

Trying to Make Sense of Suffering

If you live long enough, you will suffer. If you haven't suffered yet, you will. The only alternative is not living long enough. If you live long enough, you will be bereaved. If you live long enough, you'll contract cancer, consumptive heart failure. You might go through a divorce. You might have a road accident or get fired from a job or two. If you live long enough, you will suffer.

If you live long enough, you'll lose children. Almost every family lost some children 150 years ago. We don't expect that anymore in the medicalized West. In many parts of the world, people still lose children. If you live long enough, you will lose some too.

Suffering can be a sort of theoretical problem, a kind of David Hume challenge, a skeptic from a couple centuries back. In the light of all the suffering in the world, how can God be simultaneously all powerful and good?

It's when you suffer that it begins to bite. Many people never even think strenuously about this subject at all until something happens to them. You may even think you have it nicely boxed and figured until someone you love comes down with an acute cancer and you watch the melanoma take them out in six weeks.

What shall we make of a tsunami that can kill 100,000? What shall we make of massive injustice, the kind of thing that you had for 15 years in southern Sudan and still have going on in southwestern Sudan?

We have just come through the bloodiest century in human history. One hundred and seventy million people killed by their governments apart from war. More than half the population of the United States killed by their governments in the twentieth century apart from war!

Read the Psalms, for example. How often does the psalmist cry to God in an agony of uncertainty because of injustice that he perceives in his own life or in the nation?

There's Jeremiah. Yes, he cannot keep quiet because the word is burning within him, but, quite frankly, he wishes God would go and take a hike somewhere so that he can get on with his life and not be constantly under the pressure of a government that is against him.

Then there's Job. Job doesn't know about the first chapter, which makes it even worse.

We will look at several structural post or columns, that will help us understand more of suffering taught clearly and unambiguously in Scripture.

These posts support a platform to constitute a perspective that enables us to think about these things in a biblically faithful way.

All of these columns support a whole theology of suffering that is sort of reduced, if you listen only to the first pillar then you'll be able to say to yourself again and again, this is not realistic.

That is why we must get through all of the columns to maybe reach and understanding of suffering.

You have to get all of these pillars in place before you have a platform broad enough to give you a perspective that is biblically sound and reasonably faithful.

Having said all of that, when it actually comes to helping people who are going through their worst moments a lot of it doesn't help anyway, because when people are going through their worst moments, often they don't want all the theology and can't hear it.

What we are talking about is not designed for people who are going through the worst of it. This is prophylactic spiritual medicine, you need this medicine before you get to the worst of suffering. If we get these things truly in place in our mind, our reasoning, and our value system before you get there then you will have a stable frame of reference to handle it when you get there.

This medicine is also for somebody who has been through it and is beginning to come out the other side and is still seeing through their tears, but at least their ears are open enough now to start listening again. If you're right in the midst of it, you might already be thoroughly ticked off with what we have said so far.

When you're in the midst of it, you can be so blinded by the rage and the sorrow and the hurt that it is very, very hard to listen.

The First column; Wisdom from the beginning of the Bible's storyline.

In particular, wisdom from Genesis 1–3 and lots of text that follows from that. Insights from the creation and the fall. From this side of the Enlightenment, from about 1600 on, we have developed ways of thinking that try to establish proofs for the existence of God and the like.

The Bible does not begin by saying, "Now let us consider together the possibilities of God's existence. It just begins, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Now if you except for a moment that God already existed before anything else did and that he has made everything, then the fact that we want to evaluate whether he exists is already an evidence of our incredible lostness.

If there had never been a fall, if God had made everything, and we, made in his image, knew him intimately, do you think we would be holding learned discussions on whether or not God exists? The very fact that you can start to think along those lines is already a mark, from the Bible's point of view, of how lost and blind we already are, but the Bible just does begin with, "In the beginning God made everything."

The reason we have to think this through is this helps to establish a worldview, a frame of reference, a way of looking at things. We will call that a worldview.

in some worldviews, god and everything made are all part of the same thing. In that view god is one with everything and is the summation of it all. Somehow all of it together has a spiritual cast. Nature and the universe and everything else is all god. It's called pantheism.

Then people develop new ways of analyzing what's wrong. In some religions, for example in fact, in the form of religion that predominated in the Roman Empire from the early second century thought that what's fundamentally wrong with the universe is matter. Spirit is good by definition, matter is, at best, dicey and, at worst, actually captivating and wicked. Freedom, liberation from evil, comes by getting detached from your body. Go back to the spirit world, and everything's ok.

That means you're analyzing what the problem is differently from the person who thinks that God made everything good. If you read through Genesis 1 what do you see again and again? God made something or other, and he saw that it was good. Then he made something else, and he saw that it was good.

When we get down to the end of the whole creation narrative, we have, "God saw that the whole thing was good. It was very good." In other words, the Bible doesn't give any support for the view that matter is intrinsically bad. That's not where the problem lies, nor does this give any credence, this biblical account, to what is often called today philosophical naturalism. This is the view that all there is is matter, energy, space, and time. That's all there is. It's not God. It's just a natural world. Matter, energy, space, and time.

If you ask where it came from.... Well, the scientists are still debating. "It was the Big Bang." Well, what caused the Big Bang? Some people think there was an expanding and contracting of everything. It went back and forth, and it keeps on going. Now there are new theories that are being developed, but, in any case, there is no place for God in this. It's just molecules bouncing. Although there are lots of efforts to escape the entailments of that view, it's really hard if you hold that view to say what good and bad are at all.

Because, you see, this is not just a Christian problem. For anybody who thinks, has any moral decency at all, anybody who's made in the image of God, or anybody who is concerned about right or wrong in any sense, this is something we all have to face.

It doesn't matter whether you're Hindu or Muslim or an atheist, whether you're agnostic, whether you're a liberal or a conservative. Sooner or later all have to face this kind of thing. So it's not just a question of Christians having a dumb view versus everybody else, clearly brilliant and insightful.

Then we come to Genesis 3

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made
3:1 "Now the serpent was the most crafty [prudent] of all the creatures God had made."

Already, you do not have a competing God. You do not have a competing principle. A good God and a bad serpent, both eternal, a principle of good and a principle of evil, stretching back into eternity? No, the serpent belongs to the created order

“Did God actually say you mustn’t eat from any tree in the garden?” God hadn’t said that. God had forbidden one tree and one tree only. “From all the rest you might eat.”

That’s the implication of the question. So that you not only stand in judgment of God in a theoretical way, but, even while you’re standing in judgment of God, you’re mentally casting an image of him as a cosmic-level party pooper, spoiling everybody’s fun.

She begins to entertain the possibility that she can stand in judgment of God.

Thus encouraged, the Devil then makes his first explicit denial. “ ‘You will not surely die,’ the serpent said to the woman.”

this woman is being invited, in effect, to make her own list of what’s good and evil. Now you see that this is not merely an invitation to break a rule.. It’s the beginning of all idolatry. It is to de-God God. It is to stand in God’s place. It is to be where God is and decide what good and evil is for ourselves.

The Bible then works hard all through its pages to tie all of human evil, first and foremost, to this beginning of rebellion, this initial fundamental idolatry.

Then they get into the Promised Land. They go through these horrible cycles of sin and degradation amongst the covenant people until the people face judgment again. Then God, in his mercy, when they cry out for help, raises up a judge, and they are restored again to strength and security. It only takes a generation or two before they slide again. These horrible cycles with the repeated refrain, “In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes.”