

WHY DOES GOD...

...allow
suffering?





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This question is one usually asked by someone who has experienced some kind of suffering in their lives – or been close to someone who has. It's an understandable issue to want to raise.

In answering it, we first have to define what we mean by 'suffering'.

1. Man-influenced suffering

First it's important to separate suffering caused by man from suffering that 'seems' unrelated to anything man can influence. The majority of global suffering is man-related. Not only things like starvation (not sharing food), AIDS, natural disasters caused by man's mistakes or poor building, cancer caused through smoking etc etc etc.

Most issues of suffering fall into into the 'man-influenced' category. Though even this often prompts the question – OK, so man *caused* it but why didn't God then stop it?

Well, God has given us free will. Free will to do right and wrong. God can't keep intervening. If He did, where would He stop? In wars? Civil disputes? Family arguments? Cutting yourself shaving? God must intervene in the little things for they become big things. And if He intervened in *everything*, we would become little more than robots. That isn't free will. No, if the free will we say we *want* is to be really 'free', then God must allow it to be so. That often leads to hurt and suffering, which pains God so much He sent His son to die for us to offer *another* way.

The other obvious answer to that objection is the third point we want to make....

2. The 'you can't have it both ways' answer!

When we come to accusations of God's impotence in the face of this kind of suffering, it's interesting that these are virtually always posed by people who have rejected God, yet are now asking why the being they've rejected now doesn't intervene! It's like emigrating from England because you don't want to pay tax then complaining because you can't get UK state benefits!

Most of mankind has made it clear that they don't want God: from that point at the beginning of history, God had to leave us to a fallen world. That though, was **man's** choice, not God's.

3. A lack of respect for God

It's interesting that the 'why does God allow suffering?' question nearly always seems to be a criticism levelled at Christianity – never at any of the other faiths. This is symptomatic of the general lack of respect that people (in Europe at least) have for the God of the Christian Bible.

You could in principle, stop this question dead in its tracks by pointing out that the question implies a suggestion that God exists. If He *does*, then He's creator of a billion galaxies and we're a speck of dust in comparison. If that's the case, then it would be ridiculous for us to expect to understand everything He does.

It's tempting to put God in the dock when we ask questions like this: when we do so, we've made Him smaller than we are – and we've made a mistake. If He is what He is and we are what we are, then if we look down on Him, we'll never, ever see Him.

The famous writer GK Chesterton once responded to an article in The Times entitled 'What's wrong with the world?'. He replied: 'I am'.

Our Creator has given us enough knowledge about Him for us to know that He is a loving and just God. Because of who we are and who God is, there'll always be a gap between the end of that knowledge and the things about the world (and particularly about suffering) that we don't understand. The choice is whether we choose to bridge that gap in faith or not.

4. God's bigger plan

Once we start to see God for who He is, we can start to understand a few other aspects to suffering.

First, it may be part of a bigger plan we can't understand from our vantage point in life and history. The atomic strike on Hiroshima at the end of WW2 looked a barbaric act at the time. Yet in retrospect, historians believe that it saved millions of lives and relieved much more suffering than was inflicted thanks to the foreshortening of the war in the Far East.

Second, unlike God, we can't see the future. God may know of something in the future likely to happen to the victim of suffering far worse than that which they're undergoing: viewed in that light, suffering that ends in premature death may in certain circumstances be an act of mercy on God's part

Third, as CS Lewis once said, 'suffering is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world': fortunately, unlike us, God sees the bigger picture. Which is that primarily, it's not what happens to us here in the short time we have on earth that's important: it's where we spend eternity. If God is God, really loves us and wants us to know Him in that eternity, might not suffering, in His mercy, be used as a last resort on his part to reach us?



5. What God has done.....

God suffers when we suffer. Think of suffering. The mother who has just lost her son in a road accident. The parents who have just lost their baby in cot death. The husband who has just lost his wife in childbirth. Now think how much greater would be that grief and suffering if each of those had *voluntarily* given up their loved one to death – had sent them to their death. And not just *any* death but a painful, lonely, desperate, horrible death? How much greater would be that suffering.

Yet that's *exactly* what God did. He gave up His only son to the most horrible death imaginable – the worst form of human execution ever invented – to give us an opportunity for life. To pay the price for all the sins that we personally and collectively have committed. We can choose to *take* that lifeline – or we can choose to reject it. But either way, don't say that God knows nothing about suffering: He knows **everything** about it.

God shares our pain when we go through suffering in this world. He shares it in the deepest way imaginable. But He knows that such pain, for loved ones and for those left behind, can at least be short-lived for those who choose to know Him. He gives us a chance to start again every day: and He gives us a chance to start again even when our days are ended. Man may have messed up this world but at least he can't mess up the next. Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection have opened up our path there – *if* we choose to take it.





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