

# Pain and suffering: a biblical perspective

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Dr. Dvorak Philosophy of Religion November 5, 2004 Pain and Suffering: A Biblical Perspective There are fundamental flaws with regards to pain and suffering and how religion attempts to defines its inception. The Quran states that " True, there is Pain and suffering at the terminal end of an illness, but we believe there is reward from God for those who patiently persevere in suffering" (39: 10 and 31: 17, par. 2). On two occasions, according to the Gospels, Jesus had the opportunity to explain why tragedy strikes (John 9: 1-3; Luke 13: 1-5 REB). Why do some people suffer, while others go free? Both times He turned the discussion in another direction. The important thing, He tells us, is not the reason for suffering, but our response to suffering. It's not why we suffer but what we do when suffering comes. The experience of suffering presents us with a number of perplexing problems. For most of humankind's history, disease and death was a part of everyday experience. People faced the pain life brought, did their best to cope with it and moved on. Ironically the more effective our attempts have become to resist disease and death, the more complex they seem to become. Now people suffer much less in life than they have in the past, yet we are more upset by it now than people were before. The less we suffer the more it bothers us. It's as though suffering takes us by surprise. This brings us to a paradox that exposes the different effects that suffering has on religion. On one hand, suffering poses a tremendous challenge to faith. J. L. Mackie explained the problem quite succinctly when he wrote" In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists" (Kessler 226). Philosophers and theologians regard it as the greatest challenge to religious belief that if two of these statements were true then the third could certainly

not be true. William Rowe says there's, " A rational support for atheism", since theists cannot reconcile or rationalize the immense pain and suffering in the world that was of a Perfect Being's making (Kessler 246). Meanwhile Bruce Reichenbach searches for the karmic answer to universal justice, pain and suffering, as well as health and happiness. Like so many mysteries of life there seems to be neither consensus nor uniformity. The greatest contradictory aspect that suffering presents is the apparent discrepancy between the power of God and the realities of life. If God is all-powerful, why does anyone suffer? An omnipotent being has power to create any kind of world and change anything in the world instantaneously. Wouldn't such a being eliminate suffering, or prevent it, or at least limit it? Historically, people have responded to this problem in two principal ways. One is to move suffering outside God's will, to maintain that God is not responsible for suffering. The most popular version of this approach appeals to free will. Kwame Gyekye wrote that, " the other source of evil, according to Akan thought, is human will" (Kessler 236). God endowed creatures with the capacity to obey or to disobey. We must have disobeyed, and the world now suffers the consequences. It was human rebellion that ultimately accounts for the sorrows of the world. God did not cause it or will it. It was never God's plan that we suffer. The contrasting response to the problem of evil is to place suffering inside God's will. The world may appear to be out of control but God is nevertheless completely in charge of creation. Everything that has happened and will happen has had a place in the master plan. While we may not understand why God has done these things we can be sure that it is all for the best. Everything we go through, even the darkest chapters of our

lives is just what we need. God uses this painful process to develop our characters and bring us to moral perfection. In time, we will see that God's will is perfect. Each of these responses generates a long list of questions. Some people can't understand how creatures that were perfect at the moment of creation could ever rebel against their Maker. Others wonder why an All-Powerful Creator couldn't create beings that are free, but always use their freedom to do the right thing. This train of thought is pure fallacy. I can't see how humans can be free to choose while their choices are between good and more good. As for the other response, the idea that everything happens for the best seems to be contradicted by our experience. The soul-making or character development God is bringing about doesn't appear equitable. Is it really necessary for us to suffer this much, some much more than others, in order to learn the lessons we need to learn? History's horrendous evils such as those described by Elie Wiesel and his time at Auschwitz hardly seem to justify whatever lessons we learn from them if we learn any (Kessler 213). There are responses to these questions and further questions about these responses, and so on, in an endless cycle of philosophical point-counterpoint. I admit that I find it impossible to speak of these topics in the third person but this serves an important purpose. The value in showing us the meaning of suffering is limited and serves little purpose to those who actually are suffering. Each exposition gets us part of the way down the road, but none of them go the distance nor do they provide a satisfying solution to the problem of evil. The obstacle that brings even the best theist to a halt is physical evil. Tornadoes, cancer, floods, old age all seem to be a part of the natural world, a world that an all knowing,

all-powerful, wholly good God created. In addressing this natural world of pain many look to Christianity for answers. According to the Gospels, Jesus approached the cross with fear and apprehension. During the last night of His life, He asked His closest friends to watch with Him, and He fervently prayed that God would spare Him. He endured the agony of the cross. His cry of desolation, " My God, why have you forsaken me", reveals the depths of anguish to which He sank (Matthew 27: 46 REB). With His resurrection, of course, Jesus broke the power of death, reversed the condemnation of the cross, and reunited with the Father. The cross points to the inevitability of suffering in this world. Jesus did not avoid suffering, and neither can we. At the same time, Jesus' anguish confirms our basic intuition that suffering is wrong. There is a tragic abnormality to our existence. We know that we are susceptible to suffering and death. We also sense that we were not meant for them. If the cross reminds us that suffering is unavoidable, the resurrection assures us that suffering will come to an end. Jesus could not avoid the cross, but He was not imprisoned by it either. The empty tomb is a Christian's assurance that suffering is temporary. From the perspective of Christian hope, the time will come when suffering will be a thing of the past. There are challenges in trying to make sense of pain and suffering. There is never more need for guidance on enduring pain and suffering than when the end of life approaches. We normally turn to religion to assist us in this task but religion doesn't offer very good advice on the subject. If religion is a resource to sufferers we need to clarify its role and acknowledge its limitations. Although we often speak of," the meaning of pain and suffering", its reason for existence is something religion cannot provide. The real

concern of religion shouldn't be suffering it should be the sufferer. Pain and suffering have little meaning in themselves, but we can find meaning in our sufferings. Works Cited Islam-USA. The Quran. 1996. 3 Nov. 2004 Kessler, Gary E. Philosophy of Religion: Toward a Global Perspective. California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999. The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with Apocrypha. Eds. Suggs, M. Jack, Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, James R. Mueller. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.