

# is God helpless or heartless?

**Giles Cattermole** considers our suffering God

*'How are atheists produced? In probably nine cases out of ten, what happens is something like this: A beloved husband, or wife, or child, or sweetheart is gnawed to death by cancer, stultified by epilepsy, struck dumb and helpless by apoplexy, or strangled by croup or diphtheria; and the looker on, after praying vainly to God to refrain from such horrible and wanton cruelty, indignantly repudiates faith in the divine monster, and becomes not merely indifferent and sceptical, but fiercely and actively hostile to religion.'*<sup>1</sup>





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**B**ernard Shaw eloquently expressed the anguish and anger that so many feel when faced with the awfulness of suffering and death, that if we're honest, maybe we've all begun to feel at some point. How can a loving, all-powerful God allow suffering? It's argued that if God were both good and powerful, evil wouldn't exist. The fact that evil so obviously and painfully does exist, suggests that God must be heartless or helpless or both. God could be good, but unable to stop evil - he would be a little God, not worth worshipping. God could be powerful, but unwilling to stop evil - he would be a monster we should not worship.

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. In rejecting faith, Shaw seems to solve the intellectual paradox without providing any comfort or hope for the sufferer. We are left with Richard Dawkins' world in which *'some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice.*

*The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.'*<sup>2</sup> There is no problem of evil in such a world, so there's no answer. Some people suffer, get over it. There is only a problem to wrestle with if we continue to believe in a loving and powerful God, and God's people have always and will continue to struggle with the problem. Many of the Psalms, and the book of Job, are honest and heartfelt expressions of doubt and distress. How can God let these tragedies happen?

We can come up with solutions that make some sort of sense to us: that God gave people the freedom to make real choices; that freedom is a good thing but we use that freedom to hurt others. Suffering is often a result of choices that damage our own health, or choices that hurt others. It's about our own violence and greed and foolishness and negligence. But there's a lot of suffering that isn't. So we remind ourselves that the good world that God made was so corrupted by our rebellion that the whole order of things is damaged. There might not be a direct link between our actions and disease or disasters, but they are still indirectly the result of human sin. But we don't seem much closer to an answer that gives hope to the dying or comfort to the bereaved. Rather than saying 'there is no God and pain is just the way it is' are we in danger of saying 'there is a God but pain is your fault'? We can't leave it there.

## God using our pain

Perhaps as Christians we can sometimes see how God uses our pain to achieve something better for us; in Hebrews 12:7-10 we're told to endure hardship as discipline, for our good. When our suffering is our own fault, we learn to change our behaviour, and we can thank God. Medically, if we didn't have pain sensation we wouldn't be warned of potential injury from heat, trauma, exhaustion and so on. Diseases like diabetes that damage nerves can result in terrible ulceration and tissue destruction. Some suffering might be a warning before we cause more significant harm to ourselves or others. But what about suffering that doesn't seem to point us anywhere? And more importantly, what about death? Death isn't discipline, it gives no opportunity to reform.

We need an answer to the problem of suffering that is an answer to the problem of death.

Have a look at Luke 7:11-17. In this story, Jesus comes face to face with the agony of suffering and death. A woman who has already lost her husband, has now lost her son. He's probably a teenager, and he's died. The boy she'd brought into the world, cared for, loved, and was now perhaps her only family, has gone.

### real lives

I work in an Emergency Department. I've seen many people die, and I've been the one who's had to decide when to stop trying to resuscitate someone. I've been the one who's had to go and tell the relatives that their husband or wife, mother or father, or grandparent, has died. But I never forget the times when it was a child on the resuscitation trolley. When it's a parent who's standing there helplessly as we've tried to thump and breathe life back into their baby. When we've kept going beyond the point we know it's futile, because none of us wants death to win, none of us wants this mum and dad to face the rest of their lives without their child. And none of us wants to explain to them what's happened. We don't know why this had to happen to them - we're angry at this messed up world in which an eight-year-old boy is hit by a car and his dad is torturing himself with the knowledge that he'd been the one holding his son's hand before he ran out into the road. God knows what he's going through and we don't really know how to comfort him; whether he'll find any comfort at all in this awfulness.

What did Jesus do when faced with this bereaved mother? God is no heartless monster. Jesus' heart goes out to this woman, he's filled with compassion for her, he's deeply moved. God cares. He's not some impersonal force, he's not

some distant and detached God who made the universe and then left it to drift into decay. God loved people so much that he became a person, he lived as a man, Jesus. He saw our distress, and came to us. He reached out to us in compassion. Jesus shows us that God cares.

Occasionally I've managed to get a pulse back and keep a child alive for a few more hours. But it's often all too little too late, and seeing the hope die in the eyes of a parent is devastating. We care, we try, we hope, but we can't control the outcome. Faced with death, Jesus is in control. He certainly isn't heartless, and he isn't helpless either. Jesus says to the dead boy, 'get up' - and he gets up, and he's back with his mother. The people there are amazed: 'God has come to help his people.'

But that was then. Jesus may have had power to save this boy, but today so many prayers seem to go unanswered. If he really is God, if he still cares, why doesn't he do the same for my patient, for my loved one, for me? Isn't the Christian insistence on an answer to the problem of suffering simply wishful thinking? If the answer was just philosophical, perhaps it would be. But the answer lies not in what I'd like Jesus to do now, but in what Jesus has done already; in the compassion and power that he demonstrated on the cross, a compassion and power that are so much greater than anything I can feel or do in my Emergency Department. When I explain to a family that their loved one has died, I really do feel for them. I'm often close to tears. But I've not been there myself. I have four children; I can't begin to imagine what it'd be like if one of them were to be killed. But God really does know what it's like, because he's been there himself. He lost his unique, eternal Son. Jesus was tortured, killed and buried. 'Compassion' literally means 'suffering with'. In the resuscitation room I'm not

going through what the parents are going through. But God did. He saw our distress and reached out to us in real compassion, suffering with us. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16).

## Jesus' suffering

But the suffering of pain and loss that God went through in Jesus was not simply to show us how much he feels our pain, but to defeat death itself. Jesus' death is not just a declaration of sympathy, but an announcement of victory. In the resuscitation room, the best I can achieve is to delay the inevitable; even if a patient makes it home, they're going to die one day. But Jesus didn't stay dead, he rose to life, never to die again.

In 1 Peter 2:22-25 we see what was happening at the cross. Jesus suffered and died, tortured by the horror of crucifixion. But he went through something more horrific than any means of execution the Romans could devise; he bore our sins. Jesus, God himself, someone without any sin, took the ugliness and deviance and nastiness of our sins on himself. And he took the punishment for those sins, the separation from God the Father; he went through hell on our behalf. He knows suffering more than we ever will. But as he did so, he set us free from our sin and the death we deserve. He's taken the punishment: if we trust in him; if we turn from living according to our own ways of doing things and instead follow him, we are forgiven. We are put right with God; God sees us as he sees Jesus; the relationship is restored. And that resurrection power brings life for all those who trust and follow him.

What Jesus did for the boy in Luke 7 is a picture of what he offers people today. A hope of new life, eternal life. The life that Jesus has,



he offers to share with us. Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, said: 'When I die, I shall rot'.<sup>3</sup> That's no hope; death comes as the end; it's all meaningless. But Jesus shows us there is life beyond death, full and real life, life as it was meant to be without suffering, death and bereavement, eternal life with him. In Revelation 21:3-4 it says 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

## the cross

The cross is where we begin to find an answer to the problem of suffering. God really has come to help his people - the onlookers in Luke 7 were so right, even though they didn't know then what Jesus had really come to do. Nor do we understand it all fully, but perhaps this focus on the cross and our need for forgiveness also suggests that one purpose of suffering is to remind us of the seriousness of sin and its consequences. Like the pain fibres that warn me to avoid injury, the suffering and death we see in the world is an alarm bell, or as CS Lewis called it, 'a megaphone to a deaf world', to bring people to realise all is not well - it's not 'just the way it is', pain and death are not what is intended, and we need to turn back to God.

And according to 1 Peter 2:21, Jesus' suffering is also an example for us to follow. If we face unjust suffering from those around us, we are to face it as Jesus did, without retaliation or threat. Not to be a doormat, but because by doing so we show something of Jesus to those around us. A few verses earlier (2:12), Peter suggests that by living this way, this way of Christ-like submission and

servanthood, we will be a witness to people who will see how we live and want to know the reason for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15). We saw earlier that some suffering as Christians can help shape us to be the people God wants us to be; it can also be the means through which others can come to know Jesus.

Keeping a focus on the cross will also help us to help our friends who are suffering. We need to love them as Christ loved us, with sacrificial compassion. Do we really share their suffering? Are we there for them and with them? It's something I fail at again and again, especially in the Emergency Department. It's so easy to treat patients like products on a conveyor belt, offering pat sympathy and trite condolences. Time is so short; there's always someone else to see. But you don't refer your friends back to their GP, you spend time with them. Don't offer false hope that things will only get better; don't just look on the bright side of life. Instead, hold out the beautiful and only true hope, the hope that is found in Jesus and what he accomplished at the cross.

And live out this hope in your own suffering. We know that the problem of suffering and the way we deal with our suffering, may perhaps become opportunities to introduce our friends to Jesus. Let's pray then that God would give us the strength to follow him faithfully however difficult our circumstances; that the God who's been there himself would be with us throughout; that he would bring hope where we sometimes just see despair; that he would keep us to the end. Because one day there will be no more sickness or suffering, disease or death. One day there will be no need for doctors, and it will be wonderful! ■

## REFERENCES

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