

The problem of suffering

We have sympathy for those who suffer greatly and want to do what we can to help.

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We sometimes ask, “If there is a loving God, why does He stand back and do nothing while the world is full of suffering?”

Suffering in our own lives can be a big problem.

Some of us are not able to believe in God or the Bible until we have found an answer to the problem of suffering.

We shall look at this problem and see that:

- **we suffer because we live in an imperfect world**
- **suffering can be a warning that something is wrong**
- **suffering can make us stop and think**
- **suffering can help build our characters**
- **sometimes there are reasons for suffering**
- **the Bible tells of a future time when there will be no more suffering**

Suffering seems to be of three types:

- Caused by ourselves – pain and suffering as a result of accident injuries
– suffering resulting from our lifestyle
- Caused by mankind in general – war, persecution and pollution
- Outside human control – floods, earthquakes, illness and death

We shall look at these three categories and see what we can learn.

Our imperfect world

We live in an imperfect world full of imperfect people. This is the root cause of all suffering. The Bible tells us why there is this imperfection and what has been done to remove it in the future. The main sections of *The Evidence – you decide* material are intended to help you have confidence in the Bible message when it tells us about these issues. Suffering can be a reminder that we should think about why our world is not perfect.

Suffering caused by our own actions

Minor injuries

We cause suffering and pain to ourselves in many ways. We may burn ourselves on a hot object, bruise our hand by hitting it with something or strain a muscle by lifting a heavy object. This suffering is helpful, it tells us not to do it again! Next time we are in a similar situation, we remember the pain and act appropriately. Pain is a warning that things are not right. We must stop and think about the problem.

The importance of this kind of pain is illustrated by an American boy who was born with no sense of pain. He was nine years old when his mother took him to the John Hopkins medical school in Baltimore one November day in 1937. We might think that not being able to feel any pain would be great. However this is what the examining doctor wrote in his report:

- Partial blindness in one eye because when he had sand in his eye he did not notice it until permanent damage had been done
- Scars on almost every part of his body
- Enormous scar across his buttocks where he had sat on a heater and did not notice until his flesh was burnt to the bone
- One foot permanently deformed, as he had broken a bone and walked about on it for months before it was spotted
- Both hands so badly cut that he would never again be able to straighten his fingers

We can see that pain acts as a danger signal to the rest of us, but this unfortunate boy had nothing to warn him to stop and think when his body was being injured.



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Backache usually tells us that we have damaged our back

Accidents

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Car accidents cause much pain and suffering

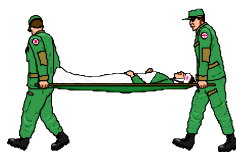
Many of us are willing to do things which we know could involve suffering if things go wrong. Do we consider the risks before we do them? Modern travel is one example. Many of us travel in cars, knowing of the suffering that could occur. Some of us, when thinking about the potential suffering involved in aeroplane accidents, decide that the risk is not worthwhile and do not travel by plane. Like suffering caused by minor injuries, the risk of suffering from accidents sometimes makes us stop and think about what we are going to do.

Lifestyle-related suffering

Many of us suffer as a direct result of the sort of life we choose to lead. In some countries, cigarettes carry a health warning, yet how many people ignore the warning and suffer the consequences later! Some of us choose to eat too much of the wrong kinds of food and become overweight, with the increasing risk of heart disease and diabetes. Because of immorality, AIDS is another problem that humanity has inflicted on itself. All of these problems are warnings that we are abusing our bodies.



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Problem of Suffering

- We live in an imperfect world
- Pain is a warning that things are not right
- Suffering from accidents makes us stop and consider what could happen
- Lifestyle-related suffering should make us want to change our lifestyle

Suffering caused by mankind

(Numbers in brackets refer to the sections in the “Further Information” section at the end, where you can find more information.)

Wars and persecution

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The results of atrocities in Cambodia

We sometimes ask the question, “If there is a loving God, why has He allowed people to inflict so much suffering on other humans?”

When we think like this, we should remember that if we want our Creator to intervene, He could well intervene in our lives and stop us doing things which cause suffering. Many of us would resent such restrictions in our lives. We all have a selfish streak which wants its own way (1). That being so, it should not surprise us that from time to time our self-interest causes suffering.

In the Bible, Jesus has an interesting comment about suffering inflicted on innocent people. Relations between the Roman governor Pilate and the Jews at the time of Jesus were never very good. The tension from time to time resulted in blood being shed. The people pointed out to Jesus a recent incident:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” Luke 13 v 1 to 3

Jesus answered their question by assuring his listeners that those killed were no more wicked than other people. The interesting point for us to note is that he is showing that such events should make us stop and think about the fact that we shall all die eventually. Such events disturb our routine and remind us that it could be our turn next. Like suffering caused by injuries, we are being warned that we have a problem that requires thinking about. This should encourage us to look into what life is all about.

Man-made problems

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Many people suffer from asthma as a result of pollution

Almost all of us choose to do things which we know cause suffering. The way we cause pollution is just one example. We make the choice to pollute and must take the consequences of illnesses such as asthma.

If we were to expect a loving God to prevent all suffering, this would include that caused by pollution. This would affect most goods and services in industrialised countries.

All suffering caused by people should make us stop and think. We are being reminded that something is not as it should be. We should think about the consequences of what we are doing in relation both to other people and to the planet on which we live.

Many people are now thinking about the current and potential problems caused by human activity and are realising that there is something wrong. Measures are being taken to try and reduce the problems.



Problem of Suffering

- We can choose how to live our lives
- We can choose how we treat other people
- Other people's deaths remind us that our lives will not last for ever
- Suffering should make us think about the effect of our actions on others

Suffering beyond our control

Floods and earthquakes

Jesus again gives us help when thinking about suffering from events such as floods and earthquakes over which we have no control. Following on from the incident that we looked at earlier, Jesus also mentions the suffering caused by a tower falling on some people:

“Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Luke 13 v 4 and 5



“Natural disasters” cause much suffering

Jesus repeats the warning that he gave in the previous incident - stop and think about the end of your life. Ultimately it does not matter whether we die from an accident at 20 years old or in bed at 95, the end result is the same. We all tend to put out of our minds the fact that our life will end. Suffering can be a warning that interrupts our normal routines. It can make us stop and think about the fact that our lives will end one day.

The good news is that death need not be the end for us. The purpose of this website is to give you the evidence that there is a trustworthy message in the Bible and that its message contains a hope of life after death.

Illness and death

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Some people endure far more illness than others. They can be in difficult situations for long periods of time with no apparent hope of release.

This suffering is not necessarily as a result of something they have or have not done. The Bible tells us that suffering can be for our own good (2) even if we can't see the reason for it. Here is one example:

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ... Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. ... For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He [God] for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Hebrews 12 v 7, 9 and 10

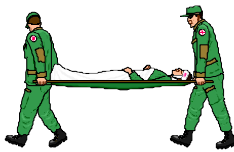
As we will see in the next section, children sometimes can't see why they are being disciplined. In the same way we sometimes can't see the reason for God's discipline. It may be that God knows we need some problem to make us stop and think what life is all about.

Most of us suffer more and more personal illness as we grow older. This also can make us realise that our bodies are wearing out and that we will eventually die.



When we see storm clouds on the horizon, it is a warning to expect rain. If we don't have clothes suitable for rain, then we should do something about it. Seeing other people suffer and die is a much more important warning. We are going to die and should do something about that. We should consider whether or not we can trust the various ideas in our world about life after death.

Look at the evidence on this website and decide for yourself whether the Bible message can be trusted.



Problem of Suffering

- Suffering and death serve as a warning
- We should consider whether or not we can trust ideas about life after death
- Suffering disturbs our routines and makes us consider what life is all about

The implications of choice

We all value the freedom of choice that we have been given. Our loving Creator wants us to love and respect Him by choice (3). In the same way, loving parents want their children to respect them. Parents can enforce obedience in their children by a harsh, rigid upbringing. But this is hardly likely to encourage the children to obey out of love and respect. It will certainly not be by choice.

There are times when loving parents need to show their children that they are in danger. They want to get the child's attention before disaster happens. They tell the child to stop before harm is done. If the comment is ignored, they may try to restrain the child physically. The motives are for the child's good, but the child may see it very differently at the time. The child may see it as undesirable, interrupting what it wants to do. Suffering in our lives can be like this. It can upset our routines and make us stop and think.

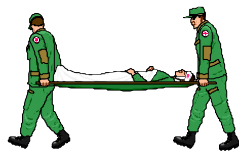


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We are like children - having our own way is not always good for us

The Bible tells us that we are like wayward children. Left to ourselves, we would become like spoiled children and selfishly destroy ourselves. We are dying creatures because, as we have seen (1), we all like our own way. Our loving Creator allows suffering to show us that there is something wrong with our world.

Because we can choose, suffering is a way that a loving Creator has chosen to get our attention and make us think about His offer of life after death.



Problem of Suffering

- We can choose how we live our lives
- We all like to have our own way
- Having our own way is not always best for us

The promised end of suffering

If we trust what the Bible tells us, we can be assured that one day suffering will end. The aim of *The Evidence – You decide* information is to give you the evidence which can help you have real confidence in the Bible message.

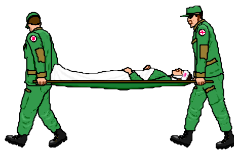


The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ will come back to the earth to eventually remove all of our world's imperfections, including pain and death. Two examples of this comforting message are:

*He will swallow up death forever,
And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces* *Isaiah 25 v 8*

...God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. *Revelation 21 v 4*

We look at God's plan for us in the "Consistent message" area of this website. Have a look at section 5.2, *What is the meaning of life?*, and section 5.3, *Where are we going?*



Problem of Suffering

- The Bible promises a time when there will be no more suffering
- We should consider whether or not we can trust this promise

Summary:

We live in an imperfect world.

We have freedom of choice.

Our Creator wants us to choose to respond to His love despite our selfish tendencies.



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Suffering

- can make us stop and think
- sometimes warns that things are not right
- may make us stop and consider risks we are taking
- makes us think about the effect of our actions on other people
- disturbs our routines and can make us realise:



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- that our lives are not endless
- there is something wrong with our world

- can make us stop and think about our loving Creator's offer of life after death which we can choose to accept or reject



The Bible tells us that suffering will end when Jesus returns to remove the Imperfections in our world.

Further Information

1. Our selfish streak

The Bible tells us that we are basically self-centred. In the early days of our history, the Bible tells us what this produced:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Genesis 6 v 5

Jesus spelt out what we are capable of:

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.

Matthew 15 v 19

The prophet Jeremiah was even more blunt:

*The heart is deceitful above all things,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it?*

Jeremiah 17 v 9

The Apostle James in the New Testament tells us that we are an imperfect dying race because of this selfish streak:

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

James 1 v 14 and 15

2. Suffering can be sent for our good

The Bible tells us that God sometimes sends suffering to encourage us to go in the right direction in life:

Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12 v 11

Solomon, the wise king of Israel, gave a prayer at the dedication of the temple he had built. This is part of that prayer:

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray toward this place and confess Your name, and turn from their sin because You afflict them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel, that You may teach them the good way in which they should walk; and send rain on Your land which You have given to Your people as an inheritance. 2 Chronicles 6 v 26 and 27

From this we can see that Solomon is suggesting that natural disasters such as drought can be sent to make people stop and think about how they are living. God brings suffering on people for their own good.

3. Freedom of choice

The Bible makes it plain that our Creator gives us the choice of whether to obey Him or not.

The position was made plain to the early Israelites:

...I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice. Deuteronomy 30 v 19 and 20

They could either love and obey God and have the hope of life, or disobey and have no hope of life.

The writer of one of the Psalms says:

I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws. I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD. Psalm 119 v 30 and 31

The book of Proverbs tells us that those who ignore God are free to choose to do so:

*Because they hated knowledge
And did not choose the fear of the LORD,
They would have none of my counsel.
 Proverbs 1 v 29 and 30*