

# The Problem of Pain

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Morning. I'm lying in bed, drifting between sleep and wakefulness, steeling myself to opt for wakefulness and the day ahead.

I flick on the radio and instantly regret doing so. Trying to get a bright start on the weekday with NPR is like hiring a funeral director to do stand-up comedy. If I could find a consistent alternative source for the news, I'd head for it in a heartbeat.

Today's fare, the announcer informs me, will include an interview with one more glittering star in the atheist universe, who will share his reasons why the presence of human suffering caused him to leave the Christian faith.

No, I did not stick around to listen. I've already heard it often enough that I'm tired of the same boring old "provocative, insightful, disturbingly honest" perspectives. I recognize them for what they are: faith-stealing, hope-killing, joyless, self-indulgent crap that sets human reason and experience as the ultimate arbiter of what is real.

I would be a liar to say that the issues of suffering and sorrow on this planet don't trouble me. Believe me, they are not abstract topics for me. Like you, I come equipped with tear ducts, and they have served me well and often. I know the meaning of loss, of grief, of the heartbreak which drives that great, pressing question no human answer can satisfy: *Why?*

"If there is a loving God, how can he allow so much suffering in the world?" Sound familiar? I'm sure you've encountered that question more than once. Perhaps, like me, you've asked it yourself. It's a question each of us will inevitably grapple with in a world torn by the reality of pain in its countless forms.

However, it's not the only question worth asking—particularly if you're allowing it to harden into your answer instead of serving as a springboard to a deeper exploration of God's nature. We're bound to encounter disappointments when our expectations of God differ from who he really is and how he operates.

So to the question of how a loving God can allow pain, loss, and grief, let me respond with another question: *Can Christianity only be true in a world without suffering?*

The first question implies that this is in fact the case. But does that notion make sense? How much faith does it take to live in a utopia? The idea seems pretty absurd, don't you think, in light of what Christianity is actually about and how the Bible portrays this world we live in. A world without pain or grief doesn't even remotely square with the life of Jesus and his reason for living it. He didn't come here because this planet is perfect, but because it is horribly broken. At times, that brokenness intrudes into our lives in ways that shatter us with a recognition of how terribly real it is, how deep it goes, and how utterly devastating it can be.

But if the human condition weren't just that bad—far worse than we can imagine until we taste its agonizing downsides for ourselves—then we wouldn't need a savior. And it's a savior that Jesus has claimed to be. Not just another great moral teacher who spoke fine-sounding platitudes, but someone uniquely equipped by heaven to actually do something about our earthly circumstances.

Only, he didn't do so in a way that frees us from pain in this life. If you think otherwise, mark my words, you're setting up yourself and the god you've created for a downfall. Whatever God meant when he described himself as "a sun and a shield," he was not implying that bad things won't happen to us. Jesus assured his disciples that bad things *would* occur. "In this world you will have trouble," he said. Then he went on to taste a slice of that trouble for himself. Brutal pummeling at the hands of thuggish soldiers, near-evisceration by a Roman flagellum, the degradation and slow, indescribable torture of crucifixion...how would *your* trust in a loving God have handled all that?

Or, if you had stood in the sandals of Mary, Jesus' mother, how might your faith have been challenged as you watched your son endure so horrible a death?

Bear in mind, too, that the crucifixion was just the ugly, inglorious culmination of a life of adversity for Jesus. Don't you think he wept when his stepfather, Joseph, died? Is it possible he felt some very human sorrow when his cousin, John, was beheaded in Herod's dungeon? In the words of Isaiah the prophet, Jesus was "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief."

The presence of suffering has never been a sensible argument against the existence of a loving God. It is merely proof of what desperate shape this world really is in, and it is a means of pointing our hopes and our values toward where they truly belong. Whether suffering turns us away from God or toward him, whether it shatters our faith or matures it, is not a reflection on God, only on the limitations of human understanding, and on the choices we make at every step that lead one person to cling to God while another person rejects him. Neither choice erases the fact of suffering. But one choice gives us a Comforter and a hope amid our tears, while the other robs us of any hope at all.

Paul the apostle put it this way: "If in this life only we have hope, then we Christians truly are the most miserable of people." Paul knew something about suffering. So did those early Christian martyrs. So did the heroes of the faith in the book of Hebrews, chapter eleven. Think about it: sawn in two, devoured by wild beasts, burned by the hundreds as human torches...how did those people's faith survive?

Dear ones, suffering exists not because God isn't good, but because this world isn't good, and it isn't home. We were created for something more. We truly are pilgrims. And yes, there are times when this life hurts, hurts terribly, sometimes beyond anything we think we can survive. At such times, we need our brothers and sisters to come alongside us with hearing hearts, great patience, and gentle compassion, to acknowledge the severity of our pain, love us through our anger and disillusionment, affirm and strengthen us in the course of our journey, and point us beyond the darkness to the hope that dwells, undiminished and secure, in our Lord Jesus. He truly does know what it's like for us. But he also knows what he has obtained for us, and for our loved ones, through his own suffering--and, let us never, ever forget, through his resurrection.

Remember, friends, this Christian faith is not primarily about good morals or modes of conduct. It is a matter of eternal life, and of a lasting joy beyond the sorrows, disappointments, and sometimes agonizing uncertainties of this world.

Suffering is real. But so is life. So is God. So is heaven. So is joy, and the hope that reaches for it, even when we're not entirely sure it can ever exist for us. It does. Jesus has promised.