

How Can a Good God Allow Suffering?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 October 2016

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 0 0] And John, who wrote these words down, said, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new. Then he said, Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.

This is the word of the Lord. Great. Thank you for being here.

[1 : 1 1] I'm conscious some of you might have never been in a church before, and we're really thrilled, really, encouraged that you're willing to engage with this subject, and think about the Christian worldview and what the God of the Bible has to say about suffering.

So it's great to have you with us. And if you haven't felt able or willing to participate in anything so far, in the singing and the praying, that's fine. We're just thrilled that you're here to engage with what we're looking at together.

As I said, I don't think I'll be able to fully answer this question. There's still lots of unanswered questions for us. But my hope is that there be enough in what you hear tonight to think, there's enough here that I really need to look further into this.

I really need to look more at Jesus. That would be my hope. And it's just worth me saying, I mean, obviously, the purpose of Gordon interviewing me there was to just demonstrate there are different ways in which you might ask a question like this.

How can a good God allow suffering? And one reason might be that you're going through terrible suffering or something awful has happened to you and you're left with big questions about that.

[2 : 1 9] And it's really impossible for me to speak into that in a talk like this. It's inevitably more abstract when looking at it in a talk. But I just want to say as well that at St. Silas, we are a community of believers in God who want to support one another and love one another and support other people.

And if you're somebody who has been through something like that, you're going through a difficult time, I would hope that you would feel able to share that with us because we'd love to do what we can to help and walk with you through it, even though we can't kind of answer that in a talk.

We'd love to share and listen, but also to talk with you about the God we believe in, who we believe it's better to go through suffering with him than without him. But if we just return to the more general question for the purpose of our talk, how can a good God allow suffering?

It was 1st of September 2004, a little while ago now, that a group of armed Chechnyan separatists took more than 1,200 schoolchildren hostage at a school number one in Beslan.

And on the third day of the crisis, there was this chaotic gun battle between the hostage takers and Russian security. And in that chaos, 334 civilians were killed, including 186 children.

[3 : 39] And it had this huge effect on people all over the world. Now, John Humphreys, who was a BBC Radio 4 presenter, ran a series a couple of years later, a few years later, called Humphreys in Search of God.

And he interviewed a Christian, a Muslim, a Jewish leader, week after week, asking them questions. Now, he interviewed the Archbishop of Canterbury as the Christian representative.

Let me just read to you what he said to him. I had unquestioning belief, and over the years, it was chipped away. And now there's a gap where it previously existed.

And I suppose in the end, what chipped away at it for me, what finally destroyed it for me indeed, was the presence of so much suffering. It's the classic thing. This is hardly original. I'm very conscious of that.

It's very clichéd, but nonetheless very real. And I could not any longer accept. And we had a conversation about it, you and I, on the Today programme, Beslan. When Beslan happened, although I'd seen lots of other things as bad as, how do you make comparisons between these awful things?

[4 : 41] But nonetheless, that was, I suppose, if there were a final straw, that was probably it. So that was from the transcript of what John Humphreys said. And we can feel the power of that, can't we?

How could a good God allow things like this to happen? And of course, we don't need to look back at Beslan. We could just look at the news this week. The storm disaster in Haiti and Florida has killed many people.

We can remember the migrant crisis, the photograph of Alan Kurdi, that little two-year-old dead being cradled by a Turkish soldier on the beach. And so lots of us ask, how could a good God be working through this for anything?

Now, I've put some points on the card that I gave out. You should have been handed at the beginning inside the notice sheet. The first thing I wanted to say was that suffering isn't evidence against God.

The objection that we're dealing with goes something like this. The Christian idea of God is that he's all-powerful. The Christian idea of God is that he's all-good.

[5 : 44] But the presence of suffering in the world cannot be held together with those two things. Given suffering in the world, if God is really all-powerful, then he's not good.

Or if he's really good, he's not in control. Look, I've put a little circle on your cards. I don't know whether you can see that on your little cards that you were given, where the points are just at the bottom there.

There's a little circle. And that circle is there to represent all knowledge in the universe. Okay? That's the knowledge that the Bible claims that God has.

He made the universe out of nothing, and he knows everything about it. So what I'd like you to do, I don't know whether you've got a pen with you or a pencil. Some of you might not have.

You'll have to do this in your mind. But if you have got a pen, get it out. And I'd love you just to draw a circle inside that circle proportionately to show your knowledge, approximately.

- [6 : 46] The amount of knowledge you think you have compared to all the knowledge in the universe. So we have a kind of scale on our cards.
- Do you get that? Some of you already look like you're thinking, I'm just too cool to get involved in this kind of participation. But maybe you're doing it in your mind.
- The serious point, though, is there's a gap, isn't there? An enormous knowledge gap between us and the sort of God that we're talking about tonight.
- Given that knowledge gap, how can we say that there cannot be a good reason why a good, powerful God could allow suffering? How can we say that?
- I think that's really important. You see, God could be perfectly vindicated if there is a point to suffering, a reason why suffering is happening that means, on balance, the good that will come from it eventually outweighs the bad, no matter how awful that bad is.
- [7 : 46] And when someone says an all-powerful, all-good God cannot allow this suffering, they are assuming that there is nothing in that vast collection of knowledge out there that for us is unknown and for God is known that might make it okay for there to be suffering.
- And to say that, that in that whole enormous load of stuff, many times more than our knowledge, there can't be anything to justify this.
- That's a leap of faith, isn't it? That is a leap of faith. So suffering isn't against God, because as soon as we allow God to be big enough to be a God that we could be angry at and challenge about suffering, we also have to accept that he knows a heck of a lot of stuff that we don't know that might mean that it's good, on balance, with an eternal perspective.
- So that's the first thing. Suffering is an evidence against God. But we can go further than that. Secondly, suffering is actually evidence for God. I think it's much harder to come to terms with our reaction to suffering in the world if there isn't a God.
- Let me read you a quote from the atheist writer Richard Dawkins that gives us an opportunity just to step into the atheist worldview and then to think about what do we make of suffering if this is what we believe.
- [9 : 11] Dawkins says this, In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it nor any justice.
- The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.
- DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music. That is not how any of us think about suffering.
- See, when we see suffering in the world, instinctively, intuitively, we very powerfully feel that is not right. It's not right to see grandparents bury their grandchildren.
- It's not fair that bad things happen to those people. But on what basis can we say that anything is not right if there's no God? That's just how things are.
- [10 : 18] All we mean is that we personally don't like it because our genetic makeup and our environmental influences mean that we happen to prefer life to death and being happy to being sad.
- If there's no God, then a massacre in Homs or Rwanda is no different from a solar eclipse. It's just matter in motion. There's no difference.
- In fact, without God, just an example of that, we can't say anything is unnatural. Everything is natural. Everything started with a first cause in the universe. It's all natural.

There was an example of this a few years ago in the news. Baby P was horribly tortured by three adults until he died.

It was an awful scandal in the news. It was a political scandal. David Cameron spoke about it. Whatever you think of David Cameron, he is a believer in God.

[11 : 17] And so he frequently used the language of evil. What has happened to Baby P is an evil thing. It's a wrong thing. Nick Clegg was Deputy Prime Minister at the time.

Whatever you think about Nick Clegg, he doesn't believe in God. He was, I take it he would have been as upset as David Cameron about what happened.

What he said about it was, I can't understand it. It's not natural. So he wasn't willing. He doesn't use the categories of good and evil, to be fair to him, trying to be consistent, because lots of atheists I know would still use those categories and they are nonsense if there's no God.

But he said it's not natural. But it was natural. Because everything's natural if there's no God. He might have meant it's not normal.

But everything is natural. And the problem is that nobody can really live like that. Can they? If you are actually the victim yourself of terrible suffering, you can't just shrug it off and think, well, we're just chemicals and atoms anyway, so there's no point complaining.

[12 : 23] It's just matter in motion. What the person's done to me, I feel it's awful, but that's just my programming. Good and evil don't really exist. So I want to suggest that if you abandon belief in God because of your suffering, you actually end up finding it much harder to handle suffering in the world.

Because our questions about why has this happened are met with vacuous silence. It's not even just that there's no one to answer the question. It's a really dumb question if there's no God. So our deep sense that suffering is wrong depends on there being a normal pattern of how things should be, an ought in the universe, a value of justice that's been infringed.

And without a God, those values just don't exist. There are just some things that we've been genetically programmed not to like. So suffering, or at least our reaction to it, I'd want to say is evidence that there is a God.

The fact that we want to wrestle with a question like this suggests, well, it is possible that we're doing that just because of our genetics. But I think a better explanation is that there is a God.

And suffering happens because the world isn't the way it should be. And so because God made us in his image, we're right to feel that there's something going very wrong in the world. Suffering is evidence that there is a God.

[13 : 48] And my third point this evening is just that it's best to have God on your side. When the Christian speaker, Billy Graham in America, went to the site of the Oklahoma bombings, he was asked by the grieving family and friends as they saw him, why?

Why would a good God have allowed this to happen? And again and again, he said to them as he wept with them, I don't know. I don't know why. But then he said this, times like this will do one of two things.

They will either make us hard and bitter and angry at God, or they will make us tender and open and help us reach out in trust and faith. I pray that you will not let bitterness and poison creep into your souls, but you will turn in faith and trust in God, even if we cannot understand.

It is better to face something like this with God than without him. See what he's saying? He's saying it's better to have on your side, when you're going through a difficult time, a God who says, I made you, I love you, and I will go through this with you.

And I just want to give you three brief reasons why that is. We look back at the cause of suffering and the solution to suffering, and then look forward to the end of suffering. So first of all, the cause of suffering.

[14 : 58] The Bible tells us God made a good world. God is not responsible for suffering. Humanity is. And the reason there is suffering in the world today is that humanity has turned away from God.

Now some suffering is obviously caused by that. Some suffering is caused by that very directly, and it's less obvious. The migrant crisis, as an example, is causing awful suffering.

It is human-caused, the migrant crisis. But even when suffering isn't a direct consequence of a specific human action, what the Bible tells us is that it only takes place because as humanity turned away from God, God has put the world under a curse.

It's a broken world because it's fallen from God. And he's done that because people rebelled against him. It signals to us something's not right with the world. If God is good, maybe something's not right between us and him.

Because the only reason that the world isn't the way it should be is that we're not the way we should be. And so when we see suffering, it's supposed to show us and remind us we're part of the problem, and we need to sort out our relationship with God.

[16 : 14] Jesus himself explained this very clearly. In his time, there was a tower in a place called Siloam, and it collapsed, and 18 people were killed. And Jesus said to the people who were following him, those people weren't any worse than you.

But doesn't it just show you, you need to turn back to God. Let me read what he said. Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish.

So we need God on our side because we're part of the cause of suffering. Secondly, there's the solution to suffering. And the solution is the cross on which Jesus died.

The Bible tells us that we don't have a God who is beyond our world, looking on uncaringly at our suffering from a distance. No, it tells us of a God who came into our world and suffered for us on the cross.

So whatever you might be thinking would be the answer to why there's suffering in your life. We know what the answer can't be. And the answer can't be, it's because God doesn't care.

[17 : 24] However bad your life gets, know that God came into our world and lived a life of suffering and rejection so that he could die for us on the cross. And the reason he did that was because the world is under a curse and he bore that curse on the cross.

He took the darkness away on behalf of everyone who trusts him because it was the only way to win us back. God cares enough to have suffered for us.

And so he's worth trusting no matter how hard your life will get. It puts our complaints into perspective. I read on a blog after the Haiti earthquake a couple of years ago, there was a guy commenting on the way people were pointing the finger at God again as this earthquake happened in Haiti.

And somebody on a blog wrote this. And which God was it again? Do you mean that God who they thought was the illegitimate son of a teenage peasant girl? That God who chose to start life in an animal feeding trough and just dodged being murdered as a toddler by the government and had to become a refugee?

That one. Do you mean that God who the powers that be kept on trying to kill for being too revolutionary? Who specialized in making friends with and helping the scum? That one.

[18 : 41] Do you mean that God who had no home and hardly any possessions and whose friends betrayed or deserted him? That God who was sentenced to death as an innocent man, ripped to shreds by whips, then died by being nailed nude in public to a piece of wood?

That one. Who said he had to do it all for our sake? That one. Oh yeah, right. So when we look back at the cross, we see a God who says, trust me, I do know what it's like to suffer.

Trust me. So we need God on our side because of the cause of suffering. We need God on our side because of the solution to suffering. And finally, we need him on our side because of the end of suffering.

Jesus promised that this world will one day be put right and there won't be any suffering anymore. That comes in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, with this incredible picture of the world put right and what it will be like.

And we had it read for us. It was on the cards. Let me just read again from verses three and four. So halfway through that paragraph. This was one of Jesus' followers being given a vision of what it will be like.

[19 : 50] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, It's a great vision of tears being wiped away.

And it's a promise. In that future new creation, it will become clear to us why things had to be the way they are in our world today. It's that future hope that has held Christians onto God for centuries.

And the writer Dostoevsky said this, I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood they've shed, that it will make it not only possible to forgive, but to justify all that has happened.

So suffering is a reality in our cursed world, but God is worth trusting. Jesus Christ suffered for you on the cross to offer the solution to suffering.

He was killed so that you can know God as your father, and God promises to bring an end to suffering one day, a hope worth dying for, of a better future.

[21 : 33] So in the meantime, we're still going to have times when, with our finite knowledge, we're going to wonder why God could possibly see good and be working good in what we're going through.

But those feelings don't disprove God. I'm arguing they're evidence for God, and it's better to go through those times with God than without Him. Thank you. Thank you.