



*Flower Memorial on Deans Ave, Christchurch, following the March 2019 shootings.*

# Christchurch Mosque Shootings: Where Was God?

by Rex Morgan

**O**n 15 March 2019 a terrible tragedy changed New Zealand forever. A terrorist brutally attacked praying worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, killing 51 innocent victims. It was a day of grief, shock, and unspeakable heartbreak for those affected and their families whose lives were suddenly devastated.

Many people have asked the question: 'Where is God when tragedies like this occur?' Christchurch had already experienced more than its share of disaster with widespread destruction and 185 deaths in the shattering earthquakes of 2010 and 2011.

It's easy to wonder what kind of God would allow tragic events like these. Multiple thousands of people around the world suffer and die in earthquakes, cyclones, droughts, wars, and mass killings, and God doesn't appear to lift a finger to help.

This question is the most common objection levelled at Christianity. If there is a loving God, why is there so much pain and hurt in the world?

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 give ample basis for the question.

## **If suffering were 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 would mean, 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 bitter 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? No doubt that wouldn't be good enough—even that would cause sorrow in the lives of those left behind.



*God made human beings with free will. We are more than mere puppets, with someone else pulling the strings.*

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, those are a cause of suffering, too. Okay then, 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?

When you think about it, you begin to realise that a world free from the potential for suffering would be a world lacking in challenges, a world of the boring and predictable.

It is only fair at this point that we should have a look at God's

viewpoint on this topic. What does he say about it? To see that, we need to look at the Bible, the book in which he reveals his way of thinking and acting.

### **How it all began**

The Bible records that the first two humans, Adam and Eve, were given a choice. 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 their own choices, the result would be suffering and death.<sup>1</sup> As we all know, they promptly made the wrong choice, and the rest, as they say, is history.

God could have done it in a different way. He could have forced them to make the right choice. Or he could have left them without a choice in the first place.

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 extra piece of cake, block your hand from picking up another can of beer, or miraculously turn the excess ice cream in your plate into a fresh green salad?

The Bible shows that God made human beings with free will, the ability to make our own decisions and choices. If we didn't have the opportunity to choose, we would be obliged to live God's way all of the time. This would make us no more than mindless robots or automatons, pre-programmed to go 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 be able 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.

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 Adam and Eve made, to go their own way rather than God's way. People ask: 'Why doesn't God come and do something about the evils in the world? Why does he hide himself?' But in fact, it isn't God that is hiding. Rather, humans as a whole have thumbed their noses at God and asked him to get out of their lives. When Adam and Eve told God they didn't want him around, he honoured this by adopting a largely 'hands off' policy.

It can't be said that God is the creator of evil. He did create the possibility of evil—that is essential in order for free will to be present. But it was humans who actualised that possibility.

# 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 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 that bad after all. It warns us of danger, forces us to rest our weary bodies, and it can even save our lives!

## God suffers, too

As a God of love, kindness, and compassion, God actually hates suffering. He desperately desired that humans would not 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',<sup>2</sup> and it assures us that he 'did not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men'.<sup>3</sup>

God is not untouched or unmoved by pain and suffering. 'I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord'.<sup>4</sup> 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 enormous 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'.<sup>5</sup> Although he did nothing to deserve it, 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 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 saw.<sup>6</sup> And he is still the same today. When he sees the suffering of the world, he suffers along with us.<sup>7</sup>

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 show in general why a loving God allows suffering. But this doesn't mean we can identify the reason for all individual occasions of suffering. Far from it! We must be careful about assigning specific meanings or reasons to tragedies and anguish. Suffering is painfully random in the world. Innocent infants suffer from terrible diseases. It is impossible to identify a specific cause for such events.

Wise King Solomon, under God's inspiration, reflected that 'time and chance' happens to all of us.<sup>8</sup> Some things are simply inexplicable.<sup>9</sup> 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 therefore not worth believing in. But we do know that God hates suffering even more than we do. The Bible doesn't shy

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away from mention of suffering. It confirms that suffering is always with us as the natural state of affairs in the present age.<sup>10</sup> But it goes on to declare that this is just a temporary situation,<sup>11</sup> and makes a firm promise that a time is coming when there will be no more suffering, pain, and sorrow.<sup>12</sup>

Since suffering is an inevitable part of life at this time, perhaps a better question to pose than 'Why does God allow suffering?' is to ask, 'What can we do about suffering?' and 'What can we learn from it?'

The Bible gives plenty of instruction on how to respond to the problems of

others. It encourages kindness, love, serving, and helping the oppressed and burdened, the widows, the poor, and the 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.

A salutary example of compassion in action was evidenced after the Christchurch mosque killings. Kiwis flooded the gates of mosques across the country with floral tributes and went out of their way to show support towards, and solidarity with, the Muslim community. Over a million dollars was swiftly raised

for the victims. 'Love travelled faster than bullets', wrote one reporter.

While it is possible for good to come out of suffering, generally it is an unhappy and unwanted part of life. However, suffering is the inevitable product of a world where God has given his children the freedom to make their own decisions. Even he himself has joined humanity in experiencing extreme suffering. Far from disproving God's existence, it shows his love for humanity that he wants us to live with free will and choice rather than functioning as mindless robots. But thankfully God promises that sorrow and distress won't be around forever. A better world is coming, where suffering will be a thing of the past.<sup>13</sup>

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:16-17.
- <sup>2</sup> Genesis 6:5-6.
- <sup>3</sup> Lamentations 3:33.
- <sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 18:32.
- <sup>5</sup> Isaiah 55:3.
- <sup>6</sup> Matthew 9:36.
- <sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:35-45.
- <sup>8</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:11.
- <sup>9</sup> Ecclesiastes 8:17.
- <sup>10</sup> Romans 8:18-21.
- <sup>11</sup> Romans 8:21-25.
- <sup>12</sup> Romans 8:21; Revelation 21:4.
- <sup>13</sup> Revelation 21:4.

## 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.

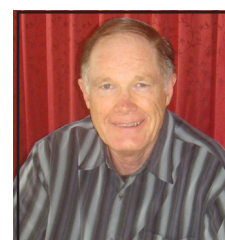
A pearl is formed when an irritant such as a piece of shell, bone, coral, or perhaps a tiny parasite, enters and lodges inside an oyster's shell. The mollusc reacts by beginning to coat the foreign object with a thin sheet of a substance called nacre. Over time, layer upon layer of nacre

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 can transform an irritant 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!



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