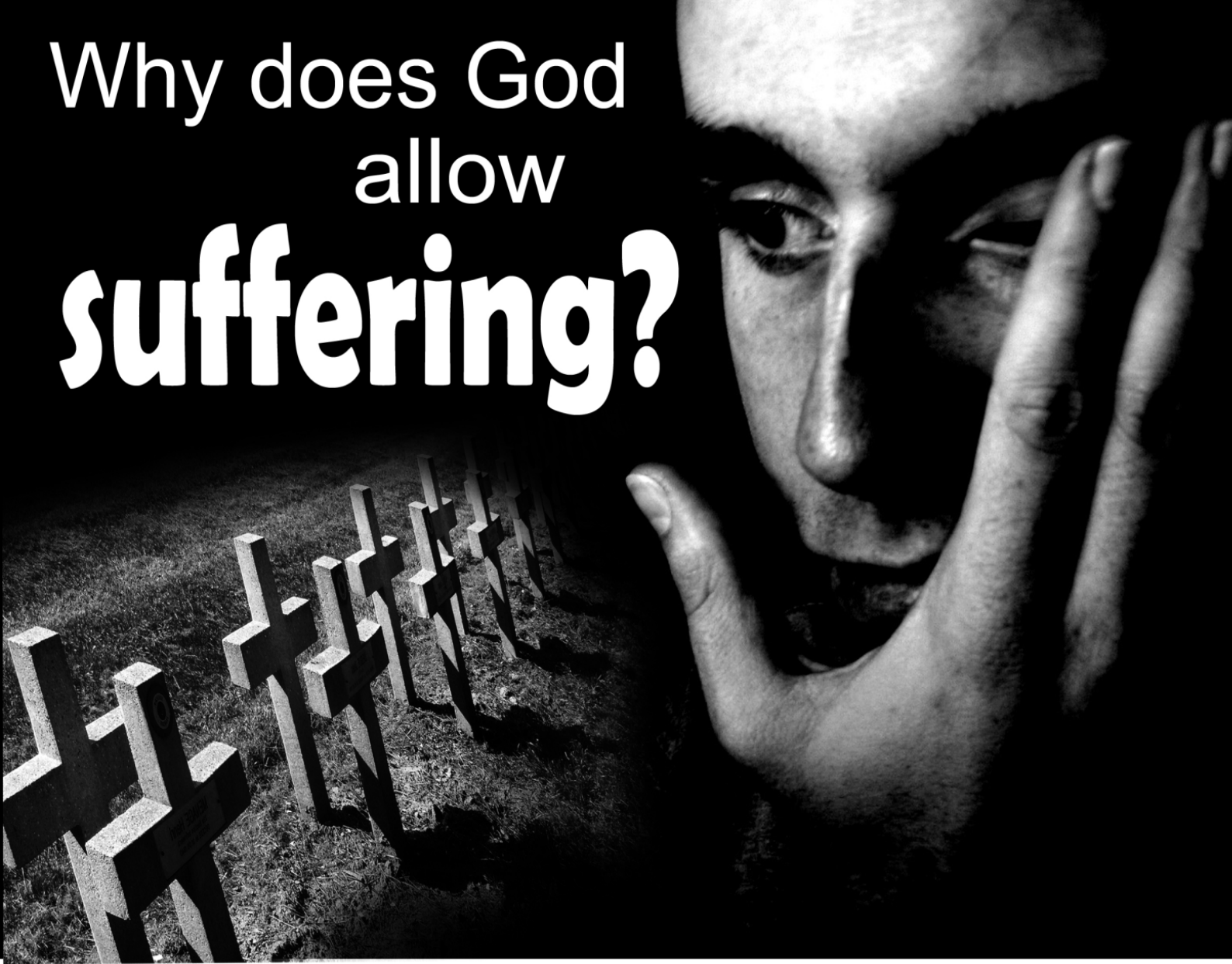


Why does God allow suffering?



By Rex Morgan

If there is a loving God, why is there so much suffering in the world?

Why would a God of love allow such tragedies as the infamous Boxing Day tsunami, the flooding of New Orleans, and the brutal loss of hundreds of innocent civilian lives in the seemingly endless conflict in Iraq?

This question is the commonest objection levelled at Christianity. If there is a God, why doesn't he stop the hurting? If he is a God of love, he must hate suffering, and if he is all-powerful, he must be able to get rid of it. So why doesn't he?

The larger the tragedy, the more attention it attracts, but actually there is no need to stress numbers in order to use suffering to argue

against God's existence. Surely just *one* untimely death is enough to make the point? The death of one patient cruelly taken by cancer raises the question of why a loving God would allow such inequity. And death isn't necessary either. The detection of the tumour and the pain experienced before that gives ample basis for the question.

If suffering was abolished

Let's suppose that God were to wipe out all evil and suffering, so the world could be fair as we would like it to be fair. That means, for starters, that he would have to put a stop to all accidents causing injury and suffering.

How would God do this? Somehow, he would need to snatch sharp objects out of our hands before we cut ourselves with them,

or maybe turn knives into marshmallows at the point of contact. He would need to somehow take over the controls of vehicles, or change their speed or trajectory so they would never crash. He would even have to prevent our mouths from uttering unkind words or cutting comments that cause hurt.

To make changes like this, God would have to modify the laws of physics and chemistry, and the natural laws of cause and effect, so they would apply in different ways at different times. This would make life difficult if not untenable, because we depend on these laws being consistent.

Next, God would need to eliminate diseases such as cancer. To do this, he would have to prevent people from smoking, drinking too

much alcohol, and eating unhealthy foods. How many people would be happy to be censored like this?

To get rid of all sorrow and suffering he would even need to abolish death. Or would it be sufficient to simply allow people to pass away peacefully in their sleep at the age of 100? Perhaps even that may not be good enough, as there would still often be sorrow in the lives of those left behind.

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If we want God to prevent disasters, we need to think about the specifics of this. Which disasters should be eliminated? Those that take hundreds or thousands of lives? Yes, certainly. But what about events that snuff out just *one* life? Yes, that is a cause of suffering too. Okay, what about a rainy day when a rugby match is planned? Would God have to avert inconveniences like that too, because they can result in difficulties for people?

"If I ruled the world, every day would be the first day of spring", declares a popular song. But if there were no winter, what would this mean? It would be great if the weather everywhere was perfect all the time, but there would be no such things as deserts, and no continent of Antarctica. Would it be possible to have any snow-covered mountains if cold temperatures were prohibited because they cause suffering?

Of course, it isn't only human beings that suffer. Wildlife and the plant world also suffer the ravages of natural disasters as well as human mismanagement of the environment. But we humans are self-aware creatures who have to grapple philosophically with the reality of

pain and our own error-prone human nature. How did it come to be this way?

How it all began

The Bible offers a theological explanation, in the account of Adam and Eve in the early chapters of Genesis. In the history of interpretation of these chapters, Adam and Eve have been taken to be genuine historical characters or metaphors for the first sentient human beings. Either way, there was a point when homo sapiens became both reflectively self-aware and aware of the divine - something not possible for animals. With this awareness came the important understanding that we have choices - we can be autonomous.

But that autonomy comes with a price. In the biblical account, Adam and Eve were given a simple test of obedience to the divine will. They were free to eat of every tree in the Garden of Eden, except for one. God warned them against taking of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil", representing the way of deciding for themselves how to run their lives rather than following God's instructions. He warned them that if they made that choice, the result would be suffering and death.¹

God could have done it in a different way. He could have *forced* them to make the right choice. But how would *you* like to be forced by God not to make any wrong choices in life? Would you like him to muzzle your mouth whenever you were about to take that second piece of cake, block your hand from picking up an extra can of beer, or miraculously turn the excess ice cream in your plate into a fresh green salad?

God made human beings with free will, the ability to make our own decisions and choices. If we didn't have the freedom to make conscious choices and to err, we would be no more than mindless robots or automatons, pre-programmed to act in a certain way. We would be mere puppets, with someone else pulling the strings.

Without the ability to make choices, we wouldn't truly be able to love.

Sincere love can't be coerced. It involves a decision, a choice. In order to have meaningful love we must also have the potential to hate, to hurt, to ignore.

So we see that the absence of free choice would prevent suffering in our lives, but it would also prevent us from knowing love and many of the other attributes of mind and character that make us humans.

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God didn't force Adam and Eve to obey him, and he hasn't forced anyone since. However, everyone has in effect made the same choice as Adam and Eve, preferring at times to go their own way rather than God's.

The entry of moral evil into human affairs led to all sorts of hardships, affecting even the natural world in which humans had to eke out a living. So it is today. Additionally, we live in a world that is subject to natural catastrophes, some of which are beyond our control, others of which are exacerbated by our activities. It won't always be this way, however. The apostle Paul, writing in the New Testament, commented "For the creation was subject to frustration...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".²

As discussed in our previous article, "What's it all about, Alfie?",³ God created human beings with the incredible potential of sharing the whole universe with him for all eternity. God wants us to have a relationship with him as his family forever, in a world of love, peace and joy. He wants to see us decide of our own free will to live that way, so he knows we will be happy doing that forever. In order for us to make

this choice, there must be an alternative available. So God allows suffering to be present in the world.

The words of Paul referred to above point out that this is a temporary state of affairs. The time will come when such suffering and sorrow comes to an end.⁴

God suffers too

As a God of love, kindness and compassion, God actually *hates* suffering. He certainly didn't want mankind to choose the wrong way. The Bible states that God was "grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain".⁵ It assures us that he "did not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men".⁶

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He is not untouched or unmoved by pain and suffering. "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord".⁷ He doesn't remain aloof and removed in a remote "ivory tower" letting humans suffer while he looks on either approvingly or helplessly. In fact, incredible but true, he voluntarily subjected *himself* to human suffering to his great cost. He suffered greatly, and continues to suffer today.

In the person of Jesus Christ, God came in human flesh and suffered the pain and sorrow we experience. Jesus was described as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief".⁸ He was ridiculed and mocked, beaten up and tortured so that he was barely recognisable, nailed to a cross and murdered with public humiliation and extreme agony.

We certainly can't accuse God of not being willing to suffer as

PAIN: FOE OR FRIEND?

Pain is something nobody likes. The searing pangs of an acute toothache, the pulsating throb of a headache, the nagging ache of arthritis... all we want is for it to end as soon as possible. How many tons of painkiller tablets are taken every day in order to deaden and stave off the torment of pain?

But pain isn't always a vexatious foe. Sometimes it can be a helpful friend. Pain often has a very useful role to play as nature's warning light. If it wasn't for the pain in your inflamed appendix it might well burst inside you and put an end to your life. A rush of pain warns you that your hand is too close to the hot stove, causing you to quickly withdraw it, instantly limiting further damage.

Pain serves as a signal that something is wrong — just like the smoke alarm in your home warns of impending disaster and gives you time to act.

Dr Paul Brand was an orthopaedic surgeon who worked with lepers in India for half of his life. He discovered that the reason leprosy patients lost fingers and toes was that they could not feel, and had no sense of pain. Those who got a piece of grit in their eye didn't realise it was there until it interfered with their vision. Then they rubbed it and painlessly scratched their eyes — until they went blind.

"As I study pain throughout the human body I gain deep respect for the Creator's wisdom", wrote Dr Brand in his book *In His Image*, which details many instances where leprosy patients suffered significant damage because they didn't feel pain.

When you think about it, maybe pain isn't all that bad after all. It warns us of danger, forces us to rest our weary bodies, and it can even save our lives!



humans do, and of not understanding our troubles!

As Jesus walked the earth and saw people suffering, the Bible says he was often moved to the very depth of his being by what he saw⁹. And he is still the same today. When he sees the suffering of the world, he suffers along with us¹⁰.

It's instructive to realise that even though he knew he himself was to become the ultimate victim of suffering, God still created a world in which suffering can exist.

Things we don't understand

These reflections have attempted to investigate in general why a loving God allows suffering. But there is no way that we can identify the reason for all individual occasions of suffering. Far from it! We need to be careful about assigning specific reasons or meanings to tragedies and anguish. Suffering is painfully random in the world. Innocent infants suffer from terrible diseases. It is often impossible to identify a specific cause for such events.

Wise King Solomon, under God's inspiration said that "time and chance" happens to all of us¹¹. Some things are simply inexplicable.¹² This is because human beings are limited. We have to recognise there are many questions we can't answer yet.

If we could understand all of God's ways he would be no bigger than our mind, and not worth believing in. But we do know that he hates suffering even more than we do, and he looks forward to and will eventually bring about the time when it will cease. At the end of the Bible we read, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away".¹³

Since suffering is an inevitable part of life, perhaps a better question to pose than "Why does God allow suffering?" is to ask, "What can we do about suffering?"

The Bible gives plenty of instruction on how to respond to the problems of others. It encourages kindness,

FROM OYSTERS TO PEARLS

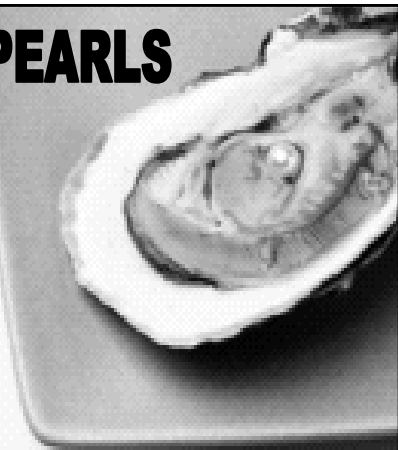
Large, well shaped pearls rank in value with the most precious gemstones. But they are quite different from other jewels. Most precious gems come from mines deep in the earth, but pearls come from the sea.

A pearl is formed when an irritant such as a piece of shell, bone, coral, or perhaps a tiny parasite, enters and lodges inside an oyster's shell. The mollusc reacts by beginning to coat the foreign object with a thin sheet of a substance called nacre. Over time, layer upon layer of nacre builds up to form a beautiful lustrous pearl.

Maybe we humans can learn a lesson from the humble oyster? When we are confronted by an irritating problem, rather than letting it get us down, it may help if we try to look on the bright side and think of it as an opportunity to build character. Perhaps we can use it to develop "pearl-like" qualities such as patience, tolerance and forgiveness?

It's amazing how something as ugly as an oyster is transformed into something as beautiful as a pearl! Wouldn't it be great if we could be transformed into something better than we are too?

You might like to think of the oyster next time something threatens to get under your skin!



love, serving and helping the oppressed and burdened, the widows, the poor and needy. God reveals over and over again his compassion and love for those who are suffering, and his desire for us to do whatever we can to relieve the sorrows of our neighbours.

So we need to live with suffering in the meantime. But God has given us a wonderful promise that eventually a time is coming in which there will be no more suffering, no more pain and sorrow. We can thank God that the current temporary state of affairs will pass away, and a much better world is coming.

If you would like to read more on this topic, please write to Inside Life, PO Box 304055, Hauraki Corner, Auckland 0750, Auckland, for our free 8-page article on "Suffering".

Notes:

1. Genesis 2:16-17
2. Romans 8:20-21
3. "Inside Life" issue 3/2006 — For a free copy, please write to PO Box 2709, Auckland.
4. Romans 8:21; Revelation 21:4
5. Genesis 6:5-6
6. Lamentations 3:33
7. Ezekiel 18:32
8. Isaiah 55:3
9. Matthew 9:36
10. Matthew 25:35-45
11. Ecclesiastes 9:11
12. Ecclesiastes 8:17
13. Revelation 21:4

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