that we may learn to comfort others when they suffer (Cor. 1:3-5). Sometimes, we may not be able to fully grasp the reason behind tragedies and devastation since we see only in part. However, we can trust that God's intention is for our good and that his plan is perfect.