

Evil, Pain, and Suffering

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Introduction

I once received an email that said: “Dear Sir: My name is Matthew and I could use your advice, or possibly just your judgment. I have a very close friend whose mother is losing a long battle with cancer. She is questioning her faith and to some degree she has a point. I was wondering do you know of any specific justification our Lord has for taking the ones we love, especially when we need them the most.”

This is an important question to consider, not just because Matthew wrote me about it, but because it is an issue that is often on the minds of many people.

On September 11, 2001, four airplanes slammed into the World Trade Center, into the Pentagon, and into the ground in Pennsylvania resulting in the tragic deaths of over 3000 people. And surely there have been many who have been asking, “Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?”

On Monday, August 29, 2005, hurricane Katrina slammed into the New Orleans and Gulfport area as a major Category 4 hurricane. Thousands of people died, lost their homes, and terribly suffered as a result of this terrible storm. And, again, surely there have been many struggling to understand how God could allow such a terrible thing to happen.

We also need to realize that this is not a new question. In Judges chapter 6, the people of Israel were undergoing difficult times. Their enemies were destroying their crops and livestock and homes; they had little food and were living in caves. And so they cried out to God: “Why has all this happened to us?” (Judges 6:11-13). In other words, why does God allow such evil, pain, and suffering?

Not only are God-fearing people asking questions like this, but atheists have long been raising this issue as they seek to prove there is no God. Their argument goes something like this:

- If God is all-good, then He would not cause or allow these terrible things to happen.
- Since evil, pain, and suffering do exist, then God must not be all-good.
- Either that or He is not powerful enough to accomplish what He desires.
- Either way, there must not be a God, since God is all-good and all-powerful by definition.

The fact is: God does exist, but He’s not the one responsible for the evil, pain, and suffering that exists in our world. I cannot profess to understand all about this issue, or have all the answers, but allow me to share 4 reasons why evil, pain, and suffering exists in our world today...

1. There is evil, pain, and suffering because of our personal wrong choices.

1 John 4:8 reminds us that God is love. And I think it is because of that love that He created us to be His children. And furthermore, because of that love and because He wanted children and not robots, he created us as real people with freedom of choice.

- In Joshua 24:15, Joshua stood before the people of Israel and told them, “Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”
- In John 5:39-40, Jesus said that the Scriptures bear witness of Him. But, He says, "You are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life." They chose not to follow Jesus.
- In Matthew 23:37, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. He wanted them to come to Him for salvation, but they were not willing to do so; they exercised their freedom of choice and chose to reject Him!
- God loved us enough to give us freedom of choice, but those choices will have consequences.

- Good choices will typically have good consequences, and bad choices will have bad consequences.
- And thus evil, pain, and suffering exists in this world often because of personal wrong choices.

Look again at Judges chapter 6. The people of Israel wanted to know why there were suffering at the hands of their enemies. The answer is in verse 1: “Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord gave them into the hands of Midian seven years.”

God gave them freedom of choice, but He also gave them rules and regulations to govern such. And when they violated God’s law, they reaped the consequences of their wrong choices. Indeed there will be suffering when we act contrary to those commands and principles that God has given to us.

Peter said in 1 Peter 4:15, “By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler.” And Proverbs 13:15 says, “The way of the transgressor is hard.”

2. There is evil, pain, and suffering because of the personal wrong choices of others.

- In WW2, six million Jewish men, women, and children suffered and died, not because of anything they had done wrong, because of the wrongdoing of Adolf Hitler and those who followed him.
- Three thousand people died on September 11, and people want to know why. “They didn’t do anything wrong; why would God allow such a thing or cause such a thing to happen?” But God didn’t do it! God didn’t fly those planes into the World Trade Center; that was done by suicidal lunatics who thought there would be dancing virgins waiting for them on the other side (bet they were surprised). People suffered and died on that day, not because of anything wrong they had done, but because of the wrong choices made by one evil man and those who follow after him.
- On October 25, 1994, two little boys named Michael and Alex Smith were drowned by their mother in a lake just outside of Union, South Carolina. People were hit hard by the tragic event. Again, many wanted to know why God would allow such a terrible thing to happen. But God wasn’t responsible; the mother Susan Smith was! She was the one who strapped her kids in the back seat of her Mazda and rolled it into John D. Long Lake. Michael and Alex and a whole lot of people suffered greatly, not because of anything wrong they had done, but because of the wrong choices made by someone else.

(I remember the event because I was building a house at that time right across the road from the cemetery where those two little boys were buried. In the weeks that followed, as I worked on that house, there was never a time when there was not someone visiting those two pitiful gravesites. Toys, flowers, stuffed animals, posters and letters were spread out over that part of the cemetery.)

- And some would argue: “But that’s not fair!” No, but would we expect God to take freedom of choice away from anyone who might abuse it?! Should freedom of choice only be given to people who are guaranteed never to make a wrong choice? Freedom of choice brings consequences... to those who make those choices and to others who are also affected by those choices.

3. There is evil, pain, and suffering because of personal wrong choices made by people of long ago.

We are blessed today to enjoy many luxuries of life: live in nice homes with electricity, heat/air, running water, computers, get in our nice cars and drive around town talking on cell phones. We are reaping the benefits of things that were done by people of generations before us.

But not only are we reaping the positive consequences, but also the negative. Just as what we do now will affect our children and grandchildren, so also are we affected now by what our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents did before us.

For instance, there are children literally starving to death in many places in our world. And people wonder why God would allow such a thing to happen. But again, God didn’t do it! He is not the one responsible for such pain and suffering. Many of these poor people are suffering because of the wrong choices made by people in their land many generations before them.

Look at Exodus 20:4-5. God warned against idolatry, and yet many forsook that command and ignored all the other ways and teachings of God. Instead they chose to worship other gods and invent false doctrines such as reincarnation.

And thus some of these countries today are filled with cattle and other animals, perhaps plenty enough to feed the many who are hungry, but they won't eat the animals because they are following religious practices handed down to them from generations before. They won't eat the animals because they have been taught that these animals might actually be their ancestors from long ago.

Look again at Exodus 20, the rest of verse 5. God warned that later generations would indeed suffer if they wrongly chose to turn away from God and His ways. Many in such countries have also suffered because they have ignored the Biblical principles of farming. God had commanded that the land was to be allowed to rest on the seventh year; thus it could regain its nutrients and continue to be good farm land.

But many in the Far East have made wrong choices and used the land year after year, and the land can no longer effectively provide the needed crops to feed later generations. God is not at fault; He gave His instructions, but people have failed to listen to Him and thus generation after generation suffers because of it.

To bring it closer to home, consider these difficult questions people ask:

- Why did my baby die before he/she had a chance to live?
- Why was my child born with terrible birth defects?
- Why does my loved one have cancer?
- Why did my mother/father/husband/wife get sick and die when that person was needed so much?

It is impossible to give a specific answer to individual questions such as these, but there still remains this truth: many today suffer because of wrong choices made by others generations ago. There are surely many specific examples of things our ancestors have done that adversely affect us now:

- People once took fertility and other such drugs that we now know have resulted in tragic side effects.
- Years ago the construction industry and the textile industry made great use of a substance known as asbestos; they didn't realize the tremendous health hazards to people who would inhale such; the use of such has led to lung cancer and heart disease, etc.
- Agent Orange and several other chemicals were used generously during the Viet Nam War; the list of birth defects and deformities and other consequences passed on to others is long and shocking.
- Our earliest ancestors lived in the Garden of Eden, a place of no sickness or death whatsoever. And, theoretically, they and their offspring could have lived there forever. But sin messed it all up. And Romans 5:12ff reminds us that all of us suffer and die now because of that sin committed long ago.

4. There is evil, pain, and suffering because people sometimes violate God's natural laws.

Some choose to do so, and some accidentally do so, but one cannot violate God's laws with impunity.

- Remember Luke 13:4 and the tower of Siloam that fell and killed 18 people? Jesus said it had nothing to do with the wrong choices they had made; rather it had to do with the law of gravity.
- If you stand underneath a 110-story building that has been fatally damaged, you are going to be hurt because God has a law that says everything gets pulled to the center of the earth.
- If you drive your car at 60 mph into another car going 60 mph, you're going to get hurt because God has a law that says two things cannot successfully be in the same place at the same time.
- If you dive to the bottom of a swimming pool and stay there too long, you're going to suffer because God has a law that says people have to breathe air in order to live.

Some would suggest that God intervene and suspend the laws of nature every time something awful is about to happen to someone. But can you imagine the chaos that would result from such a thing? Surely a world of such confusion and disorder would argue more against than for the existence of God. God's natural laws are given to us for a purpose, and it's not His fault when we try to fight against them.

Conclusion

Let me conclude in a positive and uplifting manner by reminding you of 3 things:

1. There are benefits of pain and suffering (a tingling sensation that leads to a pain in the chest will send someone to the hospital; back up to fireplace and get too hot, etc.). Suffering also brings about such positive characteristics as bravery, valor, honor, courage, altruism, self-sacrifice (WTC heroes).
2. God cares and understands all about your pain and heartaches. He knows all about suffering that's not fair and suffering because of what somebody else did. Two thousand years ago, He watched His own Son pay a price that He did not owe! Don't ever forget that God understands and cares when you hurt.
3. Finally, please know that this world was never intended to be our final home. Look at 2 Corinthians 4:8-9; 16-5:1. Paul says we are afflicted in many ways, but our focus needs to be, not on things which are temporal, but on things that are eternal. We need to focus on our eternal home above. We are, as the song says, just a-passin' through. We have a home being prepared for us, a home far grander than anything we can imagine, a place where there are streets of gold. A place where God shall wipe away every tear from our eyes, where there will no longer be any death, or mourning, or crying, or pain; for all these things shall have passed away (Revelation 21:4).
4. Tragedies such as this storm provide us with opportunities to be a blessing in the lives of others. We can act in such a way that people really will see Jesus living in us... Look at Galatians 6:9-10; James 2:14-26; 1 John 3:11-18.