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responding to suffering

Chris Knight on how we 'do' apologetics

the biggest question

We turn now to what is often seen as the biggest objection or obstacle to faith – the existence of pain and suffering in a world where God is said to be good and loving. Whether we simply turn to today's news, or are talking with family and friends, pain and suffering never seem far away. The question that so often comes to the lips of Christians as well as non-Christians is: 'If God is so good, why doesn't he stop the pain?'

In this short article, we're not going to resolve that issue fully – even a whole book wouldn't be enough. But we will think about some ways that we might respond when people raise this common question with us.





former research scientist **Chris Knight** is
content coordinator of *bethinking.org*

a real problem

For many people, the issue of suffering is a real obstacle to believing in a loving God. Nothing that I say is intended to dismiss the extent and depth of an individual's suffering. The question can be raised, however, for varying reasons. It can be an intellectual and philosophical issue, as it was for me as a teenager. Or it can be a very real, personal and emotional issue, raised by someone's own experience of suffering or that of someone close to them. It is not necessarily very helpful to respond to one of these when our friend has the other in mind. Questions will help to identify whether this is a purely philosophical issue or whether faith remains, but there is anger and disillusionment with God for what has happened.

the intellectual problem

A typical example of the intellectual problem of suffering is expressed as 'Why does God allow...?' There is not necessarily any real emotional contact with the question – although there may have been in the past. For some, it may be a real barrier to belief but it can be a question that troubles Christians as well.

The argument is often put in the following way, which I will call 'the happiness argument' for reasons which will become clear below:

1. If a loving and all-powerful God exists, he would not allow any suffering
2. Suffering exists
3. Therefore, a loving God does not exist

Few would disagree with the second statement, and if the first one is true, then the conclusion follows. So we need to look at the assumptions that lie behind the first statement: 'If a loving

God exists, he would not allow any suffering'. At first glance, this is an attractive belief. Any parent can acknowledge the extent to which they try to minimise the suffering of their children. So if God is omnipotent, surely he would simply want to prevent suffering before it happened and the world would be a wonderful, happy place to live. But there are at least two assumptions lurking behind this argument that we might question.

The first assumption behind 'the happiness argument' is the reason I chose that name – it is assumed that happiness is the main purpose of human life. The 'perfect' world is pictured as a five-star luxury hotel – solely devoted to pampering us with everything that could make us happy. Even if the world is not expected to provide five-star luxury, the assumption is still that our current happiness and contentment must be central to the purpose of life and hence require the absence of all pain and suffering, which a loving God would therefore remove.

The second assumption behind the happiness argument is that we have perfect knowledge of the world – and of God. There is no bigger picture within which suffering might be understood and resolved.

Both of these assumptions are, of course, highly questionable. The happiness argument revolves around whether there is a bigger picture that is beyond our knowledge, so the second assumption really just begs the question. But the first assumption does seem more plausible: surely God does desire everyone to be happy? So why did he not make the world to ensure that that was the case?

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a bigger picture?

Our everyday lives actually show that we do not view the avoidance of suffering as the most important aspect of our lives. Vaccinations, surgical procedures, visits to the gym can all be painful – but we do not avoid them at all costs. We acknowledge that these things have a higher purpose behind them that make sense of the immediate suffering imposed. Might not the creator of the Universe also have a greater purpose for his creation that allows (but does not necessarily want) the possibility of suffering? He sees the bigger picture – which is not visible to us.

It seems to me that if we have the possibility of happiness, then the possibility of unhappiness and suffering must also exist. If you fall in love with a wonderful person, there is a possibility of great happiness – but if that love is unrequited, there is great *unhappiness* instead. We cannot be made for real happiness without the possibility of its opposite. The only alternative is for us to be automatons – incapable of free will, but consequently incapable of any real relationships, moral choices, creativity, faithfulness, courage and every other characteristic that makes us truly human and makes life worth living.

why doesn't God stop it?

But even if we accept that free will is important to our humanity, it's still tempting to ask why God doesn't stop the huge evils that occur in the world. Couldn't he at least stop the really big things – the Holocaust, evil dictators, and so on? We might all think that if God had prevented Hitler from carrying out the Holocaust, the world would have been a better place. But why do we stop there? Surely other evil dictators could also be stopped? Murders

prevented? Violence stopped? Lying, cheating, anger and gossip can all lead to terrible emotional and physical hurt – so should these all be prevented as well? Where would God need to draw the line at his interference in the world to prevent all pain and suffering? Even sports and leisure activities that people enjoy can lead to serious accidents and tragedy.

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What sort of a world would this be? There would be no true freedom – no action would have any real consequences. There would be no moral or immoral actions as even if you shoot someone at point blank range, God would turn the bullet to jelly before it hit your intended victim. In such a world, we could make no real plans, because cause and effect would at times be suspended (science would be impossible!) and morality would be non-existent as moral actions require a knowledge of good and bad consequences.

All the above is nothing like a conclusive resolution to the problem of suffering. But it does show that there is more to the argument than first appears. It must be clear that there is no bigger picture or purpose behind the suffering in the world before the atheist's argument works. So the atheist might then revise the happiness argument to the following:

1. If a loving and all-powerful God exists, he would not allow purposeless suffering
2. Purposeless suffering exists
3. Therefore, a loving God does not exist

But it is now much harder for the atheist to maintain that he knows that purposeless suffering exists. Also, the Christian can turn the argument around:

1. If a loving and all-powerful God exists, he would not allow purposeless suffering
2. A loving God does exist
3. Therefore, purposeless suffering does not exist

Statement one is the same in both of these arguments, and the difference lies in what other truth (statement two) we have the best reasons to believe – and hence what we can conclude (statement three). Can we really know that any example of suffering has no possible wider purpose or reason behind it? What evidence could allow us to conclude this with any confidence? On the other hand, has our Christian understanding and experience convinced us that God is indeed a loving God who cares deeply for us? I believe that as Christians we have good reasons to believe that God exists and that God is loving (more on this in my next article). If that is the case, we can affirm in statement two above that ‘a loving God does exist’ rather than that ‘purposeless suffering exists’. So the atheist’s argument against God’s existence, based on suffering, fails – because of our knowledge, experience and trust in God and his character. That conviction is unlikely to convince the atheist, but it does give us an opportunity to explain why we believe in such a God and can lead to interesting conversations about the nature of the God we love and serve as Christians, which leads us to consider the personal problem of suffering.

the personal problem

The personal problem of suffering is typically expressed as ‘Why, God...?’ or ‘How can I

key points

the intellectual problem of suffering

- Only purposeless suffering is a real problem – but how does the atheist know that it is purposeless?
- Loss of free will or consequences to actions negate our humanity
- You can turn the argument around by showing that God exists

the personal problem of suffering

- Know why you trust in God
- Trust sometimes needs to walk ahead of understanding
- It’s more important to know who God is, than why suffering happens
- Jesus Christ shows us the heart of God’s love for us

continue to trust God when...?’ At first it might be expressed more dispassionately, like the intellectual problem of suffering – but we need to see whether there’s a question behind the question. What is *really* going on here?

Giles Cattermole expressed this personal problem of suffering really well in his *Nucleus* article ‘Is God helpless or heartless?’¹ He writes: ‘Most people don’t ask this question as an academic exercise for an intellectual solution, but because they’re hurting, and they’re crying out for an answer that will help them through the pain; an answer that works in real life.’ Do read the whole of Giles’ article, which is highly relevant to this personal problem of suffering. I will add just a few other thoughts.

Our emotions are powerful – they are far more likely to eat away at Christian beliefs than any argument for the non-existence of God. When we become a Christian, we begin a journey of faith, a journey of trusting God. Os Guinness puts it like this: ‘When Christian believers come to faith their understanding and

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their faith go hand in hand, but as they continue in faith their trust may sometimes be called to go on by itself without their understanding.’² When we don’t understand what is happening to us or our loved ones, and our emotions urge us to ask ‘Why?’, our trust needs to walk on ahead of our understanding. That is so much easier if we know why we trusted in the first place – which is one of the reasons why I recommended in part two that we should all think through our testimony of why we became a Christian – so that when the feelings tell us it’s all false, we can go back to that written testimony and remind ourselves why we know that God *can* be trusted, whatever our feelings currently tell us.

When we or others face the emotional turmoil arising from the pain and suffering of the world around us, perhaps we ask the wrong question. Instead of asking ‘Why?’, we should be asking ‘Who?’. The book of Job can be difficult to read all the way through, but it makes this point well. After all of Job’s suffering and all of his friends’ advice, Job finally gets what he needs. Five times in chapter three, and many more subsequently, he asks ‘Why?’, but God instead answers the question ‘Who?’. God responds to an enquiry with an encounter.

Job’s experience of God silences his questions: ‘Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.’ (Job 42:3,5) We may know why we believe in God, and we need to hold on to that, but it should lead us in our journey of faith to an absolute trust in the God in whom we believe. That same God came to us in Christ and ‘demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8). Then, whatever befalls us, our

further resources

- Giles Cattermole: Is God helpless or heartless? cmf.li/110iXYr
- Os Guinness: *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt*. Wheaton: Illinois: Crossway, 1996.
- Melvin Tinker: *Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* Christian Focus Publications, 2009.
- www.bethinking.org/suffering

experience of God’s love and faithfulness will enable us to continue our walk without further understanding. To quote Os Guinness again: ‘We always have sure and sufficient reasons for knowing why we can trust God, but do not always know what God is doing and why.’³

‘Why?’ is a difficult question to answer – indeed there probably is no adequate answer we can give. Perhaps we can redirect our friend to consider instead the question ‘Who?’. Who is it that offers us hope and purpose in the midst of suffering? Who can bring peace and joy in pain and despair? Who came to earth to identify with his creation? Who died on a cross that we might live? When we encounter the reality of God in Christ, we know we can trust him in everything. When our understanding has reached its limits, we still have reasons to trust God and continue to walk with him. We can say confidently with Abraham: ‘Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?’ (Genesis 18:25). ■

NEXT TIME – how do we know God exists?

REFERENCES

1. Cattermole G. Is God helpless or heartless? *Nucleus* Winter 2012, 43(1):14-18 cmf.li/110iXYr
2. Guinness O. *God in the Dark*, Wheaton: Illinois: Crossway, 1996:168
3. *Ibid.*

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