

# What Does the Bible Say about Pain and Suffering?

By Gavin Ortland

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In his book *The View from a Hearse*, Joe Bayly tells the story of two men who came to comfort him after the death of his three sons. The first came with answers. He said that God had a plan, that God could work it out for good, and that God would give Joe strength. The second man came simply to sit with Joe. He did not speak unless spoken to, but he prayed with Joe and sat in silence with him. Joe writes that though both men had good intentions, he couldn't wait for the first man to leave and he couldn't bear to see the second man go.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible has many things to say about [pain and suffering](#). But ultimately, it is more like the man who gives his presence than the man who gives his answers. The Bible leaves many of our questions about suffering unanswered. However, what it does do is tell us the story of a God who has come close to us in the midst of our suffering, who actually suffered *for us*, who will one day destroy suffering forever.

## Suffering and Evil

The biblical view of suffering is shaped by what the [Bible](#) actually is. Fundamentally, the Bible is a *story*—a story of where the world came from, what has gone wrong in it, and what God is doing to set it right. It can be thought of as a play with four acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.

Suffering comes into the story with the entrance of evil in act two. The Bible teaches that evil entered into God's creation through the rebellion of some of God's creatures—first angels and then human beings.<sup>2</sup> When humans lost their innocence through [original sin](#) (disobeying God in the Garden of Eden),<sup>3</sup> pain and futility entered into the basic human experiences of family and work as a result.<sup>4</sup>

Within the biblical worldview, then, suffering is not a permanent or intrinsically necessary fixture of reality, as in some renderings of the Eastern notion of Yin and Yang. Rather, all pain and suffering is the result of *fallenness*. It is a consequence of the biblical notion of sin—which one Christian author described as a disease that has entered the world through created beings refusing to accept their creaturely status.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the Bible has a linear, rather than cyclical, view of suffering. It has not always been, and it will not always be. It is but one chapter in a larger story.

## The Seriousness of Suffering

The Bible also has a sober and realistic perspective on suffering. It affirms its un-thinkableness, its tragedy, its staggering and oppressive weight. Nowhere does the Bible forbid tears or portray them as a sign of weakness. In fact, it recommends them when we are in the presence of sufferers; Bible readers are called to “mourn with those who mourn.”<sup>6</sup>

There is an entire [book in the Bible](#) titled Lamentations, which, according to tradition, records the prophet Jeremiah's grief-laden prayers to the Lord after Jerusalem was sacked and the temple was destroyed in 587 BCE. In the book of Psalms, which is a collection of songs and poems used for worship, lament is a recurring theme. The book is filled with statements like:

“I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.”  
—Psalm 6:6

“How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?” —Psalm 13:1-2

“My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’”  
—Psalm 42:3

“[God has] put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.” —Psalm 88:6

Sufferers who come to the Bible will find in it something like Joe Bayly's second friend. It is neither remote nor trite nor glib nor superficial. It is an honest book that operates right in the midst of the gritty realities we face in this life. It even has a book devoted to reflection about and struggle with the apparent futility or [meaninglessness](#) of life.<sup>7</sup> The book of Ecclesiastes addressed this problem millennia before Kierkegaard, Sartre, or Camus.

The Bible is deeply sensitive to the problem of suffering, including the internal suffering that many modern people face. It has something to say to us about these issues, if we have eyes willing to read it and ears willing to hear it.

## Trusting God Amidst Suffering

The prophet Habakkuk lived through a period of great suffering among God's people. He opened his book by asking God two questions: How long? Why?

Habakkuk lived in the time leading up to the exile that Jeremiah lamented (around six hundred years before Christ lived). Habakkuk looked around the kingdom of Judah and cried out to God about the injustice and evil he saw everywhere. God answered Habakkuk, but it was not the response Habakkuk expected. In fact, it caused Habakkuk even *more* confusion.

God declared that he was raising up the Chaldeans—a brutal and terrifying people—to execute judgment on Judah for their injustice and transgressions. Habakkuk then had to struggle with how God could use that oppressive and wicked nation to deal with the problems among God's people. He cried out to God again, asking how God could use one evil to check another: “Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”<sup>8</sup>

God responded a second time, declaring that he would bring all evil to account and settle every score. It might take longer than Habakkuk expected or hoped, but God's justice would come decisively and in the right time. In the meantime, he called Habakkuk to trust him and walk through this difficult season by faith, because “the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.”<sup>9</sup> In the end, Habakkuk saw a vision of God coming in judgment and salvation. Seeing God enabled him to find joy, even amidst his suffering.

When we experience suffering or observe it in the lives of those around us, one of the most natural questions to ask is, *Why?* Why did that natural disaster happen? Why did my loved one get cancer? Why didn't I ever know my father? Why did God allow the Holocaust?

It is encouraging to know we are not alone in asking such questions, and that crying out to God in our grief is not forbidden. The Bible offers a vision of a God who is [big](#) enough to handle such questions, and big enough to trust even when life seems to be falling apart.

## Struggling with Suffering

One of the deepest and most poignant treatments of suffering in the Bible is the story of Job. Job was an innocent man who suffered terribly; he lost everything he had and, on top of that, was covered in boils. Now that's rough. Job's three friends came to visit him, each assuming that Job must have been guilty of some crime. Their reasoning was this: Surely Job must have provoked God in some way! That is the only possible explanation for the suffering that has overcome him.

The bulk of the book of Job consists of dialogues between Job and his friends in which his friends keep saying, essentially, “Come on, Job. Confess! What did you do to deserve this?” But at the end of the book, God rebukes Job's friends and commends Job. Job even prays for his friends because God is angry with them for how they treated Job.

One use of the book of Job is to distinguish a biblical view of suffering from the concept of karma, which is the notion that there is a kind of unbreakable cause-and-effect law in the moral realm. In a universe governed by karma, people who do good will experience good, and people who do bad will experience bad. That means that if we see someone suffering, we can conclude that they did something wrong to bring it on themselves. Many people assume—perhaps sometimes subconsciously—that this is exclusively how suffering works.

The biblical view of suffering is more nuanced than the karmic view. In the biblical view, we cannot always understand why suffering happens in this life. Job never learned the true cause of his suffering, even after he had been restored by God. *But Job encountered God.* When God speaks regarding Job's suffering in Job 38–41, he basically says, “Hey, Job, I'm God. You're not. You've gotta just trust me on this.”

Some critics look at this response as a non-answer to the problem. But that isn't how Job feels! When Job sees God, he no longer needs an answer. God himself is the answer. Job responds with joy and repentance. Like the character Orual in C. S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*, Job discovers there is a kind of joy that is far better than what we *think* we want. We see here a hint of the hope that the Bible offers to sufferers. Like Habakkuk, like Joe Bayly, Job needed God himself more than he needed his questions answered.

Why is this? What about [God](#) changes our perspective on suffering?

## The God Who Suffered

In his book *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, Peter Kreeft writes: “[God] didn’t give us a placebo or a pill or good advice. He gave us himself. He came. He entered space and time and suffering.”<sup>10</sup>

At the center of the biblical story is a God who actually enters into suffering for us. The New Testament of the Bible teaches that [Jesus Christ was God](#) in human form. He was born, lived, died, and rose again from the dead to defeat evil and reconcile to God those who trust in him. When Jesus hung on the cross, he suffered one of the worst deaths imaginable, because he took on all the sins of humanity. Despite his innocence, he died for our transgressions.

This is the main message of the Bible, and it is a message of incredibly good news. At its heart, the Bible is not a book of advice or moral principles to help us deal with suffering and have a better life. Fundamentally, it is the story of what God has accomplished for us, how he is repairing a broken world; it is a message of hope in light of his suffering for us.

If Jesus was God among us, as the Bible claims, then we can no longer view suffering in the same way. As Dorothy Sayers wrote:

For whatever reason God chose to make people as they are—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from us that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole 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. When he was man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it all worthwhile.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the suffering of Christ does not immediately take away our own pain. In fact, Jesus assured his followers they would indeed have trouble in this life.<sup>12</sup> But the suffering of Christ gives hope during tough times because it imparts something that is even stronger than suffering: the love of God, which the Apostle Paul called a “love that surpasses knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> As Tim Keller explains:

If we again ask the question, “Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?” and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, now we know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that he doesn’t love us. It can’t be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself.<sup>14</sup>

## The End of Suffering

Though the Bible makes no promise to take away our suffering in this life, it does give us hope that suffering will one day be ended forever. At the end of the Bible, we are given a glorious vision of a coming world in which all pain and suffering is gone forever. Revelation 21:4 tells us something beautiful: “[God] will wipe every tear from [his people’s] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

The image of God wiping away tears from the eyes of his people communicates not merely the *cessation* of earthly suffering, but *consolation* for earthly suffering. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Samwise Gamgee asks, “Is everything sad going to come untrue?”<sup>15</sup> In the Bible, [heaven](#) represents the place where sadness not merely ends, but becomes untrue—forever. As C. S. Lewis wrote in his book *The Great Divorce*, “They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.”<sup>16</sup> The Bible offers this amazing gift to anyone who repents of sin and [trusts in Christ](#) for salvation. According to the Bible, those who reject this salvation and persist in rebellion against God will be banished from God’s presence and experience [eternal death and suffering](#).<sup>17</sup>

According to the Bible, God already gave us the first installment of this beautiful ending when he resurrected Jesus from the dead. One day, what happened to Jesus—the reversal of death and liberation from decay—will happen throughout creation; the world will be redeemed and made new.<sup>18</sup> The antidote will spread throughout the whole system. This vision of joy as the ultimate destination of redeemed creation explains our longing for permanent happiness, and the feeling of being out of place that we sometimes have in this world. Theologian G. K. Chesterton said:

Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live.<sup>19</sup>

Whether or not you believe in this vision of the triumph of joy and the undoing of suffering, you have to admit it is a beautiful thought.

## Responding to Suffering

But what do we do with all this? What's the practical payoff when we are actively suffering in the here and now?

Suffering can produce very different results in different peoples' lives, depending on how they respond to it. The same painful experience can make one person bitter, narrow, and ungenerous, and another person sweeter, humbler, and more patient. What makes the difference?

One important aspect of the Bible's teaching is the call to persevere with integrity through suffering. The Apostle James taught that trials should be considered "pure joy" because they produce perseverance.<sup>20</sup> The Apostle Paul took the concept even further, saying that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."<sup>21</sup> The New Testament repeatedly calls Christians to stand up under unjust suffering, and even to rejoice in it in light of God's redemptive purposes.<sup>22</sup>

Suffering can sweeten and deepen us. Suffering can poison and embitter us. We have a choice.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychologist who spent years in a Nazi concentration camp during the Holocaust. Upon his release, he wrote about his experiences and observations. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, he wrote: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."<sup>23</sup>

## The Testimony of Sufferers

The voices of sufferers throughout the centuries have cried out concerning the difference God makes amidst suffering. William Cowper was a Christian poet who suffered terribly. He went insane four times, attempted suicide on several occasions, and was debilitated by depression for long periods of time, including the final ten years of his life. In the midst of one of his darker struggles, he wrote to a friend:

It is with great unwillingness that I write, knowing that I can say nothing but what will distress you. I despair of everything, and my despair is perfect, because it is founded on a persuasion, that there is no effectual help for me, even in God. From four this morning till after seven I lay meditating terrors, such terrors as no language can express, and as no heart I am sure but mine ever knew. My very finger-ends tingled with it.<sup>24</sup>

In another letter he confessed, "One thing and one only is left to me, the wish that I had never existed."<sup>25</sup>

But Cowper's despair is not the sum and total of his life. In his letters, as well as in his poetry and hymns, there is another strand of thought—one of hope, patience, and faith in God. In one of his most famous hymns, he wrote,

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
but trust Him for His grace;  
behind a frowning providence  
he hides a smiling face.  
His purposes will ripen fast,

unfolding every hour;  
the bud may have a bitter taste,  
but sweet will be the flow'r.  
Blind unbelief is sure to err  
and scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
and He will make it plain.<sup>26</sup>

Cowper's life and writings remind us that as powerful as suffering is, God is more powerful. As real as suffering is, God is more real. As deep as suffering goes, God goes deeper. As Corrie Ten Boom wrote while languishing in a Nazi prison in 1944: "There is no pit so deep but Christ is deeper still."

## Suffering and Theodicy

This biblical story has amazing power for helping us sort out the suffering in our lives. But, of course, there's a more basic philosophical question at hand: Why did God create a world in which there was the potential for suffering in the first place? If he is all-good and all-powerful, why hasn't he eliminated the possibility of suffering at all?

Over the centuries, Christians have responded to this question, which is often called [the Problem of Evil](#), with many different theodicies—defenses of God's good and powerful character despite the existence of evil. John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, one of the most well-regarded epic poems in the English language, is devoted to this issue.

But perhaps the most influential response to the Problem of Evil is the "free-will theodicy" of Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Augustine taught that evil is simply the privation of good; it exists as a necessary possibility in a world of free, morally conscious creatures. According to this way of thinking, if God wanted a world without any possibility of pain, he would have had to create a world without any possibility of free choice or true love—a world of robots, not people.

Another early strand of Christian thought, represented by theologians such as Origen of Alexandria (184/185–253/254), can be called "greater goods theodicy." In this defense, God is said to permit evil because he is ultimately using evil to bring about greater good. Most people can identify with this at least to an extent; the majority of us can think of a time when something we thought was bad ultimately turned out to be good. If God can work out *some* evil for good, the argument goes, then isn't it possible—given enough time and wisdom—that he could work out *all* evil for good?

Because of such possibilities—and the finitude of human knowledge about what a perfect God would do in a given set of circumstances—even many contemporary atheists and agnostics admit that the Problem of Evil is, at best, a probabilistic argument. It raises questions for the theist, but does not make theism impossible.

The Christian journalist Malcolm Muggeridge reflected on suffering in his life in this way:

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at that time seemed especially desolating and painful. I now look back upon them with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not through happiness whether pursued or attained. In other words, I say this, if it were possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo-jumbo, the results would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the cross signifies and it is the cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.<sup>27</sup>

## The Problem of Happiness and Good

Theodicies can be helpful. But suppose one finds the traditional Christian answers to the question of evil inadequate and feels compelled to deny the existence of God? At this point, the problem of suffering becomes an even *greater* problem. After all, at that point, how can one say that there *is* such a thing as evil? Why is suffering really objectively bad and not merely personally inconvenient? C. S. Lewis came to realize this in his own journey away from atheism:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing

this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? A man feels wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet. Of course, I could have given up my idea of justice by saying that it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, suffering and evil are problems for everyone, theist and atheist alike. The theist knows why he hates them, because the theist believes that suffering and evil are a deviation from a real standard, a fall from a real good. The atheist, by contrast, must provide some explanation for *why* suffering and death are so tragic.

The movie *The Grey* dramatically raises this question: If ultimately death is all there is, why is its presentation from a nihilistic standpoint so chilling, so haunting, so poignant? Why does Liam Neeson's character so value the pictures of family members in the wallets of the other characters? Why does he cry out to God for an answer, if no God is there to be petitioned? Why is death tragic, if death is king?

If the believer is asked to provide a theodicy, the unbeliever may be asked to provide an explanation of the *desire* for theodicy. If suffering and evil are perplexing within theism, happiness and good can only be incomprehensible within atheism.

## A Final Note

It is one thing to discuss the problem of suffering in the abstract. It is quite another to experience suffering in our lives or see it dramatized in the lives of others. Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is a powerful dramatization of the redemptive nature of suffering. The character Ivan gives a heart-rending expression of the Problem of Evil in a speech in Book V, chapters 3-5, and no other character in the book really gives an answer.

It is so forcefully and empathetically articulated that one wonders if it is Dostoevsky's own view shining through Ivan's words. Ivan's focus on the suffering of children throughout his speech adds to this suspicion, in light of the fact that Dostoevsky's writing of the novel was interrupted in May 1878 by the tragic death of his three-year-old son.

But the *events* of the story undermine Ivan's argument. The narrative overwhelms the logic. Ivan's philosophy is the rationale used by the character Smerdyakov for committing the central tragedy of the plot—the murder of Ivan's father. And Ivan, in coming to terms with his indirect complicity in his own father's murder, goes insane. There is no question that Dostoevsky *understands* Ivan's perspective from the inside out—and yet he ultimately demonstrates its impossibility.

At the conclusion of Book XI, Alyosha, the book's strangely quiet hero, reflects on Ivan's madness:

[Alyosha] began to understand Ivan's illness: "The torments of a proud decision, a deep conscience!" God, in whom he did not believe, and his truth were overcoming his heart, which still did not want to submit. . . . Alyosha smiled gently: "God will win!" he thought. "He will either rise into the light of truth, or . . . perish in hatred, taking revenge on himself and everyone for having served something he does not believe in," Alyosha added bitterly, and again prayed for Ivan.<sup>29</sup>

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, and in our actual lives, there is nothing that can take away the difficulty of suffering. Some suffering—at least in this life—has no immediate answer other than weeping. But however difficult faith in God may be in light of the terrible pain in this world, its only alternative is an unlivable despair. And if rejecting God merely compounds the problem of suffering, the wisest remaining option—no matter how difficult it may be—is to trust that in the end God is big enough to have an answer for suffering.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Joseph Bayly, *The View from a Hearse: A Christian View of Death* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1969). Tim Keller summarizes this story here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=So77oS7Kih8>.
- <sup>2</sup> See *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Ezekiel 28:12-18, Luke 10:18.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Genesis 3:1-8.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Genesis 3:16-19.
- <sup>5</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; reprinted, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 19-22.
- <sup>6</sup> The Holy Bible, Romans 12:15.
- <sup>7</sup> Scholars debate the fundamental issue dealt with in Ecclesiastes. Not all think it is about “the apparent futility or meaninglessness of life,” particularly in a modern, existentialist sense. Some see it as a treatise on life’s provisional nature. Others take it as addressing the absurdities of life.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Habakkuk 1:13.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Habakkuk 2:4.
- <sup>10</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986), 133.
- <sup>11</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 2.
- <sup>12</sup> See *The Holy Bible*, John 16:33.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Ephesians 3:19.
- <sup>14</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 30.
- <sup>15</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954; reprinted, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 951.
- <sup>16</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Macmillan, 1946), 64.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Revelation 20:12-15.
- <sup>18</sup> See *The Holy Bible*, Romans 8:20-21, Revelation 21:5.
- <sup>19</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1908), 296.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Holy Bible*, James 1:2-4.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Romans 5:3-4.
- <sup>22</sup> See *The Holy Bible*, 1 Peter 4:12-19.
- <sup>23</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946; reprinted, Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 75.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Selected Letters of William Cowper*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 287.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Selected Letters of William Cowper*, 300.
- <sup>26</sup> William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” 1774.
- <sup>27</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *In the Valley of This Restless Mind* (Collins, 1978), 72.
- <sup>28</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 38-39.
- <sup>29</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Richard Pevear (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 649.