

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

The world is filled with suffering of every kind. Countless millions know little else. Yet God allows it. Why has He not stopped the terrible suffering that afflicts so many? Is there a REASON God has not intervened? Does suffering have a great unseen PURPOSE that can be understood?

BY DAVID C. PACK

TAKE A LONG look around the world. Enormous numbers of people are suffering everywhere for every kind of reason.

Every day, 25,000 people starve to death—and this is *after* weeks or months of horrible suffering. Such suffering is not limited to *physical* pain, but includes psychological and mental anguish of parents often having to watch their children die in their arms. Starvation is so awful that death is actually a blessed relief.

Why doesn't God stop this?

Even more people die each day from disease. The very word *disease* means people are not "at ease." As you read this article, untold trauma, pain and suffering, due to crippling conditions, infections and disease of every sort, are occurring around the world. Just in Africa, children are orphaned by the millions *every year*, due to AIDS alone.

Why isn't God intervening?

Now consider poverty, which affects one-third of all people on earth. The lack of even the most basic necessities (sufficient water, sanitation, clothing and shelter, as well as food) brings untold suffering to over two billion people. Conditions are growing *worse* instead of better.

Why does God allow this to continue?

War now ravages much of the world, with some nations suffering almost complete destruction of their economy, property, homes and businesses, includ-

ing injury or death to large numbers of their civilian populations.

Why doesn't God banish war?

Earthquakes, fires, floods, volcanoes, tornadoes, hurricanes, blizzards, other violent storms, drought, blights and insect infestations due to weather, also take their toll on the human misery index.

Why doesn't God better control the weather and nature?

Why?

Yes, *why* does God allow war, terrorism and violence? *Why* must men suffer disease and famine? *Why* must humanity suffer poverty or misery in the wake of natural disasters? Again, WHY do these things happen almost routinely on planet Earth?—and why doesn't God intervene to end it?

If God is working out an unseen PURPOSE through these conditions, what is it? Is there a great REASON for the almost constant state of affliction encompassing, to one degree or another, most of humanity?

Is not the God of the Bible described as merciful? Does He not speak of His kindness to, and compassion for, all mankind? If God is all-powerful, and a God of LOVE (I John 4:8, 16), *why* does He not stop the terrible human suffering billions now endure?

The ministers and theologians of traditional Christianity cannot explain the purpose of human suffering. Many theorize that Adam and Eve were created perfect and complete, until they "fell" in the Garden because the devil

overthrew God's Plan by tempting them into sin. This popular idea continues with the explanation that God's Plan is to restore men to their pre-fall condition, but the devil keeps slowing things down and disrupting God's progress.

Is this true? Is God desperately trying to *repair* damage brought by Satan's unforeseen attack on a Master Plan that God did not think through carefully enough?

Grasp this. In all physical and spiritual matters, mankind only addresses the bad *effects* engulfing the world today. He does not understand and cannot explain the *causes*—the true meaning and purpose—behind the world's woes and ills. Our many books, booklets and articles address and explain the true CAUSES of these bad effects. There is no use trying to remove wrong effects, when the CAUSES are ignored.

You need not be ignorant of the answers to these questions. You *can* know God's Plan. There *is* a cause for human suffering. The Bible reveals it so clearly that a child can understand.

Let's learn what it is.

God's Character

The true God of the Bible possesses infinite understanding (Psa. 147:5) and perfect character. A Christian is to develop that same spotless character (Matt. 5:48), while growing in God's understanding (Prov. 2:6, 9, 11).

The Holy Spirit, given at conversion to those who obey God (Acts 2:38; 5:32), defines God's character. Notice:

“But the fruit of the [Holy] Spirit is love, joy, peace, *longsuffering*, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance...” (Gal. 5:22-23).

Did you see that God describes His Spirit—His DIVINE NATURE (II Pet. 1:4)—as “longsuffering”? Why? How can God’s character include longsuffering? Most can understand that God is love. Many can also recognize that God experiences joy and happiness! Certainly, none would doubt that God has complete faith in His own plan and purpose—or that He has complete self-control (temperance) in all that He does. The same is true of the remainder of this description of God’s nature.

But why does God list suffering (actually suffering *long*) as part of His character? How does God suffer?

Before He flooded the world in Noah’s time, “it repented the LORD that He had made man on the earth, and it *grieved Him at His heart*” (Gen. 6:6). Does it surprise you that God felt pain (grief) at what mankind had chosen—and become? God brought the Flood to put man out of his misery, stating that He would never again do this to His Creation.

In Numbers 14:18, God plainly says, “The LORD IS LONGSUFFERING.” There it is! God wants no one to misunderstand that even He suffers. But this verse does not reveal *why* it is necessary for God to suffer.

Let’s grasp what God is saying.

All those with children should stop and think! When you see your children hurt or sick, how do you feel? Does it not grieve you? Do you not suffer your own anguish at their pain? Of course you do.

God is no different. He is a parent with children. When His children disobey Him, directly hurting themselves in the process, it hurts *Him*. He feels pain—grief!

Great Unseen Purpose!

Most people have no idea what God’s purpose is for mankind. Many assume that life is probably about “getting to heaven,” but have no more understanding than this. (Actually, salvation has nothing to do with going to heaven, but it is not our purpose here to explain this.)

To find out God’s purpose, on any matter, you must go to the source—

God’s Instruction Manual, sent along by the Creator with His creation (man). God’s Word reveals the answers to life’s greatest questions. Surely, the reason for human suffering is one of the greatest answers of all.

Mankind’s suffering is not an accident. It is actually one of the most marvelous tools within God’s Plan of *making sons* who have developed His CHARACTER within them. The purpose for every human being’s life is to develop the perfect, holy, righteous character of Almighty God. Suffering is directly tied to building character. Since God is longsuffering, it is also obvious then, that no person is complete in the development of God’s nature and character *until* he has learned the value of human suffering!

Wise King Solomon recorded one of the great principles in the Bible: “In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of ADVERSITY *consider*: God also has set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him” (Ecc. 7:14).

Did you understand this verse? *God* did this! *God* designed life so that we would face “adversity” and be forced to “consider” the circumstances we are experiencing. Certainly, adversity is no fun. It is sometimes *very* difficult, hard, painful, even traumatic, to endure. Yet, God said He engineered the human existence to include adversity! This seems strange to the human mind that wants a free pass to sail through life, experiencing only the *good* life—*good* times!

Verses 2 and 3 reveal more of God’s purpose in permitting suffering. Solomon also recorded this: “It is better to go to the house of *mourning*, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. *Sorrow is better than laughter*: for by the sadness of the countenance *the heart is made better*.”

Does this passage shock you? Does it make sense that “sorrow is better than laughter” or that “the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting”? Yet these statements are God’s PLAIN WORDS about how He views suffering—and that He actually *designed* this physical life to require it.

Understand. If one is mourning, it is usually because something *terrible* has happened—serious illness, pain-

ful divorce, death of a child or loved one, loss of property through a disaster or bankruptcy, or something similar. Therefore, this passage seems absolutely backwards to the human mind. This is why Solomon states that “feasting is...the end of all men.” The goal of the average person is to make life one long, never-ending party—or “feast.”

Why Christ Suffered

The world gives much attention to the suffering of Christ. But how many know what the Bible says about *why* Christ suffered? The answer lies in the book of Hebrews—and has a direct bearing on you.

Notice God’s inspired answer to this question: “Though He [Christ] were a Son, yet LEARNED He obedience *by the things which He suffered*” (5:8).

Christ was sinless. If He were otherwise, we have no Savior. So, of course, He *was* without fault, blameless, sinless. Yet, this passage reveals that even Christ LEARNED from the suffering He endured. This is what *God* says.

Suffering completed Christ’s learning process. Yes, He (as God incarnate) was able to learn as a result of being in the flesh. Being made of flesh allowed Him to learn lessons that He would otherwise not have known. The REASON Christ learned from His suffering is that pain kicks the mental learning mechanism into gear! *This* is why Solomon said that men should “consider” when facing or suffering “adversity.”

For instance, physical pain of sufficient intensity stops people in their tracks. They begin searching for the cause of the pain. Whether it is the discomfort of an on-coming heart attack, an acute headache or the inflammation of arthritis, people want to know why their body hurts.

The apostle Paul, also in Hebrews, begins to relate suffering directly to the process of God’s purpose in making sons who reflect His character. Notice: “For it became Him [Christ]...in bringing *many sons* unto glory, to make the Captain of their salvation *perfect through sufferings*” (2:10).

Christ’s suffering actually perfected Him—made Him full, mature, complete, as God’s first begotten, and later first-born, Son. This is what it says. Hebrews 5:9 continues by adding, “And being

made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that *obey Him*.” Christ qualified to “become the author of eternal salvation” because He was willing to endure and learn from God’s prescribed suffering process for all who are His sons—those who “obey Him.”

The salvation process involves obeying Christ. But let’s see more plainly exactly what this means. The apostle Peter explains, “For even hereunto were YOU [Christians] called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us AN EXAMPLE, *that you should follow His steps*” (I Pet. 2:21).

Let Peter’s words speak to YOU. Christians do not just *believe in* Christ, they *copy* Him—they pattern their lives after His life! This was the whole purpose of His “example.” But this verse also shows that copying Christ means being willing to suffer as He did! We have seen that it is this very suffering that causes one to learn and to become, in fact, perfect. Peter explains that God’s servants are actually called to a life that involves suffering.

The two previous verses (19-20) explain that people sometimes have to “endure grief, suffering wrongfully”—that they must “take it patiently” because “this is acceptable with God.” (Also see Ecclesiastes 8:14.) It is acceptable with God because He knows that suffering builds character—it strengthens the person required to endure it.

I do not like to suffer. Neither do you. But, for those God is calling, it is *only* through suffering that we can learn what God intends in order to achieve salvation. Paul also wrote, “It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him: *If we suffer*, we shall also reign with Him...” (II Tim. 2:11-12).

Suffering is absolutely essential to the character-building process. Because it is a process, TIME and EXPERIENCE are involved.

Paul recognized that suffering was tied to the resurrection of the dead, and actually looked forward to it, seeing it as a way of drawing closer to what Christ endured—as literally “fellowshipping with Him.” Here is how God inspired him to record this connection: “That I may know Him [Christ], and the power of His resurrection and the *fellowship of His sufferings*, being made conformable

unto His death; if by any means I might attain unto the *resurrection of the dead*” (Phil. 3:10-11).

A Lesson From Psalms

The author of Psalm 119, possibly David, was required to learn many lessons during his life, some causing great pain, for both himself and others. Adversity and suffering was a pattern in David’s life. He fully understood the purpose of what he had to endure: “Before I was *afflicted* [suffered] I went astray: but now have I *kept Your word*” (vs. 67).

David knew exactly what suffering was intended to produce. It brought him back into line with God’s instruction—and true purpose in his life. Notice further: “It is *good* for me that I have been *afflicted*; that I might LEARN Your statutes” (vs. 71).

Suffering certainly did not *feel* good to David, but he knew it *was* good! Mankind is now suffering terribly, but, in the end, it will be to its good. Six thousand years of suffering will eventually teach *all* humanity the crucial lesson that it cannot ignore God and still be happy. Other vital lessons are a by-product of painful trials and tests.

The psalmist grasped the great principle that those who obey God—practice righteousness (Psa. 119:172)—often suffer affliction. Many know of this next verse, recorded by David, but how many truly believe it or the promise that accompanies it?: “Many are the *afflictions* of the righteous: but the LORD delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones: not one of them is broken” (Psa. 34:19-20).

Job Proves the Point!

Many know of the ancient patriarch Job, but most know little of the important lessons his life holds regarding how God works with His servants—even His greatest servants. Though Job lived thousands of years ago, his experience bears directly on *us* today.

The book of Job is fascinating, containing almost an endless number of principles and lessons. You may wish to read all of its 42 chapters. We will merely focus on the first two.

Chapter 1 describes Satan appearing before God (vs. 6). In verse 8, God asked Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him in

the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that fears God, and eschews [shuns] evil?” This establishes Job’s character as extraordinary. While Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived, Job was certainly the most righteous.

Also, what follows could not be considered *punishment* for evil-doing because God described Job as “perfect.”

The account continues with Satan boasting that he could turn Job from God, if he were permitted to bring terrible suffering upon him. Because Job was one of the richest men in the world, Satan argued that he merely obeyed God because it was in his best interest to do so. In effect, God was *paying* him to be righteous!

It continues with Satan causing tremendous destruction in Job’s life, killing his ten children and causing the death of all of his servants and animals through four separate disasters. The devil wiped out the most precious things—people and possessions—in Job’s life.

Yet Job’s reaction to this devastating turn of events was not to attack or blame God. He acknowledged that all his blessings had come from God. In no way did he show a wrong attitude (vs. 20-22).

Satan’s Second Attempt

Chapter 2 records that, after this, Satan again came before God. Here is what happened next: “One day the angels again came to present themselves before the Eternal, and among them the Adversary. ‘Where have you been?’ said the Eternal to the Adversary; and the Adversary answered, ‘Roaming here and there, roving about the earth.’”

“Then the Eternal said to the Adversary, ‘Have you noticed that there is no one like My servant [Job] on earth, a blameless and an upright man, who reverences God and shuns evil? He still holds to his loyalty: it was idle of you to entice Me to undo him.’ But the Adversary answered, ‘He has saved his own skin! A man will let all he has go, to preserve his life. Only put out your hand, touch his flesh and bones, and see if he will not curse you to your face!’ So the Eternal said to the Adversary, ‘There! he is in your power; *only, spare his life*’” (vs. 1-6, Moffatt translation).

While this passage concludes with God giving certain power to Satan to

strike Job's health, God retained final control over his life, with Satan unable to go one inch beyond what God expressly permitted. Studying the account shows that Satan was given certain specific limits to what he could do. The ideas of men, about Satan's ability to disrupt God's Plan for mankind, collapse like the very "fall of man" theory that theologians and preachers have invented.

The account continues with Satan smiting Job with horrible boils over his entire body. As a result, his wife tried to convince him to curse God (vs. 9). His response to her: "You speak as one of the foolish women...What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not *receive evil*? In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (vs. 10).

This is a remarkable passage. It reveals Job's understanding that human beings must sometimes "receive evil" from God. Notice that the account does not record God correcting Job for misstating the facts! Rather, it *validates* Job's conclusion by inspiring "in all this did not Job sin with his lips."

Grasp what you have read in this abbreviated description of events. God permitted disastrous, even catastrophic, suffering in Job's life—physical and emotional pain beyond imagination! Yes, God directly permitted and endorsed this nightmarish suffering.

But it was for a great purpose for Job's life within God's Master Plan.

The next thirty-four chapters are primarily a description of Job's three friends blaming him for what had happened. Throughout, Job refused to accept blame, while at the same time continuing to identify God as the source of what had occurred. He knew that God was working out an extraordinary purpose, both in his life and with all mankind. He had absolute faith in God's authority and overall control of what was happening.

This account is recorded for us to understand—deeply! We too must have faith in God's decisions about what we must endure. Of course, God could

stop us from suffering. But He does not CHOOSE to do this, because it would thwart His Purpose.

The final five chapters show how God eventually brought home certain lessons to Job about His greatness and Job's insignificance in His sight. I encourage you to study this remarkable book for its application in your own life.

In Chapter 42, Job acknowledged, "No purpose of Yours can be restrained" (vs. 2, marginal rendering). He had said previously, in Chapter 14, "If a man die, shall he live again?...You will have a desire to the work of Your hands" (vs. 14-15). Job grasped that God was working directly in his life, and that nothing could impede or restrain that purpose.

The same is true of you! Christians are purposed by God to develop His character. After a lifetime of overcoming, character development and spiritual growth, they are to be BORN as sons of God. This process involves suffering, sometimes *much* suffering, sometimes seemingly lasting a lifetime. But this is God's purpose and no one can defeat it. God knows that life's all-important learning process is inseparable from suffering.

Is God a Source of Evil?

While most wonder why God does not stop suffering, there is another even greater question, asked by others: "Can evil come directly *from God*?" God answers: "I am the LORD, and there is none else...I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, AND CREATE EVIL: I the LORD do all these things" (Isa. 45: 5, 7).

Obviously, Isaiah agrees with Job. Evil *can* come from God, and, though always within God's overall control and purpose, Satan is often the vehicle that brings it. I cannot stress enough how all *true* servants of God must recognize the vital role of suffering within the learning and character-building process, central to the lives of all those God calls to His truth!

Paul lived what he taught! Take time to read what Paul's ministry required him to

endure by studying II Corinthians 11:24-30. This astonishing passage reveals that people can, with God's help, handle far more discomfort, pain and suffering than they think—if they see its purpose.

Yet, in the grand scheme of things, when compared to the reward God has in store for all His begotten sons and daughters, how difficult was the suffering? Paul answers, "For I reckon that *the sufferings of this present time* are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waits for the manifestation of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:18-19).

Nothing we endure in this life even remotely compares to the immortal life of supreme happiness in God's kingdom in store for those who serve Him.

Nevertheless, suffering can be very difficult for the moment—for "this present time." God understands this, and knows exactly when to let up—when the intended lessons have been learned! God has promised to never allow you to be tried beyond what you can endure (I Cor. 10:12-13).

Job knew God's supreme WISDOM was at work in all that happened to him. After acknowledging God's sovereign power over his life, he was blessed vastly beyond what he had before his trial. Faith in God's wisdom paid off in the end.

Recall that Solomon explained that God, throughout our lives, alternates "days of prosperity" with "days of adversity" (Ecc. 7:14). Put another way, either condition you are experiencing will be followed by the opposite condition. If you are enjoying good times, difficult times lie ahead. If you are experiencing difficult times, good times will soon follow. David, Solomon's father, knew that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psa. 30:5).

This is God's promise.

If you submit to God, this principle will be fulfilled in *your* life, both now and eternally! □

