

The Bigger Picture of Human Suffering

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The Bible teaches that there are many reasons why God allows suffering to happen in individual people's lives. Yet, as the conclusion of the book of Job teaches, the individual who suffers may never know why the suffering came into his or her life. Here are some reasons why suffering may occur according to Scripture:

- A cosmic battle between Satan and God is being fought and the sufferer is in the middle of that battle: Job 1 and 2.
- God has some greater good in mind that takes someone through a season of suffering: the life of Joseph. In reflecting on his life, Joseph said to his brothers, Genesis 50:20: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."
- God allows suffering to "test" the sufferer. Deuteronomy 8:2 Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.
- God allows suffering to refine the sufferer for God's glory. Isaiah 48:10,11 See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another.
- God allows suffering to humble the sufferer. Deuteronomy 8:3 He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.
- God allows suffering to teach his will. Psalm 119:71,75 It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me.
- God allows suffering to teach perseverance. James 1:2-4 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
- God allows suffering to make his children holy. Daniel 11:35 Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.
- God allows suffering to discipline the sufferer in love. Please note that discipline is not the same thing as punishment. Christ took the punishment for sins on the cross. But discipline refines the sufferer and makes him or her a more fit servant of God. This passage says that the discipline produces a harvest of righteousness and peace in the sufferer's life. Hebrews 12:4-11 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

- God allows suffering to drive the sufferer to repentance for sins. Again, this is not a punishment, but a loving confrontation to turn the sufferer from doing wrong to doing right.
Psalm 107:10-13
Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains,
for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High. So he subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.
- God allows suffering to get the sufferer to rely on God's grace alone in his or her life.
2 Corinthians 12:7-10 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
- God allows suffering to promote his glory.
John 9:1-3 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.
- God allows suffering to further the gospel.
Acts 8:3,4 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.
- God allows suffering among those who are followers of Christ because they will be hated by some just as Christ was hated.
John 15:18-20 [Jesus said to his disciples,] "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

God is with his people in their suffering.

Though God has many reasons for allowing suffering, including those listed above, he never abandons his children, no matter how severe their suffering, and no matter how lonely and abandoned they feel in their suffering. Here are some reassurances from God:

- God stands with the sufferer in the suffering.
Isaiah 53:2-6
He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
- God walks with the sufferer through the suffering.
Psalm 23:4
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
Psalm 46:7,11
The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.
Isaiah 43:2
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
- God comforts the sufferer in his or her pain.
Isaiah 49:13
Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains!
For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.
2 Corinthians 1:3-5 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion
and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any
trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow
over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.
- God will punish all who harm his people.
2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to
you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven
in blazing fire with his powerful angels.
- God will bring an end to all pain and suffering.
Revelation 21:1,3,4 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth
had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God
himself will be with them and be their God. 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.”