

period of time. Our situation may be worsened by seeing many other people, some of whom may be responsible for evil acts, appear to have a much more prosperous life with little or no suffering. Apart from personal suffering there is also the wider issue of mass suffering, the kind caused by Man rather than that caused by natural disasters. In particular, the effect of the Holocaust has caused a major revision of beliefs, notably within Judaism. The conventional view of God is as an all-powerful, all-loving Being. This perceived wisdom is under review by many. If God is all-powerful, maybe he is not all-loving; if he is all-loving, maybe he is not all-powerful. The latter view has now been proposed by many within Judaism.

One story told me of the Holocaust has always moved me:

An old rabbi at Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp was looking at the queue of women and children waiting to go to the gas chambers. He looked up to the sky, raised his arms high and shouted, "Yahweh, Yahweh, help them!" He waited a few minutes. Nothing happened. He turned around and, looking at the smoke rising from the ovens and smelling the burning flesh, shouted again to the heavens, "Yahweh, Yahweh, help us!" He waited again for a few minutes. Nothing happened. Then he heard the terrible scream of a woman, and looked to see that an SS soldier had bayoneted a little baby girl and flung her against a wall. In absolute desperation, for a third time, he raised his eye to the clouds and shouted, "Please, please, Yahweh, at least appease the suffering of your little children!" But still nothing happened. Finally, he fell to his knees and muttered in absolute despair, "There is no Yahweh. We are all lost .. all lost .. all lost".



What despair, what suffering! Ask yourself how you would react to that terrible situation. Would you be broken and lose faith like that rabbi? Miraculously, we know not everyone did: there are many accounts of heroic bravery in such camps, and many found their faith had grown during their horrific experience. We all respond differently to adversity. But why does God seem to push some people further than they can cope? It is one thing to say that God will give you strength to bear your suffering, quite another to recognise that experience tells you otherwise. This is part of the problem of grace which will be examined later.

Unfortunately, the Holocaust has not proved to be the definitive example of human evil; more recent times have seen massacres of millions of innocent people in Bosnia, Rwanda and the Sudan, to name but a few. Many people today can not harmonise the existence of earthly suffering and the notion of God. Resolution of the apparent paradox in terms of a final judgment, followed by salvation for the good and damnation for the evil, no longer seems entirely satisfactory. Yet, why not? If we **really** believe in a just God and an eternal afterlife, then several years of suffering by comparison is nothing. But we are human. When we suffer the loss of someone we love, our emotions flood us, and really we are feeling sorrow for **ourselves**. Our faith tells us she or he is really all right and is now with God, but we miss that person for **our** sake. Similarly, as we suffer for a host of other reasons we also have our belief in a good God to support us. There is no intellectually satisfactory answer to suffering. We live in faith, indeed we can only really survive by faith.

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

11

Why Do the Good Suffer?

Biblical attitudes, with particular reference to the Book of Job



Questions for Reflection

1. What was the view of Old Testament writers to the apparent prosperity of the wicked?
2. What do we mean by suffering?
3. If God is really all powerful, why does he allow children to suffer?
4. Are there any advantages in suffering?

Old Testament Views on Suffering and Death

In the majority of OT books the perceived position is that God rewards the Good and punishes the Wicked *here on earth*. In the Book of Proverbs, its older sayings reflect the view that obeying God's commands brings happiness but failing to do so leads to disaster. The whole Covenant theology is centred on this premise. This attitude is based on the belief that God not only loves but is just. Equally important is the belief that, as Creator of everything, He is all-powerful and can actually ensure justice takes place.



Alternative ways of approaching the problem were denied because of the way death was understood. Death did not lead to a positive after-life for the Good, and punishment for the wicked. That belief was to come much later. Instead, it was believed that everyone went to a place of nothingness called Sheol. In Sheol, there was no feeling, no memory of God or former life, just a blank existence. So, evil people could only be punished while still alive, or else by being given a premature death.

Therefore, if someone was the victim of a misfortune, then that was thought to be the consequence of some offence given to God. In addition, originally (see Yahweh's comment in the Decalogue at Exodus ch.20) any punishment was not limited to an individual, but was applied to their family or even to successive generations. This was later limited to the individual (see Deuteronomy ch.7 and 24, Jeremiah ch.31, Ezekiel ch.18 and 33).

A similar development can be perceived in relation to suffering. The previous explanation came to be questioned in the face of many apparent injustices. The issue is first raised in the Bible in the Book of Jeremiah (ch.12, in the form of a question to God about the prosperity of the wicked), and the entire Book of Ecclesiastes addresses it in a novel if not perverse way. But it is the Book of Job that examines it in detail.

The Book of Job

The Book of Job examines the question of suffering through a story about the misfortunes of a good and virtuous man called Job. The story is set in the context of a challenge made to God by a being hostile to Humans, the Satan. In Job, the word Satan appears as a title not a personal name, someone who is a 'tester' or 'accuser'. He is envious of God's liking for Job, and asks God to let him make Job suffer to see how much Job really loves and trusts in God. A series of misfortunes affects Job and, in turn, he loses his wealth and his children. Finally he is afflicted with disease. His wife is no comfort to him and nor are his three friends. His friends reiterate the belief prevalent at the time about the nature of suffering. Job's suffering is seen as being either educative or the righteous retribution for some evil deed he has performed.



Job himself vehemently denies this and in the process asks whether God is really bothered about him, whether our view of justice is the same as God's and, in making the observation about the universal existence of injustice, asks whether God is irrational. All of these reactions are often our own reactions to the suffering we experience, aren't they? But, despite these thoughts, Job

remained loyal to God and praises His righteousness. This should be an example to us.

However, there is no intellectually satisfactory solution to the problem of suffering in the book of Job. Even the appearance and speech of God fails to address it directly. God makes no attempt to justify His actions and just emphasises his absolute power and wisdom. All that Job can do, and by implication all humankind, is live with suffering in the best way possible. There is no escape from the problem except, that is, by faith in God.

Subsequent Biblical Developments

The paradox of the traditional attitude to suffering was overcome for the Jews with the development of the concept of an after-life. Ben Sira, the author of the Book Ecclesiasticus, is the first to hint at a resurrection of the body (ch.46):

'may their bones flourish from the grave'

but it is the Book of Daniel (ch.12) that makes the first explicit biblical statement about bodily resurrection:

'of those who are sleeping in the land of dust, many will awaken, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace'

followed later by the Second Book of Maccabees (ch.7 and 14):

'but the king of the world will raise us up, since we die for his laws, to live again for ever' 'he tore out his entrails .. calling on the master of his life and spirit to give them back to him one day'.

Finally, the Book of Wisdom (e.g. ch.2 and 3) influenced by Greek thought about the separation of body and soul, openly proclaims the eternal happiness of the just and the damnation of the wicked:

'for God created human beings to be immortal' and 'to the unenlightened they appeared to die .. God was putting them to the test and has proved them worthy to be with him .. those who are faithful will live with him in love .. but the godless will be duly punished ..'.

Therefore, the Old Testament finally seems to have a credible solution to what had seemed an intractable problem. God's justice will be provided after death for both the good and the wicked.

The Modern Problem

The problem of suffering, especially the suffering of the just and innocent, is often cited as an excuse for not believing in the existence of God or, at least, in a good God who has our best intentions at heart. There is more than a little irony in this. Very often, those who declare themselves as atheists use the problem of suffering as a reason for their beliefs. Yet, for those who do believe in God, the difficulty does not prove decisive for their beliefs. Yet, we must accept there is a real difficulty despite our faith. It is one thing to give lip service to the problem of suffering when we aren't experiencing any, quite another to have to persevere when illness, domestic problems, money issues or the death of a loved one strikes us, perhaps over a long

