

Why does God Allow His People to Suffer?

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[0 : 00] Well, a few years ago, television personality and celebrity atheist Stephen Fry was being interviewed by Irish Television, RTE, and he was asked, Stephen, what happens if you're wrong? What happens if you reach the end of your life, you die, and you arrive at the pearly gates, and you are confronted with God, the person who you say doesn't exist? What will you say to him?

Stephen Fry didn't hold back in how he responded to Seamus O'Mullen. He said that he would say to God at the pearly gates, Bone cancer in children, what's that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault?

It's not right. It's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain?

Stephen Fry in that moment was speaking for many people who are asking this question that we're considering this evening. Why does God allow suffering to happen to his people?

Now, it's important that we understand tonight that the question of suffering is not an academic theological question for people who live in ivory towers. Suffering is a question that is very close to all of our hearts, because all of us know what it is like to feel the bitter realities of pain and agony in our lives.

[1 : 18] I'm the pastor of a church that is filled with people who have experienced suffering. Cuts and bruises, miscarriages and infertility, broken bones, broken hearts, hurting minds, hurting emotions, cancers, depressions, self-harms, you name it, we've got it.

Yeah, the amazing thing is that in a community of people like that, their response has not been like Stephen Fry, which was to drive them away from God. Rather, their experiences of pain and suffering actually drew them closer to God.

That's going to be important as we think about this question tonight. The reality of suffering does not necessarily mean that God should be distant from you and someone that you should be angry at.

The problem of suffering is also not a question just for the Christian faith alone to deal with.

Every religion, every worldview, every philosophy has to answer the reality of pain and suffering in this world. It would be absolutely fair for us to go back to Stephen Fry and say, Stephen, okay, I hear that you're angry at the God of Christianity, but what's your explanation for suffering?

How do you make sense of it in your worldview, your secular, humanistic, atheistic worldview? I think that actually the secular worldview which dominates the Western world in which we live really falls short.

[2 : 35] It doesn't have the resources to adequately deal with this problem. So it's easy to throw stones at the Christian worldview, but they've got their own problems they need to deal with as well in-house. It's interesting that we live in a part of the world where we have never had more comfortable lifestyles than at this time.

We are economically advanced. We have medical and technological advances which shield us, that insulate us from pain and suffering at a very basic level every day. And yet we, with our much lower level of suffering, we seem to struggle more than they did in the past with pain and suffering.

Some of you are older than me. Some of you look considerably older than me, and you know what I'm talking about. You look at some of my generation, and you agree with the Daily Telegraph or a bunch of snowflakes. Isn't it interesting that we are more insulated from suffering, and yet we struggle more today with that level of suffering?

Why is that? Well, I think that part of the answer is that the secular worldview just doesn't have the resources to cope and to manage with suffering. It tells us that suffering is just a fact of nature.

It has no higher purpose. It has no ultimate reason to it. There is no redemptive hope in it. It just is. It has no longer purpose, and it will interfere with your plans for life.

[3 : 47] It will frustrate your dreams. It will prevent you achieving your plans for happiness. You've just got to get on with it. It will be a block on your hopes and your dreams and your plans.

That's just it. It's just a waste of your time in life. That's just it. In the past, people had hoped that even though things were difficult, that maybe there was a purpose.

Maybe there was a plan. Maybe one day they would look back and see, oh, that makes more sense now. But secularism doesn't have that. Suffering just is. Get on with it. It isn't interesting that actually whenever we encounter suffering in our lives, we don't just ever receive it just as, well, that's just the way it is.

We don't just shrug our shoulders at suffering. We know deep down there's something more going on there. One Christian philosopher has said that only we human beings spell pain the way we do. And he doesn't just mean spell it P-A-I-N. He means that we see suffering not just as a fact of nature, like the weather, but that we see it as a moral problem. Whenever we have the rain here in Scotland, we get it quite a lot at this time of year.

[4 : 53] We don't go around all day complaining, saying, you know, rain is evil. It's wicked. It's despicable. It's just wrong. We're just like, well, that's just where we live. That's just Scotland. Come on. Go on with it.

We're well-versed in our umbrellas and our ponchos and things to keep us dry. But whenever we encounter evil, when we encounter pain, when we encounter grief and loss in this world, we don't just greet it the way we greet the rain and the weather.

We instinctively know this is wrong. This is not the way things should be. And secularism is unable to make sense of that experience, that all of us deep down know to be true, that suffering just is wrong.

Take one of the spokespeople of secularism. Richard Dawkins cannot help us with this experience that we have. He has said, in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason to it, nor any justice.

The universe that we observe has precisely the properties that we would expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

[6 : 09] I guarantee you, friends, that whenever Richard Dawkins experiences suffering in his life, he does not greet it with just pitiless indifference. He's angry.

He's outraged. He says things should not be this way too. He can think these thoughts, but he can't lift them. There is something inherently unstable and wrong with the secular worldview.

We know that this world is wrong. It is not the way it ought to be. We know that suffering is not fair. These instinctive, deep intuitions that we have, they're telling us about the truth about the world in which we live.

We live in a moral universe. There are such things as right and wrong, good and evil, and suffering is on the evil side of the equation, the wrong side of the equation. One former skeptic, C.S. Lewis, once said that, 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. Lewis is saying that he understands that just the very fact that we know instinctively that suffering is wrong, that tells us that we live in a universe of moral goods and moral evils.

[7 : 25] And that implies that there is also a moral, ultimate good lawgiver who is God himself. This is why I said at the start that the problem, the problem of evil, the question of suffering does not necessarily need to drive us away from believing in God.

But what it will force us to do is consider what are the purposes of God in allowing suffering to happen in the lives of his people. Now we're going to go on a bit of a whistle stop tour, three points to try and help us answer that question this evening.

First point then is that there is a reason for suffering. Now if God is truly good, which is what the Bible says from the very first chapter, from the very first page, God is good, everything he made was good, very good by the end of creation week.

Then how is it that this world has gone so wrong? Why is it that everywhere we look in this world, there is pain and sadness and suffering and decay? What has gone wrong? Well, there are two ways that things can go wrong.

There is user error or there is manufacturing error. Now a few years ago I had a mobile phone before I upgraded to a smartphone and for years it had a crack in the screen.

[8 : 37] And if I had gone back to Cameron Tolldown to the O2 shop and said to them, look, my phone screen is broken, I would like a refund please. Well, the customer service people would be entitled to ask me, well, sir, was it like that when you got out of the box?

To which I'd have to say, well, actually, no, it wasn't. When I got out of the box, the screen was fine, it was intact. And then they would be entitled to ask, well, sir, how did the screen get cracked? And I would feel a little bit uncomfortable at that point and have to tell them, well, actually, there was a Saturday morning.

I'd forgotten to turn my alarm off. And my alarm went off. I wasn't happy at it. And I let it fly. And crack went the screen. And at which point the sales assistant would say, you're not getting a refund. It's your fault. This is not manufacturing error. This is user error. And when we look around at the world around about us, we see it broken in so many ways. And the Bible tells us that the problem is not manufacturing error.

This is not that God has somehow messed up his creation, that he is in some way bad and did a bad job. But rather, we are told in the Bible that what has gone wrong is user error. People have often asked me, is it not possible that God could have created a world in which user error would not be possible, where everything would always be right?

[9 : 48] And the answer is, well, theoretically, yes, God could have created a world where user error wouldn't be a problem. But you wouldn't want to live in a world like that. That would be a world without freedom, a world without love. You see, love always requires the ability to choose.

And God wanted to create a world full of people like you and me, who would know him and love him and live with him and live for him.

But to be creatures who can choose to love God and enjoy God forever, we also have to be creatures with the ability to choose to live for ourselves and not for God. And sadly, the story of the human race is that that is precisely the decision that we have made.

We have chosen to live for ourselves and to reject God, our creator. This world is not the way it's meant to be, because human beings are not the way that we were made to be.

And so here is the dilemma of the problem of suffering. The dilemma is actually not with God. It's actually with us. If this world is broken because of user error, then we are a part of the problem of evil.

[10 : 53] Have you ever thought about that? That each of us in our own small ways contribute to all that is wrong in this world. Let me assure you, the God of the Bible is a God of justice. He cares about every evil, wrong thing that's been done to you in your life.

Every act of unfairness and unkindness and injustice, he cares about that in your life. There's coming a day whenever he is going to settle the accounts of all those people who have caused suffering in your life.

That's good news. But friends, the bad news is also that God cares not just about the suffering that you have experienced, but he also cares about the suffering that you have caused other people to experience.

And there's a day whenever he's going to have to hold you to account for that pain in other people's lives. And so you see all of us in our own small ways, maybe some of us even in bigger ways, contribute to all that's wrong in this world.

We're all part of the problem of evil. Someone who had quite an incredible perception into this problem was a man called Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He was a Russian.

[11 : 57] He experienced the Russian gulags under Stalin. He got on the wrong side of Stalin. He was thrown to the gulag for many, many years. He suffered horrendously in there.

Wrote an incredible trilogy of books, the Gulag Archipelago. And in the second book, he writes this reflection. He reflects on the true dilemma of evil. He says, If only it were all so simple.

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds. And it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. If only it was so easy.

But he continues and says, But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

Solzhenitsyn saw friends and colleagues just turned evil by their experiences in the gulag. And he says that is something that is a capacity which is in all of our hearts.

[13 : 00] So evil is not just a problem out there. Suffering is not just something done by other people. Evil is very much within all of us. And that means that whenever we demand God, Why will you not just intervene?

Why will you not just come and stop all this bad stuff? Why will you not just end evil? Why will you not just bring an end to suffering in the world? You are actually asking God to come and deal with you as well.

He has to deal with you who is also a part of the problem. We must be careful what we ask God to do. So the real dilemma of evil is how is God to deal with people like us whose hearts are plagued with evil?

Just like a wine bottle that's been corked. What's God to do with us? Well, we'll come back to that in a few minutes. But let's move on to a second thought this evening. We've thought about the reason for suffering.

Let's now think about a companion in suffering. See, the Christian faith, the good news of Jesus, it provides an answer to the problem of suffering. And it tells us not just some sort of theoretical, philosophical principle that's the answer, but actually it presents it to the person who is the answer to the problem of evil and suffering.

[14 : 11] The good news is that God has not remained distant from us. He's not remained removed from our pain. Rather, in an incredible love, God has stepped into this world. He's become one of us.

He has walked many miles in our shoes. He has felt our pain. He has drunk from the bitter cup of suffering. And he has worn our scars. So I want to tell you a true story from the book, the Gospel of John, from John chapter 11 this evening.

And this is a story that describes Jesus, the Son of the living God, helping people in the midst of suffering in this world. John 11 begins and it tells us that a few days before, Lazarus, one of Jesus' friends, had died.

He had been buried. And Jesus had been late. His sisters had called for Jesus to come and help their friend, their brother. But Jesus delayed deliberately. So they've buried their brother.

And then a few days later, Jesus shows up. And he comes to care and comfort this family in the midst of their grief and pain. And as Jesus walks into time, one of the sisters, Martha, runs up to him.

[15 : 15] She is disappointed. Grievously disappointed. She had hoped that Jesus would come, that he would heal her brother. And she says, verse 21, Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.

I think many of us echo Martha's question at times in our lives whenever we ask and we say, God, where were you?

Why did you let that happen? Why did you seem so far away when I was going through that time? Where were you? If only you had been here. If you ever asked that question, you have permission to ask that question because it's in the Bible.

The story goes on. Martha responds to Jesus and tells her, verse 23, Your brother will rise again, Martha. And Martha agrees with him.

Verse 24, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. And I wonder if we had an amplified Bible with voices, audio Bibles, if we had that, if we could actually hear the tone of voice in Martha's voice.

[16 : 20] I wonder, was it a, I know he'll rise again. Is there a tinge of frustration here in Martha's voice? Because sometimes whenever people are struggling, the very last thing they need is us coming along and just sprinkling some Bible verses, airdropping in some platitudes.

That's the very last thing that people need whenever in the midst of pain. Is that perhaps what Martha feels Jesus is doing initially? He's just giving her a platitude. I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

But Jesus here is not minimizing the depth of her pain. He is not dismissing the reality of her grief. He isn't just fobbing her off with some platitude. So Jesus is reminding her that the Bible teaches that history is not just a cycle that's going round and round and round aimlessly.

That rather, history is going somewhere. That it will climax finally on the last day when God is going to raise the dead and make this broken world new in every way.

And Martha is an Orthodox Jew and she believes that that day is coming. There's a day coming when Lazarus and even she herself will be raised from the dead into a new creation. She knows that. But Jesus actually wants to shock Martha.

[17 : 31] He wants her to understand that what's going to happen on the last day, well, she's going to get a glimpse of that on this day. Jesus in verse 25 says, I am the resurrection and the life.

Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live. Jesus is saying that he is the king of that coming kingdom. And he has the power to bring some of that resurrection life into Martha's world on this day.

And Jesus doesn't just make crazy claims like that. He doesn't just talk the talk. He then asks to be taken to the tomb. And many people probably expected that this was Jesus wanting to go and pay respects to his dead friend.

But Jesus has something far greater in mind. And so they make the journey to the hillside where the tomb is. And standing on this hillside filled with tombs, the Bible records the very shortest sentence that there is in the entire book from cover to cover.

Just two words. Jesus wept. Someone who's thought a lot about these two words is Philip Yancey. Philip Yancey has written a lot of books on pain and suffering and the problem of evil.

[18 : 41] And he's reflected on how something changes in the Bible. In the Old Testament, there are whole books dedicated to the question of suffering. The question is often asked, God, do you care?

The Psalms are filled with that question, God, do you care? Job, Habakkuk, other places. God's people wrestle in the Old Testament with the question. In the face of evil, in the face of suffering, God, do you care?

Where are you? But Yancey notices that in the New Testament, things have changed. Suffering is still all over the place in the New Testament. But nobody asks the question, Lord, do you care any longer?

And he thinks to himself, why is that? And then he says, although I cannot learn from Jesus why a particular bad thing occurs, I can learn how God feels about it.

Jesus gives God a face. And that face is streaked with tears. Anyone who wonders how God feels about suffering on this groaning planet need only look at that face.

[19 : 49] So there you go. The writers of the New Testament never have to ask the question, Lord, do you care? Because they've seen this face marked with tears. But Jesus' tears are not just tears of sadness and grief.

They are tears of anger as well. The words in the New Testament Greek, they are, he is indignant. He is deeply moved. He is greatly troubled. Verse 33, verse 38.

Jesus is indignant because death is not just a tragedy. Death is an enemy. This is not what God wanted for his world. This is not what God wanted for his people. One theologian has said that when I see the death of a child, I do not see the face of God, but the face of his enemy.

And that's so true. But Jesus here is God come in the flesh, come in person to take on his enemy. He's come to face death and to liberate his people from its clutches.

He's come to return things to the way that they were always made to be. And so Jesus then decides to tell the family to open up the tomb. They're shocked. This is the Middle East.

[20 : 53] It's hot. The body's been in there for three or four days. It smells. Jesus says, open it up. Then Jesus speaks into the black mouth of the tomb.

Lazarus, come out. And out of the tomb walks very much alive the dead man. The old preacher Charles Spurgeon once said that it's very important that Jesus said, Lazarus, come out.

Because if he just said, come out, the entire hillside of tombs would have been emptied. It's a great thought. And on this day, Jesus proves beyond a reasonable doubt that he really is the one who is the resurrection and the life.

It's also interesting that John tells us towards the end of this chapter that Jesus' actions on this day, proving that he's the resurrection and the life, set him on course for his own death.

The story ends with the Pharisees and leaders of Israel being so overawed by this incredible miracle, which they cannot deny and dispute, that they resolve to make plans to put Jesus to death.

[21 : 57] Chapter 12, then of John's Gospel, through to chapter 19 is all about the last week of Jesus' life on the earth before he is crucified. So what happens on this day sets Jesus up for the cross.

And that's so important to understand because Jesus has not just come to sympathize with us in the midst of our pain and our sadness and our sufferings. Jesus has come to save us from those things. But to do that, Jesus has to save us in the most surprising way. Jesus, to save us from evil, has to become the victim of evil. Jesus suffers an incredible miscarriage of justice. He endures incredible bruising and battering. He suffers horrendously. But in the cross of Jesus, God is making a way to deal with the cause of evil in this world, the evil of sin in our hearts. Jesus takes upon himself our sin and our guilt and our shame, and he brings it into judgment before God. And then he takes it down with him into the grave where it's buried, where it belongs. [23 : 02] That's the only way that something can be done about the evil and wickedness within our hearts. Jesus has to take it. And it has to be judged and destroyed in him. The story doesn't end there.

Let's move on to the third thing. This is a hope beyond suffering. See, death and evil does not have the last word on Jesus' story. And it does not have to have the last word over your story either. History records the incredible good news that Jesus did not just die on Friday, but he rose again to life on Easter Sunday morning. Proving once again that he is the resurrection and the life. That he is our champion. The resurrection of Jesus assures us that there is a day coming when good will triumph against evil. There is a day coming when death will die. There is a day coming when tears will cease and pain will be no more. Whenever the sadnesses of this life will just be forgotten like a bad dream. I love how J.R.R. Tolkien in Lord of the Rings puts this.

[24 : 04] I was reading through the trilogy over the summer. And at the end of the return of the king, there's just this little exchange, this little phrase that everything sad is going to come untrue.

Tolkien as a mere Christian, as someone belonging to the Roman Catholic faith steeped in the scriptures, understands that's how the Bible story ends. That there's a day when everything sad is going to come untrue.

Just as Jesus was raised, just as Jesus battered and bruised and broken body was raised from the dead. So also one day, that is the pattern for what we will experience.

That this body, which is broken and suffered in so many ways, it will be raised into newness of life.

And will inhabit the heavenly new creation that God has brought.

Of that day, God promises, I will wipe every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.

[25 : 06] For the former things have passed away. That also explains then why it is that God continues to allow his people to suffer in this world. Why he doesn't necessarily answer all of our prayers for healing.

Why he doesn't keep us safe from every possible tragedy and catastrophe. We're not at the end of the story yet, friends. We're in the middle of the story still. We're not yet at the end. We've not yet reached a new creation.

We've not yet been resurrected into newness of life. That's still in the future. And God is not going to keep on patching up this old creation. He's not just going to keep it running.

God's plan and purpose is not patch up. It is resurrection. It is new creation. But that means that this old creation has to be allowed to die. And so there's going to come a time in your life whenever God is going to decide to no longer patch you up.

And he's going to let you die, Christian. But that's not the end of your story because his plan is resurrection and new creation for you in your life. There is hope beyond suffering through the Lord Jesus.

[26 : 04] Now, as we finish up this evening, I heard on the radio one of the few times the radio has been useful. I thought to myself when I heard this, I can use that.

That's good. On the radio a few years ago, I was listening to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and he was describing an incident in 1983. He was involved in a car crash. His wife and his seven-month-old daughter, Joanna, was in the back of the car.

And dear little Joanna died. This is a terrible tragedy in the Welby family. But in that interview, Welby said, The Christian faith doesn't hide us from the cruelties of life.

Jesus himself faced every aspect of the cruelty of life that is possible. It's just that in it, he is there in the middle of the mess with us. Let me say tonight that whatever you have been through in your life

and whatever yet awaits you in life, let me assure you that you do not have to go through the storms of life on your own.

Either you can come to the Lord Jesus and you can find refuge with him and in him. So, please do that. Do not try and go through this life and this broken world on your own.

[27 : 20] Come to Jesus. Take refuge and find help and hope in him. Let me pray. Father, we come to you this evening and we, in the stillness of our hearts, we can look back and see just so many things that we have questions about in our lives.

So many disappointments. So many broken dreams. So many times of tears and sadness and heartbreak. And they don't all make sense to us.

Well, we thank you that we read in this passage that you, Lord Jesus, wept. We know in the Psalms that we're told that you put all of our tears in a bottle.

You know, you've counted them all. Not one of them has dropped to the ground and been missed by you or forgotten by you. And we know that through the resurrection of Jesus and the hope of the new creation, that there's one day whenever all of this bitterness and badness and brokenness is going to be made to work backwards, that it's going to rebound to our greater joy, that the bitterness of this life in this world will be all made the new creation, our resurrection life, all the sweeter.

And yet here in the midst of this world, as we walk ourselves and walk with others under incredible burdens of sadness and pain, we thank you that we do not walk alone, that you are with us by your spirit.

[28 : 44] So we pray you administer to each of our hearts tonight and that you would help us with whatever we're carrying right now in the present or whatever scars and wounds we have from the past.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.