

The Virtues of... Suffering

By Philip Baldwin

My wife and I live in Darfield, Canterbury, and we are thankful that we suffered very little damage from the 4 September earthquake and aftershocks. Two weeks after the initial 7.1 magnitude tremor, though, we had what seemed to us an unusual experience. We received one of the food boxes that were packed by the Salvation Army for delivery by World Vision volunteers in towns like Darfield and Kaiapoi.

A young black man came to our door to give us what really seemed more like a pick-me-up box than a care

package—filled with essential toiletries, Kleenex, paper towels, hand sanitiser, several different kinds of chocolate bars, granola bars, marshmallows, hot chocolate and instant flavoured coffee, and a bottle of water. I would have tried more strenuously to send him away so that someone else could have benefited from the supplies, but my wife wanted to take the box, as she was already thinking about folks to give the supplies to. We learned from talking to him that he is Sudanese, a Christian, likely a refugee, and working as a missionary in New Zealand for World Vision. And we both had the

same reaction to the experience—‘How ironic!’

To think that someone who had probably suffered a great deal more than we had would be trying to help us Cantabrians after the earthquake, made me wonder again: ‘Why does the God we worship, who is supposed to be good and loving, let bad things happen?’ Why does God let the creation

**Grief knits two hearts
in closer bonds
than happiness ever can;
and common sufferings
are far stronger links
than common joys.**

Alphonse de Lamartine

rip people’s lives and homes and businesses and lands apart with earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and tsunamis? Why does God let people abuse young, innocent, defenceless children? Why does God let the leaders of nations wage war on their own people, or the people of neighbouring countries?

These are much more than academic questions, because the problem of suffering sparks anger and bewilderment and frustration with God in the people who suffer and in those who have to deal with consequences of evil in our world. When we see the senseless carnage of war, or learn of horrific family violence and abuse, or live through earthquakes that destroy people’s homes and livelihoods, we are often moved to ask: ‘Where was God?’

We may point to the amazing blessing that no one was actually killed in the Canterbury quake, but the devastation and death toll in the Haiti and Chile tremors stagger the imagination. How do we put these economic and personal disasters



Susan Baldwin with a pick-me-up box delivered by a World Vision volunteer in Darfield, Canterbury, after the 4 September earthquake.

Helpful Thoughts on Pain and Suffering

*Life is 10% what happens to you, and
90% how you respond to it.*
Unknown

*Difficult times have helped me to understand
better than before, how infinitely rich and beautiful
life is in every way, and that so many things
that one goes worrying about are of no importance
whatsoever.*
Isak Dinesen

*My barn having burned to the ground,
I can now see the moon.*
Masahide, Japanese poet

*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being,
the more joy you can contain.
Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup
that was burned in the potter's oven?*
Kahlil Gibran

What was hard to suffer is sweet to remember.
Seneca

*If you're going through hell,
keep going.*
Winston Churchill

Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.
African proverb

He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.
Friedrich Nietzsche

*When written in Chinese the word 'crisis' is composed
of two characters: one represents danger
and the other represents opportunity.*
John F. Kennedy

*Do not free a camel of the burden of his hump;
you may be freeing him from being a camel.*
Gilbert Keith Chesterton

*The gem cannot be polished without friction,
nor man without trials.*
Confucius

God gave burdens, also shoulders.
Yiddish Proverb

into perspective with what we know of God?

Freedom of Choice

For the most part Christians believe that God has given us the freedom to choose our actions as well as the responsibility to live with the consequences of them. Story after story in the Bible clearly gives witness to this freedom: think of Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, David and Bathsheba, even the divisions in the early church at Corinth.¹

God could have determined, at the beginning, that there would be no conflict between peoples; he could have protected little children so that none would ever be brutalised; he could have structured the earth and organised it so that floods, droughts, volcanoes, and earthquakes would never have happened. There are many things God could have done, but he seems to prize free will enough not to step in directly to constrain the activities of his creation (as far as we can tell), no matter how destructive, evil, frightening, or perverted they seem to be.

And it's worthwhile to remember that God has given the whole of his creation this freedom to act. Some people find this particularly difficult to accept, but there is no running away from the reality that our world, the world God has created for us, is full of good things and bad, blessings and heartache, unpredictable joys and unexpected sorrows.

Interestingly, people don't ask the soul-searching 'Where is God?' question when they fall head-over-heels in love or win the lottery or are bursting with pride at the birth of a grandchild! But when bad things happen we are very quick to ask where God is—after all, we want to have someone to blame for earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and drought. It is also interesting that bad events are called 'acts of God', but he doesn't receive similar credit for good things that happen!

It seems that God's creation is free to be itself, and to express its freedom, through the unpredictability of weather, the centuries-long cycles of climatic change, and the gradual movement of tectonic plates. For some reason, God thinks that is good, and I'm not the only person to believe that this kind of world, a world of unpredictability, a world of time and chance, mirrors the freedom that God has given humans to choose between good and evil in all sorts of situations.

Virtues Brought Out

As much as the natural forces of this earth can bless us or cause us to suffer in a variety of ways, they give us cause to express virtues like self-sacrifice, kindness, generosity, hope, and trust. The recent earthquake in Canterbury brought out these virtues in the volunteer spirit of people who gave up their own time to help with the clean-up efforts, the neighbours who started to

look out for one another during the aftershocks, a number of shops that decided to share their trading space with neighbours or competitors who lost their own buildings, the gifts of food and shelter that were given to people whose homes were no longer safe to live in, and the growing community spirit of Canterbury residents, church congregations, and local councils that committed to rebuilding homes and churches and landmark buildings.

By anybody's reckoning generosity, kindness, and self-sacrifice are a few of the noblest features of humanity, and not just by chance, they are among the characteristics that God seems to value in human beings, too. Where would the virtues of self-sacrifice, kindness, generosity, even hope and trust, be needed in a

world without risk or uncertainty, danger and calamity? And what would be the point of love? Because love isn't just a matter of getting along when everything is going smoothly: love is made real in suffering and loss, self-sacrifice, and generosity.

When the apostle Paul writes to one of the earliest Christian churches in Corinth, he



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praises the generosity of some Macedonian Christians who had unexpectedly been generous to other Christians who were in need, even though they themselves were poor.² Paul goes on to suggest

that the Corinthians can learn from God's provision for ancient Israel when those people gathered manna during the exodus:

...The goal is equality, as it is written: 'The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.'³

In the same way God provided for every one of the Israelites who

We have no right to ask when sorrow comes, 'Why did this happen to me?' unless we ask the same question for every moment of happiness that comes our way.

Unknown

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Christchurch neighbours work together to clean up the sand and clay that were liquified by the earthquake, exploding through the topsoil in geysers, and accumulating on properties in the Eastern suburbs.

gathered manna in the wilderness, Paul seems to be saying that you and I can have a part in balancing out some of the unfairness in this life. Our generosity allows us to imitate, you might even say ‘participate in’, God’s provision for others when we help them in their suffering.

God Suffers, Too

‘Oh, really’, people might say. ‘If God thinks suffering is so great, why doesn’t he just come down here

and go through the kind of suffering that the Haitians, or Chileans, or even some of us Cantabrians have gone through?’ In fact, that is exactly what he has done: Jesus, the Son of God, was willing to live as one of us, to walk through human life and sympathise with our suffering, to experience evil and pain and the sharpness of death, and ultimately

to sacrifice himself and make a pathway to resurrection and new life for us. Jesus’ most demanding expression of Christian love illustrates just this truth: ‘Love one another as I have loved you...greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends’.⁴

Every problem has in it the seeds of its own solution. If you don’t have any problems, you don’t get any seeds.
Norman Vincent Peale

I suggested above that God’s creation behaves in such a way that love, sacrifice, devotion, kindness, and generosity exist as our response to suffering and calamity. Humans believe that it is important to care for one another, help one another, encourage one another, and stand by one another—even when that caring or encouragement might seem to have no tangible reward, even when that devotion or solidarity can bring the prospect of further suffering. And Christians believe that God in Jesus

has understood, experienced, and lived just this kind of human suffering. Our willingness to help the people around us is an extension of this ‘laying down your life’ that Jesus taught and accomplished himself. For us, this is not necessarily in the sense of physical martyrdom, but in our willingness to offer our time, our emotional support, and our physical resources to other people.

The Anglican Bishop of Christchurch, Victoria Matthews, has challenged her seventy-one parishes in Canterbury to live out this kind of generosity by giving \$100,000 out of their own financial blessings for rebuilding and relief after the Haitian earthquake’s devastation. As of this writing, it appears that the bishop’s goal has been exceeded by at least \$44,000.

When our question is, ‘Why does God allow bad things to happen?’, we focus on the problem, not the solution. The solution to suffering comes from our willingness to be generous to those in need, like the Christians in Macedonia were, like Cantabrians have been, like the young Sudanese fellow is doing—to be a blessing to the people around us who are struggling through the difficult circumstances of life.

Notes

¹ Respectively, Genesis 4:1–9; Genesis 37, 42–45, 50; 2 Samuel 11; 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, 3:1–9, 11:17–22.

² 2 Corinthians 8:1–12.

³ 2 Corinthians 8:14–15, quoting Exodus 16:18.

⁴ John 15:12–13.



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