

God Has a Problem, and So Do We

Psalm 46

So, why do bad things happen to good people? This has become a recurring question with its wording based on Rabbi Harold Kushner's popular book from about thirty years ago. The fact that it comes up consistently in some form in these "Ask Jack" questions testifies to its relevance. But it is only one of five relevant questions, all related. Together, they speak to certain assumptions we make:

1. Why do bad things happen to good people?
2. Why do good things happen to good people?
3. Why do good things happen to bad people?
4. Why do bad things happen to bad people?
5. Who are the good and bad people?

The answer to these questions is relatively simple, if kind of unsatisfying. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told us, "[God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5: 44-5) In short, bad things happen to all people – good and bad alike. Good things happen to all people—good and bad alike. And we are all a mixture of good and bad.

Recently, Dr. Bart Ehrman has written a book called *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. Using some of his insight and the challenges he poses to the Christian faith, we'll look for a way forward with integrity through "the valley of the shadow of death." (Psalm 23)

It is not intrinsically good to suffer, but the key point is that it's not intrinsically bad to suffer either. To the extent that any of us can know something of the mind of God, I am convinced that God does not desire for us to suffer, yet suffering exists in a world created by God. So, why is there suffering?

There are lots of reasons why suffering happens, but none of them explain why in a way that is ultimately satisfying for us. Much of the world's suffering is the result of human evil. World hunger, for example, is almost entirely the result of human action such as war. There is enough food produced in the world to feed everyone, but many people still starve each day.

Some suffering just comes with being alive. Though God doesn't want us to suffer, it is apparent to me that God wants us to grow. Life compels growth and, when growth stops, we are dead. That still leaves a lot of bad stuff that happens without blame—except to blame it on God (act of God), bad judgment (building homes on flood plains, along earthquake faults, and in tornado alleys, etc.), and just bad luck (wrong place at wrong time).

Most suffering is tied to deeper issues. Fear is behind so much of the suffering in our world. Fear of others who are different leads to prejudice and even to war. Fear of not having enough, not being secure enough, leads to greed: to the hoarding of wealth by the few and to poverty for so many.

Fear leads to exclusivity in religion and the need to control what and how others believe. Fear of being abandoned leads us to judge others and leave them before they can leave us. In response to suffering, ancient people tended to ask, "How long?" When would the suffering

stop? Modern people, at least in western societies, tend to ask in words of country song, “Why me, Lord?”

The Christian Church has a mission to be a prophetic voice. to point to the suffering in our world and also to its deeper causes. We are called to hold the truth we see up to the light for all to see, to confess our own complicity in that suffering, and to work for solutions. We have a message of hope to share—that true love casts out fear.

We have another mission as well—to share a vision of how life can be. This vision reflects what our faith proclaims to be the will of God. It is a vision that emerges throughout the Bible with a God who desired to free a people from slavery. It is a vision that found profound and challenging form in the concept of Jubilee when, every 50 years, all debts were cancelled, all slaves were freed, and all lands were returned to their original owners

That same vision shone in the prophets of ancient Israel who announced the coming of sight to the blind, freedom to the captive, and good news to the poor. That vision shone in Jesus who identified so clearly with the suffering people of the world.

How should we respond to suffering in the world? The simple answer is, we should respond as deeply and honestly as possible according to our abilities and resources. When the pain we encounter is the problem, we need to respond with charity to ease it. When the pain we encounter is symptomatic of a deeper problem, we need to embrace the pain, confess our complicity when that is appropriate, and commit ourselves to become agents of transformation. God wants us to grow and be full partners with God in shaping and re-shaping the world in terms of Shalom.

Is suffering absolutely necessary for this to happen? I believe that there can be gain without suffering--depending on what kind of *gain* you mean. But wealth or knowledge gained as the result of hard work and struggle, and reflection on that struggle, may enrich us more than wealth or knowledge given without the struggle. It may bring wisdom. The gain one receives seems to be connected intimately to the process by which it is gained. True enrichment may well come through the struggle itself and the confidence it brings.

To be clear, we can find blessing through dealing with suffering, but suffering itself is not a blessing. Also, the lack of suffering is not necessarily a blessing. That’s a problem for most us. We lose a great deal by focusing our efforts to avoid suffering. We live in a culture that preaches, as a way of life, the avoidance of suffering. We work hard and buy things that will make us happy, things that will occupy our minds and allow us to distance ourselves from unpleasantness. We try to insulate ourselves from harsh realities such as poverty, mental illness, crime, and death. Many of us have become so successful at this that we just do not see the suffering around us. Whenever we try to cut ourselves off from the misery of others, however, that misery has a way of finding us—eventually.

As we try to cut ourselves off from our own pain, that pain and its underlying causes has a way of finding us and biting us hard! Things and money are not the problem. The problem is our unhealthy attachment to them. Attachment to things and money becomes a problem when we use them to avoid seeing suffering in the world, and to avoid acknowledging our own pain. The problem increases with the use of mind-numbing substances, mind-numbing entertainment, or a mind-numbing pace of life to avoid the reality of the suffering around and within us.

We keep ourselves busy. Sometimes we do so in an effort to convince ourselves that we are really living. Our busyness can be an effort to avoid facing our own pain. We can do this even in church. One result of living this way is that we distance ourselves from those who make us uncomfortable—who remind us that not everyone has a home or comes from a loving family, or has a job. Not everyone looks at life the way we do.

This attitude colors our theology as well. We think of heaven as a place of no suffering. Hell is a place where there is only suffering. What about this fantasy? If you were God, surely you'd make a life without suffering! Yet, without suffering, what would we lose? Look no farther than the field of sports: world cup, Tour de France, Wimbledon (9 hour match). The elation of success in sports is directly related to the struggle of training and overcoming adversity.

All of suffering is related to that struggle to stand, to overcome, to attain, and to survive. There are fruits of that struggle and even of the suffering itself. Without acknowledging our own suffering, we might never hear the groans of the poor, the loneliness of the homeless, or even the joy and laughter of children at play. Somehow God provides a world in which suffering happens. Evidently, it's what we do with it that counts! Jesus challenged us to let our suffering open us to the suffering of others, to let the suffering in them draw compassion from us. Jesus called us to see, hear, and embrace the suffering around us and also the suffering within us.

Let's be honest. Most of us try to avoid suffering at all costs. Our culture offers many choices for avoidance: money, power, drugs, fantasy, and suicide. The lure is an assumption that you can and should avoid suffering at any cost. Do these substitutes work? No, they don't! Even when they appear to offer a way to avoid suffering, the avoidance does not last for long and does not solve the problems that led to the suffering in the first place—not at any real depth.

Sometimes we try just to endure suffering stoically—denying pretty much all our feelings except anger and bitterness. The usual result of that strategy is to lose hope. We come to expect the worst and are seldom disappointed. In some sense, we actually become the anger and the bitterness ourselves. There is little hope and less joy. But there is another way.

There is a way that involves some suffering. In fact, we can invite a certain suffering by choosing to live in a way that is characterized by authenticity. We can live with integrity by a vision that emerges from within the self, guided by our own giftedness and motivated by the Spirit's invitation. This way of living invites the suffering that comes naturally along that way. Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador chose to live this way. He called others to do the same:

A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth—beware!—is not the true church of Jesus Christ. A preaching that does not point out sin is not the preaching of the gospel. A preaching that makes sinners feel good, so that they are secured in their sinful state, betrays the gospel's call.

(from a sermon January 22, 1978) He spoke out against an oppressive government, to the people and for the people. He was assassinated while saying mass in his church.

The answer to suffering is in finding a sense of meaning in life. The idea of heaven is not a way of avoiding life's troubles by envisioning a perfect, non-suffering, world to come, one that rectifies all the wrongs of this one. It is to give us an ideal and a vision toward which to live our lives. There is so much we just don't know about this life, this world.

I think I know this clearly—God is God. We are in God and God in us. The secret to thriving is in seeing a different vision of what living well means. We stepped off the mountain onto the tundra and began a hike that descended almost a mile over a length of some four miles to the Continental Divide. The view was spectacular!

This was last week when a group of us walked a portion of the old Ute trail in Rocky Mountain National Park. This experience was one of the highlights of a week of Church Camp in the Rockies. At the beginning of our hike, a park ranger described how animal and plant life coped with the harsh conditions on the tundra. They survived by adaptation, hibernation, and migration.

Some species of vegetation adapt by putting down deep roots and growing low to the ground. They often sacrifice limbs on the windward side for the survival of their leeward foliage. Some animals hibernate to conserve energy by sleeping up to nine months a year. And many animals migrate to lower elevations during the harshest months of winter before returning to the tundra for the short growing season of summer.

There is something about the mountains that helps put life in perspective, but sometimes I wonder just what that perspective is. Am I getting the right message from my experiences on the mountain as well as my experiences in the rest of my life? It's clear that life can be harsh in the mountains. Life can be challenging everywhere. Bad things happens, and good things, too!

We tend to respond to life's challenges and the suffering we experience in the same way plants and animals respond to conditions on the tundra. We migrate by moving to more comfortable and hospitable surroundings. We hibernate by, in effect, sleeping through the worst of our troubles in hopes of surviving till spring arrives. And we adapt by staying low to the ground and out of the fierce wind. In so doing, we often sacrifice our larger dreams for the sake of survival. Rather than risk confronting the harshness of life directly, we often let our windward side die so that our leeward side can survive.

There are times we have to *hunker down* just to survive a crisis, but that's not the consistent lifestyle for us to adopt. That's the answer! Faith offers a view that we are always held in the life of God. Each breath we take in is God's breath. And God breathes in each breath we expel. We are intimately connected with the divine source of all of life, so we can risk embracing and living our dreams—discovering and doing what we feel God's Spirit leading us to do.

Faith invites us to trust that God values justice, compassion, and peace. These values are the key to joy, the key to real happiness in life, that the only risk in life is trying to play it safe, pretending that we are isolated from each other, "No man is an island." When we choose to live with integrity, despite whatever suffering that may come as a consequence, we grow to know ourselves and God more deeply and more clearly. In other words, we grow spiritually.

To live this way is to experience life like standing in a flowing river--always new. The answer is that life is always renewing itself. We are being reborn. Through the power of the Spirit—around, within, and between us as human beings—we can give birth to the *new* that God places within us on the journey of life. We travel this journey together: with each other and with God.