



"How Can I Believe in God When There's So Much Suffering?"

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How do you expect me to believe in God, asked Woody Allen, 'when only last week I got my tongue caught in the roller of my electric typewriter?' For a while now, at least in the Western world, the existence of any form of pain, suffering or evil has been regarded as evidence for the non-existence of God. If a good God existed, people say, these things wouldn't. But they do and, therefore, He doesn't.

My job takes me around many different parts of the world in order to answer people's questions about the Christian faith. I find it fascinating that I have never been asked this question in India, which I have visited on many occasions and which certainly knows a lot more about suffering than we do. I find it even more intriguing that Christians who write books in situations where they have known unspeakable torment because of the Gospel also do not normally raise this as an issue for themselves. Why?

There are so many ways in which the question concerning pain can be raised. It can be because of personal loss and pain, or because of a personal interest in the issue of theodicy (the theological term for the question we're looking at here) - to name but two. However, regardless of which way the question is raised, it normally comes down to a moral complaint against God: 'How could you allow this to happen?' The complaint is against God's moral character: 'Can I really trust God if I see this happen?' If you are sure that you can trust Him, regardless of the pain you find yourself in, there is no temptation to turn away from Him, as He is the only one who can

help.

First, let's deal with the argument against God's existence. Ravi Zacharias has dealt with this brilliantly in his book *Can Man Live Without God?* If you argue from the existence of evil to the non-existence of God, you are assuming the existence of an absolute moral law in order for your argument to work. But if there is such a law, then that would also mean that there is such a God, since He is the only one who could give us such a law. And if there is such a God to give us this law, then the argument itself is flawed, since you have had to assume the existence of God in order to argue that He doesn't exist. In short, it is an attempt to invoke the existence of an absolute moral law without invoking the existence of an absolute moral lawgiver, and it cannot be done.

Second, we must also ask the question, which we often fail to do, about what it would take to create a loving world. A world in which love is capable of meaningful expression and experience would also imply a world in which there is choice. If someone tells you that they love you, those words mean something because they are freely given. If you learnt that someone had told you that they loved you and that they had been forced to do it, their words would not mean very much. If you want to create a loving world, you must also create a world in which choices can be exercised. And in such a world, there is also the possibility of choosing a course of action that is not loving, namely evil.

However, these observations do not answer the heart of the question as I think people most commonly ask it. Can I trust God even when faced with great evil? Is He morally trustworthy? Can I trust Him even if I don't understand what is happening?

These are profound questions, and whole books could be written about them. But I would offer one observation for your thoughts: Maybe the reason we question God's moral character when bad things happen is that we live lives largely independent from Him. In other words, do we really trust Him even when things are going well?

I said earlier that I have never been asked questions about God and suffering when I am travelling in countries riddled with the realities of

it. In fact, when I visit churches in parts of the world where they are faced daily with the horrific realities of suffering, I normally leave inspired. They trust God in everything, even when things are going well. When times are hard, they cling on to Him because they have already learnt to trust Him. God hasn't changed, even though the circumstances have.

Maybe we struggle with suffering so much in the West because we are so comfortable most of the time that we feel we don't need God. We don't rely on Him on a daily basis, and so we don't really know Him as we should. When suffering comes along, therefore, it is not so much that it takes us away from God, but that it reveals to us that we haven't really been close to Him in the first place.

Obviously we can't address all of the intellectual issues involved here, but, as well as the book already mentioned, let me suggest *The Problem of Pain* by CS Lewis; *God, Freedom and Evil* by Alvin Plantinga; and *Evil and the Cross* by Henri Blocher.

However, what may challenge the critic of God in the face of suffering is not another book on the subject, but rather seeing more lives lived out in dependence on Him, regardless of what is going on around us.