

Where is God when bad things happen?

Introduction

We certainly live in a tragic world. The coach tragedy in Switzerland with the loss of 22 children and 6 adults is one immediate example.

The problem, simply stated, is this. *Couldn't God, if he is loving and powerful, have prevented this tragedy or that catastrophe?* This is often the issue behind the questions people ask when there is a tragedy on a world scale

The Tsunami 8 years ago in the Indian Ocean, or the destruction of the twin towers 10 years ago, or the break-up of a marriage, or the suffering caused by cancer? How does the God of the Bible relate to these tragedies? Where is he when they occur? Can we continue to believe in a loving God who would permit such terrible things to happen?

Aldous Huxley wrote: "Men and women see good things and evil things, beautiful and ugly, and they want to find a reason - a final and absolute reason - why these things should be as they are. It is the Riddle of the Universe". There is this riddle - but the Bible shows us how we are to think about it.

No easy answers

First, the Bible teaches that there are no easy answers. That is the message of the book of Job. Somehow our own attitudes find themselves under examination if we try to say too much. We can't be glib. The problem of evil and suffering is not like the problem of a blocked drain, or an unfinished work assignment, or a losing streak in a football team. It calls for humility on our part - and compassion. Those in pain are more likely to want loving attention, a listening ear and practical help than a clever answer.

Second, we need to realise that the question of why God allows suffering is the hardest of all questions. It is tied up with the bigger question: "Why did God allow evil into his world?" We simply do not have the answer to that.

Third, our response to suffering should be learnt from Jesus' own attitude to evil, suffering and injustice. Jesus was put to death at the age of 33, after the agony of Roman torture. The dying itself took six hours. We learn about the right response to suffering from his teaching, and supremely from the statements he made before and after his trial, and as he hung on the cross. And like life itself, Jesus' attitude to evil is made up of 'segments' that fit together, each needing the other to make the whole. We need to hold them altogether in our minds as we try to answer our own questions, and the questions of others, about the suffering we see in the world.

Jesus' response to suffering

1. Purposeless suffering is part of our disjointed Universe

Jesus told us to expect difficulties in this life. "In this world you will have trouble" (John

16:33). "Nation will rise against nation" (Matthew 24:7). It is not a pleasant thought, but that is the way life is often going to be in this fallen world.

When God made the world, all was well. Purposeless suffering entered the world when we decided that we knew better than God how to live in his World. The Biblical view of man is that he is ultimately responsible for the misery and chaos in the world. Even disease, earthquakes, and tidal waves have become part of our present human condition as a result of dislocation in mankind's relationship to God (Romans 8:18-25).

The moment that Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, they brought sin into the world - and deadly accidents and murderous acts soon followed. And accidents have plagued human kind ever since. No one is exempt. Paul's life was peppered with serious accidents. And yet these painful things never shook his confidence in a good and loving God. Why not? Unlike us, Paul did not see tragedy as evidence against the existence of a loving God. He writes: "For when I am weak, I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). When life overwhelmed him, he knew God would step in to help.

2. We are part of the problem

Jesus said in Mark 7:20 "What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean". If we are honest, we must admit that we ourselves are part of the problem of this world's suffering. We hurt people; we cause others to suffer anxieties and tensions that make them ill. We break other people's hearts. We often need forgiveness. We can exploit and devalue people quite shamelessly.

The overwhelming proportion of all human suffering or evil is caused by people like us. Just look around you where you live or work. If we demanded of a powerful, loving God that he intervene and wipe out all evil, then we too would be finished. Perhaps God is more loving than we give him credit for.

We doubt God's love because he does not prevent bad things happening. Yet when you consider some options God could take to step in and make a difference, you realise that he has chosen the best option. God could handpick the evil people and eliminate them. Anyone who might do wrong even if it hadn't happened yet, would be terminated. The rest (if there were any left) could live in peace?! God could make us all do right all the time - he could programme us like robots to avoid every wrong choice. God could step in to over-ride every evil act. When someone shoots another person, the person just gets up and walks off. Our choices would not make any difference.

3. God is not distant or uninterested

Jesus was slandered, hated, betrayed and then written off. He was on the receiving end of injustice and evil. He knows what it is like, and today, he enters these experiences and makes himself known to us through them.

I cannot imagine what it would be like to endure tragedy without the hope that Jesus offers. Without Jesus Christ there is no hope - there is simply an eternal, black, cold, and unrelenting world. And hope is readily available to all of us, even in the midst of tragedy. Hope is available right now, in the middle of life, because Jesus has promised to walk with us through any hardship or disaster that might overtake us.

4. God uses suffering to bring good

From our perspective, tragedies look meaningless, senseless and chaotic, but God knows how to take even tragedies and bring good out of them. The Bible teaches that God often uses suffering to strengthen our characters and to speak to us. "Pain is God's megaphone to a deaf world" said C.S. Lewis. Romans 5:3-5 says: "Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope". In suffering, God, the Refiner sits patiently beside the crucible of our lives, tempering the heat, eager that the scum should pass off so that his own face might become perfectly reflected in the surface.

Many of the events in the Bible are presented to us both as arising out of human sin and rebellion and as having a divine purpose. Think of the story of Joseph sold into slavery, or Israel having to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, and of course, Jesus dying on the cross. When we get to heaven, we will finally see his purposes even in the tragedies of life. Meanwhile we must continue to believe that he does have a purpose in everything that happens (even if now we are unable to see a shadow of what that might be).

5. This world is not our final home

In John 14, Jesus teaches that this world is not our final home - and this life is not all there is. So, when loved ones die in tragic accidents or at the hands of wicked men, we need to remember that this world is not our final home. We were created for eternity, and tragedy can never change that. This is only a transition period - a prelude to what God really has in mind for us. Our perspective is enormously limited. We tend to look only at what could have been down here on earth. God looks at all of eternity. If we are to cope with tragedy, we need to look at it through an eternity lens.

Jesus spoke repeatedly during his trial and execution about the coming Kingdom when God "will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death and mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4). He warned against anyone building all their hope and happiness on this world alone. One day the world itself and all people everywhere will be brought under the control of the risen Christ.

6. Each of us can become part of God's solution

Instead of just being part of the problem, each of us can become part of the solution to the problem of suffering. Human beings can be forgiven and changed. This is a vital aspect of the Christian response to suffering. We are not only offered a realistic explanation of why the ship is sinking, we are summoned to join the life-crew.