

COVID 19 and a Christian understanding of suffering

Many are suffering right now because of the coronavirus pandemic. It may be due to the disruption of our normal life patterns and relationships, or economic distress and even the potential of financial ruin. We may be grieving for lost loved ones, or we ourselves may be sick and fearful of whether we will live or not. As I write the global death toll is approaching 100,000.

These experiences of suffering are, of course, not new. Such suffering goes on all around us. The global scope and near simultaneous experience of this situation, however, is unique.

Whenever we endure suffering we need others to love and care for us; a network of good and strong relationships around us. We also need categories to think about our experiences; to help us process and sort through what's going on. How are we to think about all this? And what's a Christian way of understanding our suffering? The following are some reflections on this topic. And we start with -

Some basics

Yes, the world is broken. It doesn't function the way God originally intended and so there are things like sickness, plague and death. It's broken because of human sin. Passages like Genesis 3 and Romans 5:12 highlight the connection between sin, suffering and death. And sin doesn't just affect us as individuals. It impacts everything including social structures and, in our case, the creation itself.

In Romans 8:20-22 Paul says, "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." Not just people suffer, even the creation is groaning under the effects of sin and is eagerly waiting for God's salvation.

As Christians we have hope. And that's because suffering is not a necessary part of God's creation. When God's kingdom comes to earth all things will be made new (Matthew 19:28). There will be a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1; 2 Peter 3:13). This is when "God will wipe away every tear from (our) eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore." (Revelation 21:4. Also Isaiah 25:6-8). We look forward to this in hope.

But until that time, **we live in the tension of the “already” and “not yet.”** Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of God has begun with his coming (Matthew 12:28; Luke 17:20-21). But it’s not all the way here yet. That won’t happen until he returns.

So we exist in an in-between time. We live in the “already” of the kingdom where God has begun to make things right. This was evidenced in Jesus’ ministry of healing, nature miracles and exorcisms. And is still evidenced today when God answers prayer to heal and help those who suffer.

But we also live in the “not yet” of the kingdom. As Paul says to Christians in 1 Corinthians 10:13, we still go through the same testing and trials that are “common to everyone” (NRSV). That’s because Jesus hasn’t returned. The resurrection and complete redemption of our bodies has not yet happened. And Satan is still alive and active. So we still experience the realities of sin, suffering and death. Although these realities have been decisively defeated through Jesus, we will not experience the fullness of this victory until the final day.

In the meantime, we have -

Questions upon questions

We turn to these now. **1. Should I assume I’m suffering because of my personal choices?** You know, “Is God judging me for something I’ve done?” The answer is, “No, you should not assume this.” This is not to say that there can’t be a connection. God can specifically cause suffering in relation to our choices to sin. For instance in Acts 5:1-11 God immediately judged Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit. (See also 1 Corinthians 11:29-32).

But the idea that every time I suffer it’s because God is punishing me for something I’ve done is just not the way the world works in its brokenness. Scripture makes this clear. The wicked prosper (Psalm 73:3-5) and the righteous suffer. Job suffered, but not because of sin (Job 1:8). And Jesus suffered, but was sinless. This shows us that there is no one-to-one connection between a person’s sin and consequences in this world. So short of God making a connection clear to us, we should not assume that our suffering means God is specifically judging us.

2. Is it God’s will for the world to suffer through this pandemic? As I said, God does sometimes directly intervene to judge sin in this world. So is that what’s going on? Well, since it’s happening, we can say for sure that God has allowed it. God is the sovereign creator and overseer of all things. But that God allows something doesn’t mean that God specifically caused it. Not everything that happens in the world is an expression of God’s preferred will (Acts 7:51; Ezekiel 18:31-32; Isaiah 63:10; Luke 7:30).

So like with question #1, short of God telling us this is God’s own work, perhaps through trusted messengers, we should not assume that God is

causing this pandemic. We're simply experiencing, yet again, the current brokenness of the creation.

3. Why did God make the world in such a way that we could mess things up so badly? If human sin causes such pain and suffering, why did God take such a risk? Simply put, God wants us to freely choose to love and serve him. God doesn't want robots as servants. God wants people, made in God's image, who will be his partners in his plans for the creation. And this can't happen without allowing the possibility of our choosing to hate and rebel against him, which we have done. The possibility of love, even in human relationships, involves the risk of suffering.

4. Is all the suffering worth it? According to Scripture, it will be. That's because our suffering is temporary, but our blessings will be much greater and eternal. As 1 Corinthians 2:9 says, ". . . no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." Paul, a man who knew about suffering, said, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18. Also 2 Corinthians 4:17)

This doesn't take away the pain of our current suffering, but it does give us comfort and encouragement.

5. Can God bring good out of our suffering? Scripture talks about this quite a lot (James 1:3-4, Romans 5:3-5; Hebrews 12:10-11). For instance, Joseph was sold into slavery and was also put in jail. But God used his suffering for good. As Joseph said to his brothers, "do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5). Also, Paul's life was in danger due to persecution, but God used this experience to teach him to "rely not on himself but on God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

Although it was not God's will that we choose sin and thus suffer, God can nevertheless accomplish his plan by using our suffering for his own ends. As Paul says in Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." God can redeem and transform our pain and suffering to bring good into our lives and into the lives of others.

This also doesn't take away the pain of our suffering, but it encourages us to endure and to keep moving forward.

6. Can we show how God brings good out of every example of suffering (question #5) and that it will be worth it (question #4)?

No, we cannot. We say this all by faith. We are simply not in a position to know how God orchestrates everything and why God allows things like pandemics.

This, in part, is what the book of Job teaches us about suffering. It never tells us why Job suffered. It simply teaches us that God is in control and that what he does is beyond human understanding. As the Lord says to Job in Job 38:4, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell

me, if you know so much." We will not understand why and how God does all that God does, at least in this life. And so we have to trust God in all this. We have to trust that the God we know to be just and merciful is doing what is right and good.

7. Where is God when we suffer? God is with us in our suffering. It doesn't always feel like this is so. It can seem like God is absent. As the psalmist says in Psalm 10:1, "Why, O Lord, do you stand afar off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

Yet we are taught that God is with us. As the Lord says in Isaiah 43:2, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." God is with us to watch over us, to encourage us, to comfort us and to strengthen us.

And not only this, God has come to be with us through his Son. He sent him to this earth, whose name is Immanuel or "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). God did not stand far off and aloof from us. Jesus suffered with us and for us in his life and in his death on the cross. God knows first-hand what we're going through.

God has not left us alone. He is with us as we experience the pain of suffering. And he suffers with us, until that day when all things will be made new.

A final thought -

We can have joy even while we suffer

Even though we will continue to suffer in various ways, Christians can experience victory in the midst of it. Paul says in Romans 8:35-37, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

A part of this victory is the experience of joy even while we suffer. We can have joy because God is working in us. As James 1:2 says, "count it all joy." God is working in us that we may be "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (v. 4. Also Romans 5:3-5). We can also have joy because, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17, "this slight, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." We can "rejoice and be glad, for (our) reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:12). There is a new world coming and we have a part in it.

We can have joy because, even though we cannot always understand our suffering or explain it, by faith we know that God is working in our lives and we know that God's promises are true.

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