

UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING AND ILLNESS

The presence of illness and suffering in the world is one of the most common problems people throw at us when we try to present the gospel to them. *Why should we believe in a God who allows or causes so much suffering?* Think of all the earthquakes, floods and hurricanes we've had in recent years. Think of the pain, fear and devastation they cause. Think of this being compounded by the despair, disease and suffering that is endemic afterwards. What kind of God is it that is LORD of a world like this?

And this is the problem with illness and suffering - they call into question God's character. They question his power, his goodness and his justice.

- **GOD'S POWER:** If God is unable to stop suffering he is not all-powerful, and frankly he's not much of a God.
- **GOD'S GOODNESS:** If God is able but unwilling to stop suffering he is not good, and who wants to believe in a vicious or malevolent God.
- **GOD'S JUSTICE:** Assuming that God is willing and able to stop illness and suffering, why then is it still here - and in particular why does it affect the innocent? We have no objections to the Hitlers and Bin Ladens of this world suffering, but children with leukaemia or juvenile arthritis, or the young mother with advanced, incurable breast cancer - these things we object to. These things offend our sense of justice and they cause us to question God's sense of justice.

Well one of the underlying problems is that people have jumped to the wrong conclusions about the presence of illness and suffering in this world. They think it is God's punishment, here and now, on the wicked - which is why these people have such a problem with God when they see innocent people in real suffering.

The Cause of Illness and Suffering

The first thing to note is that illness and suffering were not a part of God's original creation. God's repeated blessing upon his creatures in Genesis 1 and 2 was, *to be fruitful and to multiply*; and again and again we read that God looked upon his creation, the work of his hands, and saw that it was good.

There was no suffering and no illness, only blessings and good things. So where did they come from?

We have said that the presence of illness and suffering in this world calls into question God's character. Well Genesis 3 tells us that illness and suffering are present in the world *because* Adam and Eve questioned God's character (read Genesis 3:1-7). Adam and Eve cast aspersions on God's character by doubting *his power, his goodness and his justice*.

- **God's Power:** They doubted God's power to fulfil his promise that the consequence of eating the forbidden fruit was death. In verses 4-6 we see how quick they were to believe that God's words were a lie and instead to believe that eating the forbidden fruit would make them like God, therefore placing them outside his power to fulfil his promises.

- **God's Goodness:** They doubted the goodness of God in stopping them from eating this fruit. They were quick to believe that he was a party pooper bent on denying them good things and stopping them from realising their true potential.
- **God's Justice:** They doubted that God's justice would be carried out. They did not believe that God would carry out his punishment for disobedience (verses 4-6).

God, however, was faithful to his promises - as Genesis chapter 5 testifies. Adam and all his descendants after him died. God also made the process of living tough, as the curses in Genesis 3:16-19 testify. God's good creation is subject to pain and suffering as the promised and direct result of mankind's disobedience - his rebellion against God. And this is the world we now live in - a world marred and characterised by sin, in which such evils as illness and suffering abound, and our characters without exception bear the stamp of rebellion against God.

Illness isn't caused by our individual wickedness, although because of our distorted natures we often do things that can predictably cause illness and suffering in ourselves and other people. Promiscuity puts you more at risk of STDs; the lifestyle that tends to be adopted by hard drug users puts them at greater risk of HIV and hepatitis; stress, anger and tension amongst family members can put you at risk of hypertension, stroke or a heart attack. However, the hard-nosed business man who sat in the 1st class section of the train in the Paddington rail crash and sustained 60% burns was no worse a sinner, and no more wicked than the charity worker who was standing in the corridor towards the back of the train and escaped with only minor cuts and grazes. This wasn't God's judgment on them as individuals - that is yet to come - it is simply the product of having mucked up God's world.

So much for the origins of illness and suffering, but what has God done about it, and how has he vindicated his character?

- **GOD'S GOODNESS:** Revelation 21:1-4 tells us of God's goal for his creation and clearly proclaims his willingness to put a stop to illness and suffering. God is good. There is a future and illness and suffering have no part in it.
- **GOD'S POWER:** The promise of Revelation 21 is all very well, but this is a future event - how do we know God has the power to rid the world of sickness? Well Mark 1:40-41 is just one occasion where Jesus confirms both his willingness and his power to heal sickness. In fact time and time again in his ministry Jesus demonstrated God's power to heal sickness and suffering, but more than that, this incident in Mark 1 is also declaring Jesus' power and willingness to deal with the root *cause* of sickness in the world - his power and willingness to deal with sin, which of course he did on the cross.
- **GOD'S JUSTICE:** Jesus submitted his whole life to God's rule and to doing God's work, yet on the cross he willingly took upon himself God's anger that was directed towards us for our rebellion against him. Jesus died for our sin, but he didn't deserve to die and so death had no hold over him. God raised him to life, having broken the power of sin and death for those of us who trust in him. And this is God's justice - the fact that God does not give us what we deserve. He does not reject us the way we rejected him, and abandon us to face the consequences of our sin, to face eternal

death and suffering, but has sent Jesus into the world. By trusting in Jesus' death we can be certain that when this earth passes away we will be raised up to eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth. We will live with God in that heavenly city and there will be no more sin and there will be no more illness and suffering.

Dealing with the presence of suffering in the world today

So having got the bigger picture of illness and suffering in perspective how do we as Christians deal with their daily occurrence in the world?

Our biggest problem comes from thinking that Jesus' death should be fully effective now; that because Jesus, on the cross, dealt with the problem of sin, those of us who trust in him should be free from any kind of association with it *in the here and now*.

Christians with this perspective on the cross will take you to such passages as James 5:15-16 which says, *the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well* and, *the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective*. They will tell you that we should expect to be healed of our physical sicknesses now if we only ask God. But what do we say if I pray for healing for myself or somebody else and nothing happens? Does this mean I don't actually have any faith or have somehow missed out on being made righteous - or has God lied. Or if neither of these is true how do I reconcile to myself a God who apparently wants me to be sick and suffer even after I have acknowledged my sin and accepted that Jesus died for it?

Similarly, one could be tempted to read John 14:12 in this way, which says, *anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father*. Well what has Jesus been doing? He's been healing the sick, casting out demons and raising the dead. So if I have faith in Jesus, is this what I should be doing? What if I can't? I haven't been present at that many successful resuscitations - actually I haven't been present at any. But I hope this is due to the fact that I have spent my career to date in cardiac surgery, orthopaedics and rheumatology, and not because my technique is no good or because I have no faith or not enough faith. And what about the greater things we're supposed to be able to do? Even if I could be present at a successful resuscitation, I am fairly certain I will never see anyone brought back from the dead after they've been in the morgue for 4 days (see John 11). So how are we even to match what Jesus did, let alone do greater things?

There are also Christians who would strongly assert that because healing signs and wonders were an integral part of the dawning of Jesus' Kingdom, so they should be an integral part of the proclamation of Jesus' Kingdom. Don Carson in his book *How long O Lord* has some helpful insights into the problems with these kinds of theologies. He says...

[This] framework is just not large enough. [It] tries to establish a theology of healing and power encounter without a theology of suffering; [it] has a theology of victory without an adequate theology of the cross; [it] has a theology of life without a proper reflection on the place of death. [It] sees the triumph of the kingdom when sickness is overthrown, and cannot see the triumph of the kingdom when people are transformed in the midst of sickness. [It] discusses God's power, but rarely wrestles with God's predilection for displaying his power in the context of continuing weakness. [p. 124]

So how does God's kingdom triumph in the midst of sickness and suffering? Well it triumphs when people turn from their sinful ways and become members of God's Kingdom. When non Christians are sick and suffering and ask 'Why me?', they often look to God for their answers. Sometimes there is no special answer, but sometimes the answer comes back - so that you may come to me and find me. God's Kingdom triumphs now as Christians become more Christ like and firmer in their faith. As Paul says in Romans 5:3-5, *we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us.* In our weakness we turn to God for strength.

Faith - trusting in Jesus - is like a muscle; the more it is used the more it grows and the stronger it becomes, and it is so often when we are sick and suffering that we cry out to Jesus - that we turn back to him, that we depend on him, that we grow to know him better and grow to be more like him. God's Kingdom triumphs in the midst of sickness and suffering because it proclaims the true character of God. He is no stranger to our sufferings - but willingly embraced them himself. He is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who humbled himself unto suffering and death - who rose victorious and who now sends *us* into the world to proclaim the message of his comfort.

God's response to suffering, with all his power, goodness and justice is not to rid the world of suffering now. That is not compatible with the primary cause of suffering in the world (our rejection of God) and with God's character to which he must be true. God responds to suffering by experiencing it with us and by making it possible for us to choose a future with no more pain and suffering. He imposes nothing upon us, but shows us mercy, understanding and offers us a more glorious future than we deserve or can imagine.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does the presence of suffering in the world make it so hard for people to believe in God?
2. What misconceptions do such beliefs embody about
 - a) God?
 - b) Mankind?
3. Read Genesis 3:1-7. What do these verses tell us about the cause of suffering?
4. How does God's Kingdom triumph
 - a) In the relief of suffering and illness?
 - b) In the presence of suffering and illness?