

1. SUFFERING: WHY DOES GOD ALLOW IT? SOME CHRISTIAN SUGGESTIONS FROM THE BIBLE

Introduction

The problem of suffering has no easy answer. Let me say that at the start. And the answers which the Bible gives are not, at first blush, what secular people would like to hear. But at the outset, let's observe that *some* of the problems associated with the question arise from false theologies and interpretations. Not least is the idea that God gives only good, wants us to have a fantastic life free of suffering, and therefore all the negative stuff must be blamed upon a supernatural being known as the Devil or Satan. This is not what the Bible teaches. This is a simplistic theology which has its roots in paganism and not in the one true God. It creates more problems, and more mental suffering, than it ever solves. I've written extensively about the issue in *The Real Devil*, which you can freely access at www.realdevil.info. For now, let's allow the words of Isaiah 45:5-7 their full weight: "I am Yahweh, and there is none else. Besides Me, there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not known Me... I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace, and create calamity. I am Yahweh, who does all these things". This was written in the context of Judah in captivity starting to be influenced by the pagan ideas that there was a good God and a bad one. But there is not; struggle with it as we may, the one true God is all powerful, and all things, positive and negative, have their source in Him.

2. People with our Questions

The Bible has a wonderful way of correctly anticipating our questions and doubts- and addressing them. The questions are taken right out of our minds, and placed in the mouths or on the pens of Bible characters. The prophet Habakkuk takes the thoughts, doubts and struggles out of our minds when he begins his short prophecy with a list of questions about the justice and morality of God. Reading his opening questions, we are immediately attracted to him. For the questions of this ancient Israelite man in Habakkuk chapter 1 are our questions in this age: Why do the wicked prosper? Why does God tolerate them? Why is there so much injustice? Why do the innocent suffer so terribly? He stubbornly stands upon his watchtower and awaits the answers from God (Hab. 2:1). With bated breath, we await smart, profound responses from God in chapter 2, brief, pithy answers that are going to leave us feeling with relief 'Ah! OK, now I see... yes, I never thought of that, never saw it that way'. But there is nothing. The silence is deafening. In Habakkuk 2 we have veiled references to the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, and the final establishment of His Kingdom on earth. But no specific answers to the questions which grabbed our attention as we first began reading the book in chapter 1. Habakkuk concludes his prophecy with a Psalm of praise, eagerly awaiting the coming of God's Kingdom on earth and the realization of the Hope of Israel. The Bible teaches the good news of the Kingdom of God as the ultimate answer to all our struggles of understanding and experience- the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth after the resurrection of the body at Christ's return. Then, "they that sow in tears shall reap in joy" (Ps. 126:5); then shall come true Mt. 5:4: "Blessed are the mourners, for they shall be comforted".

Under the old covenant, God had promised that the flocks, fig trees and vines of His faithful people would be blessed (Lev. 26; Dt. 28). But Habakkuk concludes: "For though the fig tree doesn't flourish, nor fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive fails, the fields yield no food; the flocks are cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in

Yahweh. I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! Yahweh, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like deer's feet, and enables me to go in high places" (Hab. 3:17-19). He knows that he will be saved, finally, even though he received no answers to his questions, and despite the lack of present blessing as he thought it ought to be. That's the point- we have our ideas and expectations of what life ought to be, of what blessing should look like in our lives. But we don't get it. As with any dashed expectation, we tend to get angry and resentful when things don't work out. But this is where faith and hope come in, and the perspective of God's Kingdom. And at this point, let's just define faith and hope. The Bible was written mostly in Hebrew and Greek. The original words translated "faith" mean effectively 'trust'. Trust means we do not have all the answers, nor do we have a clear picture of our immediate path in this world. "Hope" doesn't mean 'a hope for the best', an unfounded positive feeling that things will work out nicely. The Greek *elpis* refers to a solid, firm expectation. The "blessed hope" which the Bible speaks of is not something which might be, hopefully, for me, or at least for someone (Tit. 2:13). It refers to a concrete knowledge and expectation of a future event.

Job was another Bible character who had our questions about suffering, fairness, 'where is God in all this?' and so forth (Job 9 is full of these questions). And like Habakkuk, he received no specific answers. God simply affirmed His greatness, and Job is convinced of his sinfulness and repents. He is saved, and the curtain goes down on his life with Job a happy man with his God.

3. Answers We Don't Want to Hear

All this isn't what we really would like to hear. We want to have the answers. We don't want our questions about suffering ignored and left without specific answers. Rom. 9:18-20 raise the issues of God's fairness, with the inspired author correctly second guessing our questions. And the answer again is not quite what we want to hear: "So then He has mercy on whom He wishes to, and hardens whom He wishes. Then you will say to me: Why does He still find fault? For who withstands His will? No, O man; who are you to answer back to God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it: Why did you make me thus?". The answer is that it is not for us to so reason with God, but to accept His work; for we are the clay and He is the potter. Job learned the same, finally. He had a mass of questions for God, and God replied by asking *him* questions. And Job feels his case against God has totally collapsed, and begs for forgiveness. But my point is, that no answers are given by God to Job's mass of questions about suffering, Divine justice, fairness etc.: "Then Job answered Yahweh, I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be restrained. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I didn't know. You said, 'Listen, now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you will answer Me'. I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:1-6).

The American constitution guarantees all citizens the right to the "pursuit of happiness"; and this reflects the presumption of every man in whatever time and culture. But the Bible speaks of only one right- and that is to death. Any experience of blessings and salvation from death is not by right, but will be experienced by grace alone- for those who can humble themselves to believe in that grace. Nor should we think that by good works we can expect a life of blessing and absence from suffering. "How could *that* happen to such a *good* person?" is a question we frequently hear and ourselves ask. But the Bible again gives us an answer that makes us wince, and shuffle our feet uncomfortably: "There is none that does good, not one" (Rom. 3:23). "No-one is good except God alone" (Lk. 18:29). All are serious sinners. And the more so because the sinful world for which we alone are responsible means that little children also must die at times, in this order of things. Others suffer the consequences of our sins or those which we would have committed had we had the chance and place in time or space; and that includes Adam's sin.

Again and again- we don't like these responses. 'It's not for you to ask these questions about justice and suffering... you can't understand... you are a sinner and need salvation yourself, focus on that... suffering is ultimately for the spiritual maturing and perfection of those who trust in Him'. But these are in fact God's answers to the questions about suffering. But because we don't like the answers, we think God is totally silent about it. Job fell into this trap- he had stacks of questions for God about suffering and Divine justice. But Elihu, speaking on God's behalf, wisely comments: "Why do you accuse God of never answering our complaints? Although God speaks again and again, no one pays attention to what he says" (Job 33:13,14 GNB). The fact that the answer isn't what we want to hear doesn't mean that He has made no answer. Elihu also perceptively notes that Job's anger with God over the questions of suffering arises from a false sense that he is totally innocent: "Job claims that he is innocent, that God refuses to give him justice" (Job 34:5 GNB). Job kept on about his own innocence. And the answer was that he was not innocent; and eventually he realized this and broke down in confession of sin. So one important perspective on these questions is that *we are sinners, and the wages of sin is death.*

The Lord Jesus brought this out so clearly when commenting on the fall of the Siloam tower which had killed a number of people beneath it. We can imagine the questions: 'Why *those* people? Where was God in *that!* Innocent people died!'. And we so often hear this complaint- that innocent people suffer. The Lord's comment was: "Those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them. Do you think that they were offenders above all the men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you no, but unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:4,5). Those 18 were not innocent; and neither are any of us. So the question of 'Why *them?*' was declared inappropriate. Suffering, the suffering of death, is coming to our door- right up to each and every one of us. The form of death, whether in a building collapse or from simple old age, is in that sense not relevant. The tragedy of the human position elicits the question: 'What can I do to get out of it? Or to help others avoid it?'. And the answer is clearly given: Repent, so that you do not perish. This was the thrust of Peter's appeal in Acts chapter 2; and thousands of people saw the point, and were baptized immediately.

4. Sin and Suffering

The wider problem of suffering and Divine justice is well addressed in the book of Job. He was a wealthy man, who earnestly served the Lord. But he suffered terribly, lost everything, wealth, family and health. His friends held the view that obedience leads to blessing, and disobedience nets suffering- straight away, in this life. They start speculating as to what sins of Job would've merited this suffering. Was it a woman? Abuse of workers? Idolatry? Job searches himself and finds himself innocent of such sins, and becomes increasingly worked up and distressed. He really is innocent, so he feels; and God is unfair. And as the book progresses, the friends become increasingly convinced that they are right and Job is wrong; he needs to just fess up and confess what he has done wrong, and his blessings will return. The book ends with all of them being demonstrated as seriously wrong. Yet until that point, our sympathies are actually with all the characters and all the arguments; they all seem fair enough, from a human viewpoint.

The Divine answer is not what we at first blush would like to hear. We are all sinners, Job included. And God simply doesn't pay out immediately. He is working according to a far bigger program, which wishes only our eternal good at our latter end. And Job becomes a prototype of the future sufferings of the Lord Jesus, the parade example of the righteous suffering unfairly. It is the issue of human sin which is one of the keys in all this. We are sinners, and we need to take that more seriously. We have no right to life, for the wages of sin is death. It's no good blaming Adam; for if we were in his shoes,

we would have done the same. That is how I understand Rom. 5:12 “For as by one man [Adam] sin entered the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned”.

If we have no right to life, how much less do we have a right to a life free from suffering and full only of what we perceive as blessings. Here again the Bible has a case study to help us. Solomon had all that men would regard as blessings: health, wealth, women, reputation, ability and freedom to pursue whatever path of interest took his fancy. And the book of Ecclesiastes shows us that without God as the central factor in human life, all those blessings do not bring happiness. Happiness, in the sense of freedom from suffering, therefore doesn't exist in ultimate terms- without God. Our calling as believers is to walk humbly with our God (Mic. 6:8). Happiness is often only perceived in retrospect- we look back at a period in our lives as happy, but that's only because memory is selective. We simply have to ditch the idea that life now must and can be just great. The life without suffering is not for now; believers will eternally live it, in God's Kingdom. But for now, we must live in a suffering world, and suffer ourselves, to prepare ourselves for that eternity. Human history is not even a millimetre along the eternal line of God's infinite life which He wishes to share with us. And yet some miserably object to having to suffer briefly now. Throughout infinite future time, God will lavish His grace upon us in the ages of eternity. So says Eph. 2:7.

5. Suffering for Believers

As believers, we cannot immediately attach meaning to event. We don't pass through life with the smug impression that everything makes perfect sense. But we do have the strong impression that we are on a journey, and that our life experience is not a sequence of random events. Our baptism into Jesus was like Israel passing through the waters of the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1,2). Our life afterwards is like their wilderness journey towards the promised land of God's Kingdom on earth. We have a destination. Every step of the path is towards a definite, clearly defined point of destination. The New Testament speaks of how the Lord is working with us towards our perfection, a point of final maturity. The human lifespan is not even a millimetre long, compared to the life eternal which awaits us. God, as it were, has to pack a lot in to a short space to prepare us. As cotton wool clouds pass lazily across the sky, we can easily lose this sense of the urgency and intensity of His work in our lives. But all things are in fact moving at breakneck speed towards the achievement of God's final, saving purpose with this earth. There is a climax to human history, which will be in the return of the Lord Jesus.

My point is simply that life for the believer is not random event. Nothing is chance. All has an intention, even if we miss the point or waste the potential. But inexorably, through it all, God is seeking to move us forward on the path towards our final salvation. Take Joseph as an example. As a teenager, he had dreams from God, that one day his brothers would bow to him. They unreasonably hated him, and at 17 years old faked his death and sold him into slavery in Egypt. There, again, he was falsely accused and imprisoned. Whilst there, he offered to interpret the dreams of two men, confident that God's dreams came true. And they did. As a result of that, Pharaoh called for him to interpret *his* dreams, and again, Joseph believed that dreams given by God come true. As a result, he was promoted from prison to be prince of Egypt. And about 10 years later, his brothers came bowing to him, begging for food during the famine. His dreams were fulfilled. But for decades of hard experience up until then, Joseph lived in a situation where it seemed those dreams could never come true for him. He saw the dreams of others coming true; but his never did. But still he held on to his basic faith that they would. And that faith was rewarded.

He summed up the situation in Gen. 50:20: “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good... to save many people alive”. Through the long drawn out process of unfair suffering, God worked.

Ultimately, to save people. Looking at his life at any one point during those earlier years, all the questions of why the innocent suffer, the wicked prosper... would have remained apparently unanswered. But the lesson is that God's saving purpose will eventually come true for us- if we remain within that purpose in faith / trust. And it is through the decades of unanswered questions that it all works out in the wonderful way it does. In Joseph's case, he must have wondered about one stubborn detail in his first dream which didn't, apparently, come true. It was that his *mother* along with his father and brothers would bow down to him. He was taught through his sufferings in prison and in the trauma of the famine that God's dreams *do* come true. And his brothers did bow to him as predicted. But... his mother? She was dead when God gave him that first prophetic dream as a teenager. And so she never bowed to him when his brothers did. And yet he believed that God's dreams come true; he had been taught to believe this by experience. So he would have been driven to the same hope and resolution that we are- that at the last day, God's people (including his mother) will be resurrected and all that has been promised us shall come gloriously true. In God's own time and in ways which we may not understand.

Through all his sufferings and unanswered questions and struggles about suffering and God's rightness in allowing it all... Job was driven to a firm hope in the resurrection of the dead and final, ultimate justice being done when he would see God face to face. This would be when "at the last day he will stand upon the earth", in the second coming of Christ (Job 19:25-27). This is the final key which shall turn the stiff lock created by all our struggles about suffering. *Then* we shall understand and see things perfectly; "for now we see in a glass, darkly; but then, face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). After all, we are only human. No more, but no less.

Our insistence that we must right now, this moment, understand completely... shall then be seen for the petulance of a child, who doesn't have the apparatus to understand the answers even if they are given. Now that of course is humbling; for we wish to see ourselves as mature and capable of understanding. 'No! Tell me, I know I can 'get it', I'm old enough to now, and I *will* understand if you tell me'. This is effectively what many of our struggles amount to. But a child's struggles and frustrations at not being able to understand are real enough, and we would never seek to mock them nor say that they are not legitimate. They are legitimate and real enough... and painful enough. So in saying that the full mystery has not yet been revealed (for we see through a glass, darkly), I am in no way brushing off the legitimacy of our pain and struggles over these matters. But "through a glass, darkly" we do see an outline form of understanding. Even if it emerges from the glaze of years of our own tears and head shaking.

There must be a cross before that eternal crown; God's Son is the parade example. Paul reflected that "Our slight momentary affliction accomplishes for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison; whilst meantime we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:17,18). Heb. 12:7-12 and so many other Bible passages speak of suffering as being for the eternal good of the sufferer: "Endure your sufferings as a father's chastening; it shows how God deals with you as with sons. For what son is there whom his father does not chastise? But if you are without chastening, of which all have been made partakers, then aren't you illegitimate children and not real sons? Furthermore, we had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them respect; shall we not much rather be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed good to them; but He for our profit, so that we may be partakers of His holiness. All chastening seems for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yields peaceable fruit to those that have been exercised thereby- the fruit of righteousness. Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down and the feeble knees".

Part of that suffering is that we must live in an imperfect world, full of suffering and imperfection. Suffering has meaning for believers in that it trains us for eternity. Short of creating us as robots, this environment is necessary. We learn by the experience of opposites. A child learns 'up' and 'down' at the same time; not 'up' one week and then 'down' a month later. Thus both light and darkness, good and evil [in the sense of calamity] ultimately come from God (Is. 45:5-7).

6. Suffering for Unbelievers

But this all begs the obvious observation- that is all very well for the believer, who has the perspective of God's Kingdom ahead to help him or her contextualize all present sufferings. But what of those who do not believe? Why do they suffer? And that is indeed the question that torments us all. In God's wisdom, it could be that this state of affairs is permitted, and even enabled, by Him- in order to bring the unbelieving world to the Hope of His Kingdom. For the hope of the future Kingdom of God on earth is indeed the only Biblical explanation and context for suffering.

But what of those who have not heard the good news of that Kingdom? Why should *they* suffer? And the Bible is pretty much silent about that- apart from observing that all are sinners, all would have done what Adam did were they there in Eden faced with his choices (Rom. 5:12). The fallen world we live in is as it is because of the result of Adam's sin. The nature of sin is such that it affects other people; people suffer because of the sins of others. That is one of the reasons why babies and children die. There is little point in wriggling and protesting about this- it is quite obviously how it is. And that fact does not in the slightest take away from the actual existence of God. You may not like it, or be bold enough to even say you don't agree with it. But that is how things are, and your dislike of God's larger plan and way of working doesn't in the slightest take away from His existence. We must come to terms with it; and in practice, that means humbling ourselves before Him, recognizing we see only "through a glass, darkly", accepting the Hope of the Kingdom for ourselves- and then doing all we can to extend that hope to as many others as is within our power. For the call to evangelize the good news of the Kingdom is inextricably and naturally connected with personally having that blessed Hope ourselves.

7. Atheism and the Problem of Suffering

Wanting answers to all our 'why suffering?' questions seems to me rather like demanding concrete reasons to believe; searching science for hard visible evidence that God exists. But this is not the nature of faith. I'm aware that many calling themselves atheists will say 'If there's a God, then where is He when...' various tragedies happen. But I am not convinced there are any really solid, hard to the core atheists out there. In their heart of hearts. Because we can never disprove the existence of God. There is no experiment to be done which declares 'He's not there'. And so each and every atheist has to live with that niggling doubt. Many who have come to faith admit the nigggle of the doubt they felt. And the louder and more dogmatically and publicly they declare His non-existence... the more desperate they are to drown out that little niggling voice within. The question of suffering is difficult for us all, of whatever religious persuasion [or not]. Atheism also is no real answer to it. In fact, to take God out of the equation leaves us at the mercy of the winds of fortune to such an extent that life becomes a hideous running of gauntlets, defying statistics, fearing the strokes of bad luck and misadventure. Ending all the same in death, and the loss of all we once held dear in this world. And that final suffering- death itself- is left with no deeper meaning, nor is it removed, by atheism. So I cannot accept that the problem of suffering is a very valid excuse for atheism. There is no sensible reason why suffering means there is no higher power. That simply does not follow. At best it might be a reason to disagree with certain interpretations of that higher power, but not to doubt its existence. Atheism doesn't take it away. The atheist [if such really exist] is left with the problem of suffering. Any attempts to philosophize it away do not take it away in reality.

8. The Nature of Humanity

Another window onto all this is to accept the Biblical picture of the nature of humanity. We are sinners, and by nature are no more than animals. We live, breathe and exhale our last breath, returning to the dust as they do (Ecc. 3:18-20; 9:5; Ps. 146:4; Is. 38:18,19). "Dying you shall die... you shall return to the dust from which you were made" was God's judgment upon Adam and his children. Everything within us cries out that by nature we are so much more than animals, and our human suffering and death is of a much higher order than theirs. But that is not the Biblical picture. There are many human theories and fantasies about the nature of man, not least the pagan idea that we are 'immortal souls'. But the Bible teaches time and again that the 'soul' is mortal; we die, totally. The only hope of immortality is in Christ (2 Tim. 1:10), granted at the resurrection from the dead at His return (1 Cor. 15:53,54), through whom alone immortality has been revealed to those in Him, by baptism and abiding in Him. He is the only way, truth and life.

This is all so hard for man to accept. But without this backdrop to the Gospel- then the Gospel of the Kingdom, of bodily resurrection to eternal life through Christ, is all not really such vital good news. But once we humble ourselves to accept our humanity, that we are no more and no less than human- then actually, the hope of resurrection and eternal life is exactly the good news which we need. It is a perfect fit for that hole in our hearts, that desperate need, however unspoken or vaguely articulated.

For those who consider that man is somehow more than human and higher than the beasts who perish- the problem of human suffering becomes the more deeply painful. And more so, because there is no human way out of it. No medicine to take which makes us live for ever, no clever cures for broken legs or divorces or fires that burn houses down or the war next door. Those with no place for God in their thinking become deeply frustrated with human suffering- because there is no human way out of it. Only cosmetic amelioration of it, a touch here and a bit there, but all the same ending in death and eternal demise. Only allowing God into the hopeless equation gives a chance of solving it. And once we accept God's existence- then all changes. We trust / believe that God is love. That He has a purpose. And we give up seeking to argue or resist His will. For we are just men, dust and ashes, water and complex chemicals. And in that humility is great peace and freedom. 'Walk humbly before your God' is the appeal of the book of Micah.

We are to accept God as He reveals Himself in His word- and bow before Him: "Yahweh! Yahweh! A merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth, keeping loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and disobedience and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the children's children, on the third and on the fourth generation. Moses hurried and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped" (Ex. 34:5-8). It is not for us to tell God how we think He should be, nor for us to create God after our own image and imaginations as to how He should be. It is for us to humble ourselves to accept Him as he is.

Without God and the perspective of His Kingdom coming on earth, a hope that runs like a golden thread throughout the Bible, the equation is not solvable. And so what can we do but conclude that God has allowed the present situation on this earth in order to bring every humble person towards a faith in Him and His Kingdom. It is only those who refuse Him who will find the situation an unbearable riddle which cannot be solved. Accept Him and His plan in Christ- and whilst the suffering doesn't disappear, nor do all the hard questions evaporate, we have at least a personal framework for understanding our place in this world. And the trust that finally, all shall make the most perfect sense, and we shall one day reflect that it could not have been any better way.

The problem of those who have not heard remains a difficult one- but that of itself does not in the slightest take away from the existence of God. Perhaps one reason for that difficult question is that it ought to provoke each believer to do all they can to fulfil the Lord's parting commission to us all- to take the Gospel to every person on this earth. The problem of those who have not heard may partly be explicable by accepting that the problem largely exists because the believers have not taken the message to all. All have not heard because they were not told. God always works through mechanisms, not that He needs to, but He clearly chooses to. He has delegated this work to us, the church; or 'entrusted' us with the Gospel, as the New Testament puts it. We have freewill. And the church has not done its job as it was intended. And so others have suffered ignorance because of our dysfunction. Just as any human failure or dysfunction results in the suffering of others. Any other way would mean that God has not given us freewill and the consequences which come along with the gift of genuine freewill.

9. Suffering and the Love of God

What is so endlessly fascinating about God is that despite all the suffering on earth, there is a gentleness and love that also runs through all His ways. After all, according to the Bible, He is the God who gave His only begotten Son for human salvation- when He surely could have thought up all manner of ways to achieve that same end result. The gift of His Son was to demonstrate His love for us, publically displayed for all time. And there is a beauty in His creation which becomes the more exquisite the closer we look. He is the God who gave Israel the law of Moses, which reflects His intense awareness and sensitivity towards His people. The oxen were allowed to eat some of the grain they were treading out. There was deep sensitivity to every human situation. And supremely, the manifestation of God in His Son reveals just how much He does in fact care.

In seeking some window onto the suffering question, I opened my Bible at random. I came to Rom. 5:20: "Now the law was added to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace increased all the more". Pretty complicated theology, Paul talking about why the Law of Moses was given. My mind wandered to a similar statement in Gal. 3:19: "For what, then, was the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made". But I assumed I had come to an irrelevant verse, and ought to flick on a bit further to some more promising part of the Bible which spoke more directly to my questions. But something made me stay on that track of thinking. Why was the Law of Moses given? A law, which was never fully obeyed by anyone apart from the Lord Jesus and which led people to desperation at their inability to obey. But why? It drives the question a stage further back: Why did God allow sin- the whole concept of disobedience, reconciliation and forgiveness? Why not just create us as good, or leave us to just strive for various levels of goodness? And like a wave bursting over me, I at least saw and felt something of the bigger picture here. His love, forgiveness, grace, patience... our repentance, stumbling, indescribable sorrow, guilt, anger, gratitude, unanswered questions, indignation at God, sin, the passion of zeal to respond to such love which we never deserved, our earnest desire for Him, our desperate need for and attraction to His Son as our Saviour, the tears and joy which go with restored relationship... and so much else. All this would just not be possible if He had created us as some kind of good robots, without the possibility of failure and all the suffering which comes with it. He is love, forgiveness is what He is good at, and He thirsts for genuine, authentic relationship with us. In the end, we will see that it had to have been this way. And the final outcome will be exquisite.

10. The Answer of the Cross

The cross puts a perspective on why God allows human suffering. It certainly isn't because He is mean or nasty. A God like that would not have given His Son, let alone in the way that He did.

There is in secular man a search for love; 'Can I find love in this world?' is the haunting question, repeated in music and every art form, and finding expression both verbalized and subconsciously in every human life. And the cross of Christ is the answer. The fact this supreme expression of Divine love was made within such extreme suffering, both physical and mental, is surely God's way of saying that He is no stranger to suffering and has fully participated in our pain. We are called to not simply accept that 2000 years ago, on a hill outside Jerusalem, on a day in April, on a Friday afternoon... this actually happened. But to further participate in Him there. We are invited to know *and have* the mind of Christ there (Phil. 2:5). To be baptized *into* Him, to abide *in* Him, to go through the same stages of His progressive humiliation, that we might share in His eternal glorification (Phil. 2:5-8). He there is God beckoning to us, we in this world of suffering, we who alone know the pain of our own hearts... to find love, love to be experienced and lived out within our suffering world, within the suffering of our own minds and bodies. He there... re-phrases the question of 'Why *me*?' to 'Why *Him*?'. Why would the only sinless, guiltless man, who only ever did good... have to die, and to die *that* death? He there was and is our representative; not a substitute for our suffering [for why then should *we* now suffer?], but our representative.

He had our nature, knew our pain, our hunger, to the end. It was love for us, the love that seeks to identify and empathize with the beloved, that held Him there to that stake of wood- and not the nails. Someone, somewhere, knows all about your sufferings, and the suffering of this world. Maybe you are right in feeling that there is nobody on this earth who can understand what you have passed through; even if they sat and listened to you telling your story for a month, paid attention and agreed and sympathized... you would still feel they could not quite feel it all for you. And... there were bits you forgot, aspects you didn't express well, parts you misremembered. But there is someone, now, who does completely understand- the Lord Jesus, the Man who suffered and died as He did for you. Whatever our questions about suffering and why God permits it, the gift of God's Son overarches those struggles with the fact that God *is* love. And He has demonstrated that. It's not that on one hand He loves us, but on another hand He doesn't, and we are to come to some synthesis of the positions. No. God is love. Somehow, all the suffering works together for the final good of His purpose, which is centred around love. We do not now understand the *how*; but that is our limitation.

To expect to understand it all is, frankly, immature; and carries the deep inappropriateness which at times goes with immaturity. Such a demand assumes we are more than human- when we are not. In the cross of Christ, God was with us; Emmanuel. Man is not alone; you are not alone, I am not alone. God is with us. Because His Son knew exactly our human condition, and identified with all its pain through being nailed to a cross, naked, despised, rejected, forsaken by all; He who there 'learned obedience through what He suffered' (Heb. 5:8). That is for all time a statement of His humanity, how He was not God, not part of a Trinity or other mistaken human philosophy. He was one of us; and again, He there for all time showed that suffering has a purpose- once we bring into view God Himself, human sin and mortality, Divine grace, salvation and the things of God's Kingdom.

11. What Should I Do Now?

"He who believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). Have the faith which is trust. Humble yourself to realize your own desperation, accept God's love and identify yourself with Christ. Rejoice in the sure Hope of God's Kingdom; give your life to sharing that hope with others. And walk humbly with your God.

We would be so happy to help you study the Bible further and to be baptized into Christ. There is more information about baptism at www.baptizo.info . And we can offer you free hard or soft copies of the following books:

New European Version Bible with commentary <http://www.n-e-v.info>

Bible Basics, a study manual going through all the doctrines of the Gospel

<http://www.biblebasicsonline.com>

The Real Devil, a study of satan, the devil and demons in the Bible <http://www.realdevil.info>

The Real Christ, a study of the nature of the Lord Jesus Christ, deconstructing the false doctrine of the Trinity and presenting the Biblical Jesus as God's Son, of our nature

<http://www.realchrist.info>

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