

Suffering Like Jesus

John 9:1-7

What is the worst thing you have ever experienced? Why did God allow it to happen? In suffering, the problem of evil becomes unavoidably personal. John Stott says, “The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith.” Hans Kung calls suffering “the rock of atheism.” While many would say that Darwinism or the Enlightenment drive unbelief in our day, it would be far more accurate to say that suffering does. Because of this, we ought to prepare our hearts and minds before we are in the midst of tragedy so that we might respond like Job when it comes (Job 1:21). In examining why God allows suffering, we are not putting him on trial to determine if he lives up to our standard of righteousness (Lk.4:12). We are understanding him as he has told us to do with the means he has given us—his Word (cf. Mal. 3:10-12). The Bible lays out the fact of suffering, its causes, and the surprisingly wonderful results for the children of God.

The Fact of Suffering

It seems obvious to say that suffering occurs and is important, but this doesn’t stop people from denying and distorting it. The psalmist says “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Ps. 116:15). Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus, had compassion for the “harassed and helpless multitudes”, and defended those who suffered for no fault of their own (Jn. 11:35; Matt. 11:36; Jn. 9:3). Jesus is the *sent* Messiah who, like the Father, gives sight to the blind (v4, 7; Ex. 4:11; Ps. 146:8; Is. 29:18, 35:5; Gen. 2:7). Jesus *saw* the man blind from birth (v1). His disciples didn’t see him at first, probably because their theology blinded them (v2). The God of the Bible’s recognition and response to suffering stands in stark contrast to consistent Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist or atheistic responses.

The Causes of Suffering

- i. The first point of Calvinism neglects to mention that God made man upright, and only after did he seek out many devices (Eccles. 7:29). The wages of sin is death, and we are all top earners, maintaining the legacy of Adam who *first* brought it into our world. This accounts for the *general* presence of evil, calamity and suffering: sin in the world and our hearty cooperation with it. In this regard, we get better than we deserve since without exception we sin by nature and choice. We invite God’s wrath (Job 5:7; Prov. 8:36; Eph. 2:1-3). His mercy is apparent in what he withholds (Gen. 3:9, 6:8, 9:21, Ps. 130:3).
- ii. The fact that we get better than we deserve does not mean particular instances of suffering can always be attributed to particular sins (vv2-3). But sometimes our actions do result in particular consequences and should be interpreted that way (Prov. 24:33-34). We should apply the obvious patterns of Scripture and general revelation, and not an over-scrupulous conscience (Prov. 16:18). We should be generous with others and realistic with ourselves.

The Results of Suffering

For the Christian who loves God and his gospel, all suffering comes from the hand of a loving and attentive Father (Heb. 12:3-11). We are reminded that the only sinless sufferer, Jesus, suffered to death in our place for our sins, truly Godforsaken (Heb. 12:3; Ps. 22:1). Only his suffering was penal; ours is disciplinary and for our good (vv5-10). *God did this for us*, so we can trust him to discipline us tenderly. This doesn’t make it pleasant or easy, but we’re not bleeding yet (v4, 11)! In the face of any suffering, we: I. Repent of any sin (Lk. 13:1-5); II. Rejoice that God you are a true child of God (Heb. 12:9); III. Remember that this is only going to last a little while and result in your beauty and God’s glory and honor (1 Pet. 1:6-7). Not only are we made more like Christ in suffering, but he comforts us through it so that we might comfort others (2 Cor. 1:4).