



A Loving God and a Suffering World

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By Rev. Dean Moore

The terrible tragedy of the Asian tsunami, on December 26, 2004 got a lot of people asking how God could allow such a terrible thing to take place. Within days newspapers had contacted Sydney's religious leaders and asked them: "Why does God allow tragedies to befall innocent people?" It's an important question and one which most people will ask at some stage in their life, particularly at times when they themselves have suffered.

The answer is complicated by what we know of God. The Bible ascribes to God two very important qualities. These two attributes of God are that:

1. He is all-powerful (or 'omnipotent'); and
2. He is all-loving.

God's omnipotence is best illustrated by God's ability to create the universe. By simply speaking the words "Let there be light," there was light in the universe, where previously there had been only darkness. God is the person that brings all things into being, and He is the one that keeps things going. Nothing can stop God or overcome God's power. In fact, because God made all things, any power that we have is only present because God is gracious enough to let us have it.

God is all-powerful - He is omnipotent.

Fortunately for us, God is also complete and total in his love. In fact the apostle John says 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). 'God' and 'love' are two words meaning the same thing. We can understand the depth and breadth of love as we focus in on God. God loves his creation, from the smallest to the largest. We are told that God's eyes are even on the sparrow, the flowers in the field and he knows how many hairs are on our head - an ever decreasing number for me! The Bible tells us that he is immensely interested and concerned about you and me. Why? Because He loves us, that's why!

The fact that God is all-powerful and all-loving is tremendously comforting.

When I'm feeling sick, or low, or sad, when my troubles start to mount up and there seems to be no way out, my faith in an all powerful God who loves me gives me a great deal of hope and confidence. Because God loves me, what does it matter if someone else hates me? Does it matter that other forces are working against me? In the long run, all things work together for my good because my God is all-powerful and all loving.

Now all this is true, but there is a problem...

If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why is there suffering at all? Isn't this a fair and in fact obvious question? Why are there bad things in a world created by a God who is completely good? Theologians use the term 'theodicy' to address this question, and although the bible wasn't written as a theological text book where one can look up the word 'theodicy' and discover its

meaning, with prayerful and thoughtful consideration, we *can* find a satisfactory answer to this most difficult question. An answer that will be good enough to sustain you through times of suffering.

A little while ago I received a phone call from a young couple that had just brought into the world two beautiful twins. Usually this would be an occasion for much joy. However, these twins had been born many weeks premature and survival was doubtful. They were two beautiful little boys, each one only about the size of a can of soft drink. Each baby could fit into the palm of my hand. Against all odds one of those babies grew strong. He began to breath unassisted, his lungs and heart and other organs began to function and mature. It was truly a miracle of God. However the other baby did not respond.

I remember being called up to the hospital and this couple saying to me: 'The doctors want to turn the life support machine off. This will most certainly kill our baby. What should we do?' I said 'I can't make that decision for you. You have to make it yourself.' So we prayed together and finally the husband told the doctors to turn off the machine. About 2 am in the morning the baby died. I was there. I held the baby in my hand. He fought hard. He tried to live but the fight was too difficult and he finally died.

It was a tremendously sad time but God's love and strength was present. At the funeral this young couple testified to God's enabling. They spoke of God's strength for them throughout this experience. Now, this couple could have reacted quite differently.

Instead of running to God and finding strength in God, they could have reacted in a number of other ways. The first is this:

God doesn't exist!

How could an all-powerful and all-loving God allow an innocent baby to die?

There can be only one answer. Because he does not exist. That would have been an understandable reaction, wouldn't it? The question of theodicy forces us to say that in a world of suffering, a perfectly loving and powerful God is a logical contradiction.

An atheistic response is one that this couple could have had, but they didn't. There are many reasons why they didn't. Firstly, to take such a strong and definitive stance requires a lot of evidence that went beyond their immediate situation. Although this couple had a lot of questions beginning with 'why?' they knew that their knowledge and understanding was limited. God knows things we don't.

He sees a bigger picture than we can ever see.

Additionally, if this couple chose to say 'there is no God,' they would have to find a way to live in a world with no absolute values, no moral guidelines, no underlying principles which would give them direction. Furthermore, this couple would then have to deny that they have a spiritual yearning within. A soul which cries out to know and be loved by its creator. Atheism creates a lot more problems than it solves. Having an atheistic response is one way to react in the face of suffering, but it's not

the only way. Another possible response is to say that God is not *completely* loving or He is not *completely* powerful.

God is not loving! God is not omnipotent!

If God created all things and he loves us and wants the best for us, how then could he allow sin and suffering into our world?

The logical conclusion to this question is that He isn't all-loving or all-powerful. The problem with this response is it completely contradicts the bible and God's revelation of Himself to us. From cover-to-cover we read of an all-powerful and all-loving God. We read in Genesis that God created everything from nothing.

We see how he remained faithful to the people of Israel even though they were unfaithful to Him. We read of a God that so loved the world He sent his only Son to be an atoning sacrifice. We see Jesus time and time again demonstrate his compassion as well as his authority over sickness, evil spirits, nature and even death.

Yes, suffering *is* present in our world and the Bible acknowledges that, but the Bible also tells us that God is all-powerful and all-loving, so there *must* be another answer to our problem.

Well, what is the answer to this problem? Although the Bible does not give us a text-book answer the Bible does give us a number of insights that help us make sense of suffering and understand better God's sovereignty.

The first insight is that of **human freedom**.

Suffering is not part of God's original created order (Genesis 1-2). There was no suffering in the world before humanity rebelled against God. There will be no suffering when God creates a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21). There will be no more crying and no more pain. Suffering only entered the world as a result of Adam and Eve sinning. It is, therefore, an alien intrusion in God's world. Suffering entered our world because humankind chose to go it alone. Humankind chose to turn their back on God. But some would say, 'Why did God give mankind free will - wasn't that irresponsible - even unloving?'

He did so *because* He loves us. Love is not love if it is forced: It can only be love if there is a real choice. God gave human beings the choice and the freedom to love or not to love.

Given this freedom, men and women from the beginning of time have chosen to break God's laws, and this has resulted in suffering.

Sometimes this is clearly seen. When we sin, suffering is an obvious result of our sin. There is a natural connection between sin and its consequences. When we drive our car recklessly we smash it and the injuries are a result of our recklessness. If a person abuses drugs, drug addiction may be the consequence along with the suffering that that brings. In a similar way, selfishness, greed, lust, arrogance and anger often lead to broken relationships and unhappiness of one sort or another.

Suffering comes when we choose to sin.

But of course not all suffering is the direct result of our own sin. Much of the suffering in the world is the result of *other* people's sin: adultery, theft, sexual abuse, unloving parents. This is true of many community and global disasters. War, for example, causes many innocent people to suffer, and war is always the result of human sin. Much of the starvation in the world is caused by the unequal distribution of the world's resources, or by civil war, or some other human sin. Some scholars have estimated that perhaps as much as 95% of the world's suffering can be accounted for in this way.

This leaves a small proportion, which cannot be explained by somebody's action. Who sinned when the baby in our story died? Who sinned when the Tsunami hit those coastal villages? The Bible tells us that when sin entered the world, every aspect of creation was in some way affected. The apostle Paul expressed it this way:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed (**when believers enter into their perfect state**). For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.
(Romans 8:19-21)

The Apostle here, using poetic personification, describes how sin has caused all creation to fall from the perfect state in which God created it. But the Christian hope is that one day all creation will be liberated and transformed. We look forward to the new heaven and new earth that God has promised and we wait for God's new order that will free the world from sin, sickness and evil. In the meantime, because God is all-loving He did not leave us to suffer in our sin. He entered our world and exposed Himself to the suffering that we had caused, and He used to it to bring about our redemption.

In our day-to-day life experience, as we are subject to suffering, God's presence and comfort is available to us. His Holy Spirit brings comfort and guidance to our souls. Christ himself continues to minister through His body the Church. God also uses that suffering to bring us to Christian maturity. God uses suffering to build our character, teach us and give us wisdom.

God didn't introduce sin and suffering into our world, that was our doing, but he uses it for our benefit to make us mature, wise and fruitful. God hates sin and the suffering that human kind endures but nevertheless those who experience suffering are granted the opportunity to see the love of God in the hands of those who bring aid and care.

John Hick argues that God's intention in creating man was not to create a perfect creature, but rather to create a Being in need of moral development. God intended that man spend his time on earth building his moral and spiritual character, in preparation for his participation in the Kingdom of God. Hick asks, what sort of environment would be most conducive to soul-building? Would a world in which no evil ever confronts man be the best place to develop character? No.

The best classroom is a world where evil and suffering exists. The Bible tells us that our time on earth is short. The Kingdom to come is eternal and death is only the gateway to a much, much longer life.

Finally, God often uses suffering to bring about His good purposes. Paul tells us that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

We see an example of this in the life of Joseph (Genesis 37:50) He suffered the rejection of his close family, was separated from those he loved and forcibly removed to Egypt, away from his father whom he did not see again for twenty years. In Egypt he was unjustly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. For thirteen years he faced trials, temptations and testing. God did not delight in this nor did He orchestrate it. The sinful heart of man caused Joseph's suffering. Yet Joseph remain faithful and close to God and at the age of thirty he was made ruler over Egypt and was

placed in a position to save the lives of not only *his* family, but *all* of God's people. Towards the end of his life he was able to say to his brothers about his suffering, 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives' (Gen. 50:20).

Job was another man who endured enormous suffering. His friends accused him of sinning and wanted him to search himself and confess, but that wasn't the reason for his suffering. There was something going on in the heavenlies, far from his comprehension and understanding. He just needed to be faithful to God through his time of suffering and in the end all that was lost was restored ten-fold.

God promises us that we will be abundantly rewarded for the sacrifices we make and the suffering we endure, if, not in this life, certainly in the next. Paul says:

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Romans 8:18)

On another occasion he wrote,

"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (2 Cor. 4:17)

When we are suffering we will not always be able to work out why. God never told Job why he was suffering, and God never told our young couple why their baby died. But when we do experience suffering or when another experiences suffering, go to the Cross, for it is here that we begin to understand why a God of love should allow suffering. Firstly, we see the results of human freedom: it was sin that put Jesus on the cross. We see human wickedness at its worst. We see that God was dealing with the results of man's abuse of his freedom, in paying the price for that sin. Secondly, we see God working through suffering.

Those who nailed Jesus to the cross intended it for evil; but God intended it for good – the saving of many lives. Thirdly, we see that God more than compensates for suffering. Jesus *'who for the joy set before Him endured the cross.'* Hebrews 12:2 saw ahead to His resurrection, and as a result of that to our resurrection.

Fourthly, and most importantly of all, we see that God Himself is not removed from suffering, but suffers for us and with us. He weeps when we weep. He triumphs when we triumph. As His children, He is in us and we are in Him (John 15:4). When we are weak, we can have His strength. When we have no words, He can give us words. When we ask for his help, we will receive.

Are you His child?



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Dean is committed to helping people live in joy
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