

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Alan Hayward

If God really loves his children
why does he allow them to suffer?

Whenever I hear the word “suffering” it makes me think of Marjorie Lawson.*

[* All the people named in this booklet are real, but their names have been disguised.]

She is not the only one of my friends who has suffered.

- There is George Evans, who is both crippled and blind.
- Or Hans Schlosser who was tortured by the Nazis in a concentration camp.
- Or the two children Michael and Elizabeth, who lost both their parents in a car crash.
- Or Frank and Violet Peters, whose only child is incurably insane.

But of all the sufferers I have ever met, I always think first of Marjorie Lawson. It is not that she has suffered more than the others. It is because she is the one who has helped me to find an answer to that terribly difficult question — why does God allow His children to suffer?

Marjorie Knows the Answer

Marjorie has spent the last ten years of her life in one small room, on the top floor of a great grey tenement in a northern city. Afflicted by a painful and crippling disease, she hardly ever moves outside her tiny home. But although she is never free from pain, Marjorie never wonders why God allows suffering. The Bible is her constant companion; and she knows that the Bible holds the key to the problem of suffering.

Later on we must come back to Marjorie Lawson in her little home. But first of all we must start to piece together the Bible's solution.

We shall find that the answer is bound up with the whole history of the human race. Part of the answer lies in the remote past. Part belongs right here in the present. And part of it is concerned with the future, with the world of tomorrow.

When we have put these three aspects together — the past, the present and the future — we shall, like Marjorie, understand why people have to suffer.

The Past

There is only one way to understand the story of Eden. Get out your own Bible and read the first three chapters of Genesis for yourself. You will be surprised to discover that some very common beliefs about the Garden of Eden are not in the Bible at all. You will find, for instance, that man's first sin had nothing to do with an apple, and nothing to do with sex.

Instead you will find a simple account of how the first man was given freedom of action, and a chance to use his freedom wisely. The world he lived in was described as "very good", and he had the opportunity to live an exceedingly happy life. But Adam misused his opportunity; he chose to disobey God. By this choice he started a sort of habit, the habit of sinning, which has held the human race in its grip ever since.

God told the first human pair that two consequences would follow from their sin. First, that they and their children would experience "sorrow" — which in modern English we would call "suffering" (Genesis 3: 16, 18). And secondly, that they must suffer death—the greatest and most final form of suffering there is (Genesis 3: 19).

Thus Genesis tells us how suffering came into the world, because the first man made a foolish choice. Being Adam's children we inherit his sinful tendencies. And so we too must suffer, and we too must die.

But this raises a very important question. If God is all-wise. He must have known from the beginning what was going to happen. Why then did He give us so much freedom in the first place? Why did He not make us so that we could not sin? Why does He not prevent us from doing harm, and making each other suffer?

The Nature of Love

The answer to this is really quite simple. The New Testament tells us that "*God is love*" (1 John 4: 8). Because of this, love is the most important thing in the world. God's great object in creating men and women was to give them the opportunity to return His love.

That is why God simply had to give us what we call a "free will". For by its very nature, love is a voluntary thing. Even God's almighty power cannot make men and women love Him.

The caveman is an example of what power can and cannot do. He can seize his bride by the hair and drag her away captive. He can compel her to be his wife. But he cannot compel her to love him.

We all know that it is worse than useless to try and force people to love us. Unless it comes freely and willingly, there can be no such thing as love.

And God Himself is a God of love. He did not want a race of man-sized puppets

dancing on strings. He wanted people who could really love Him, of their own choice. So He gave us free will.

But instead of choosing to love, we choose all too often, to hate. *“If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments”* said Jesus (John 14: 15, Revised Version). By breaking God’s commandments, we show that in our hearts we do not really love Him. By giving way to the hatred in their hearts, many men inflict terrible trouble upon their fellows.

People often forget this when they talk as if God were responsible for all the suffering in the world. God certainly created illness and death. But man invented the rack and the lash, the concentration camp and the gas chamber, the rocket and the hydrogen bomb. It should make us feel very humble when we remember how much suffering in the world is man-made.

God Shows Mercy

It was tragic that mankind chose the path of disobedience, the way of hatred instead of the way of love. But God had foreseen that this would happen. He was ready with a plan to bring great good out of this disaster. And in this plan, suffering plays a very important part.

The first thing that He did was to sentence the whole sinful race to death. (We shall see the reason for this shortly, when we come to consider what death really is). But not to immediate death; He mercifully allows us to live a while, before we suffer the just penalty of sin.

But His mercy did not stop there. He went further, and provided a way of salvation, so that those people who really want to love Him might learn to do so.

As later chapters of the Bible show, He made a wonderful offer. “Learn to love and obey Me”, He said, in effect, “and you shall be raised from the dead to live for ever.”

The Meaning of Death

In every engineering works there is an inspection department. Here the manufactured parts are measured, to see if they are the correct size and shape. Those that fail to pass the test are classed as scrap, and find their way back to the smelting furnace, where they finally cease to exist.

Death serves the same sort of purpose for human “rejects”. Those that fail to measure up to God’s requirements are sentenced to eternal death—which simply means that they cease to exist. When machine parts are found to be no use, they are destroyed; and when men and women show that they are no use to God, He blots them out of existence too.

This simple, sensible teaching is found throughout the Bible.

Here are just a few examples:

“The LORD preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.” (Psalm 145: 20).

“Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself” (Proverbs 13: 13).

“inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians -1: 8, 9).

Even the word “hell” in the Bible is actually a poetical name for “the grave”, or for “total destruction”. As Jesus put it, hell is a place where God destroys both soul and body (Matthew 10: 28).

It would be practically impossible to find an answer to the problem of suffering, if the wicked were going to suffer agonies for ever and ever in hell. Happily there is no reason whatever to think this. It is a pagan belief, not taught in the Bible, and we need not concern ourselves any further with it.

Summing Up

It will be useful at this point to sum up what we have learnt from our look at the past, before we go on to examine the present.

1. God gave man free will, so that he would have the opportunity to love.
2. Man chose hatred rather than love, thus bringing suffering (much of which is man-made) into the world.
3. Death puts an end to both sin and suffering. It is God’s way of wiping out of existence those who do not choose to love Him.
4. But there is a hope of life after death for those who do try to love God. (We shall see more of this later on.)

The Present

We have seen the reason for death, and we have seen that a large part of the world’s suffering is man-made. But this still leaves a great deal of suffering for which God is undoubtedly responsible. We must now take a close look at the present day, to find a reason for this.

Briefly, this is what we find. Suffering actually serves an extremely useful purpose. The world would be worse off, not better off, if there were no suffering in it.

If this statement strikes you as almost unbelievable, please be patient. Wait until you have read a few more pages before you dismiss it out of hand. There is more to be said in support of it than you might think.

Pain

To begin with, take the subject of pain. Pain is not the only form of suffering, but it is the most obvious. And it is not too difficult to see how useful pain is to mankind.

The story of George Mackay, a nine year old American boy, illustrates this. George's mother brought him to the famous John Hopkins medical school in Baltimore, one November day in 1937. In most respects he was a normal healthy boy, with more than average intelligence. But in one particular way he was different from any boy that you are ever likely to meet: he was born without any sense of pain whatever!

You may be tempted to think that George was a very lucky lad, and to wonder why, if God could make one boy entirely free from pain. He could not make the rest of the world like it too. But wait. There is another side to the story. "Scars", the examining doctor wrote in his report, "were found on almost every part of the body."

There was one huge scar on his back, where George once sat on a heater, and, because he felt nothing, had not moved until his flesh was burnt almost to the bone. He was partly blind in one eye, where sand had one day worked its way in, and he had never noticed it until permanent damage had been done. His left foot was permanently deformed, where he had broken a bone and then walked about on it for months before the damage was spotted by his parents. Both hands had been so badly cut that he would never again be able to straighten his fingers. Pain acts as a danger signal for the rest of us, but poor George had nothing to warn him when his body was being injured.

Which would you rather have for a son? A normal boy, who hurts himself, and cries, and gets over it— and takes more care next time? Or a carefree little George, with his total freedom from pain—and his multiple deformities?

Character

The story of George shows how necessary pain is if a child's body is to develop into that of a normal, healthy adult. But God is even more concerned with the growth of people's characters than He is of their bodies. And suffering also plays an important part in the development of character.

This does not mean, of course, that every time you have toothache you grow a little more virtuous. It would obviously be wrong to think that the best people in the world are those who have suffered the most. What it does mean—and this is a very important point —is that strong characters can only be developed in a world where suffering is always present.

Think how important manure is in agriculture. Yet nobody likes handling the unpleasant stuff. Children often think that the garden would be a far nicer place if only Dad wouldn't keep manuring it.

But Dad, of course, knows best. The finest flowers grow in well manured soil. Similarly the fine flower of human character blooms best in a world that has been liberally sprinkled with tragedy.

If there were no such thing as suffering, there would also be no such thing as courage, or compassion. If nobody ever fell among thieves, there would be no Good Samaritans in the world.

Sometimes it is men who have suffered greatly who are the first to recognise the truth of this.

The Apostle Paul was such a man. Acts 14: 19 tells how a mob set upon him, stoned him, and left him for dead. He survived this terrible ordeal, and not long afterwards he returned to the very town where it happened. There he told disciples “that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14: 22).

Marjorie Explains

When Paul spoke of tribulation, he obviously knew what he was talking about. Yet perhaps the very fact, that he was a Bible character makes him rather remote. It is not easy to realise that these are the words of a real human being like ourselves.

But there is no such difficulty about the words of Marjorie Lawson. She is a British citizen, still very much alive as these words are written. It was not so very long ago, when lying on her sickbed, she startled me by remarking, “Do you know, I often thank God for treating me like this!”

When I asked her what she meant, she told me a little about her past. “Twenty years ago”, she said, “I was a typical, healthy young woman. I was too busy enjoying life to have any time for God. Besides, I felt that I had no need of Him. I could get along quite well on my own.”

“Then came the day when God decided to show me whether I needed Him or not. He put me here, on my back. For a few years I was miserable. All the joy had gone out of my life and I could see no point in going on living.”

“That’s how I was when Mrs. Knight came to see me, with a Bible in her handbag. In the old days, when people talked about religion, I used to shut my ears. But this time I was prepared to listen. And that’s how I came to hear about the offer of a place in God’s Kingdom.”

She raised herself up a little in her bed, and spoke with great emphasis.

“Now I know that these are the best days of my life. If you offered to take me out of this bed, free from pain, and put me back where I was twenty years ago, I just wouldn’t thank you. Without this pain, I should never have come to accept God’s Way of Life. He knew that I needed this illness, and so I can only thank Him for the way that He has

shaped my life.”

Why the Innocent Suffer

It is easy to see a reason for Marjorie Lawson’s sufferings. But there are many people whose sufferings appear to serve no useful purpose at all. The native in central Africa who has never heard of Jesus Christ, but is mauled by a lion and dies after weeks of agony; the baby in an English village who dies when his pram is struck by lightning in an unexpected storm. They are not being prepared for God’s kingdom by their suffering so why, we wonder, does God let them suffer?

Perhaps the best way to answer that question is to ask another one. Just suppose that God did decide to protect such people from suffering, and to allow nobody but Christians to suffer; what would the result be?

Obviously there would be such a strong incentive to remain an unbeliever that hardly anybody would ever become a Christian!

So God has adopted a more practical scheme. He has created a world subject to certain natural laws, where a measure of suffering is bound to come to everyone, sooner or later. We live in a world where, as Solomon puts it:

“time and chance happen to them all. . . . so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.” (Ecclesiastes 9: 11, 12).

Think of Jesus

The problem of suffering is most likely to worry us when we ourselves are in great distress. At such times a very helpful Bible passage is Hebrews 12: 1-13. It is too long to quote here in full, but it is worth reading, several times over, in your own Bible. It hinges about verse 3 which says:

“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” In other words, whenever we feel sorry for ourselves we should think about Jesus. He suffered dreadfully, very much more than we are ever likely to suffer. Yet he accepted it willingly, without complaint. He knew that there was a purpose in it. As it says a little earlier in the same epistle, he *“learned obedience by the things which he suffered”* (Hebrews 5: 8).

If only we can accept this advice and think about Jesus, we shall find our own sufferings much easier to bear. People often say, in their distress, “But why should all this happen to me? I have never done anyone any harm. I am not a wicked person. Why should I have to suffer so much, while the wicked get off scot free?”

It is strange to think that Jesus, the only man in all history who might have been excused for talking like that, never did so. He, alone among mankind, could truly have

said, “I have never done any harm”. Yet he never once asked, “Why should all this happen to me?”

“Consider him”, advises the Bible. If we think how the righteous Jesus was willing to accept such terrible suffering, we shall never want to feel indignant about our own troubles.

Summing Up Again

Before we turn to the third part of our subject, the future, we must take stock once more. This is what we have learnt from a careful look at the present world:

1. Pain serves a very useful purpose. Without it we could not develop healthy bodies;
2. Similarly, suffering is of value to us. In a world free from suffering we could never develop strong characters;
3. Our own sufferings become much easier to bear if we think about someone else’s—especially those of Jesus.

The Future

A small boy was walking with his father past a building site. He looked at it with a puzzled expression then turned to his father.

“Hey, Dad, is that the new town hall going up there?”

“Yes, that’s it my boy”.

“Well I don’t think much of it. What a mess it looks! Piles of sand, stacks of bricks, concrete mixers, lorries and wheelbarrows all mixed up together. And look at that ugly scaffolding all over the outside. It looks to me as if the man in charge doesn’t know his job”.

The father chuckled.

“You’re in too much of a hurry. You must wait until next year before you decide whether the architect is any, good. All that ugly stuff will have done its job then, and it will be cleared away. You can’t judge the building until it is finished”.

“But surely, dad, there must be some way of seeing what the finished building will look like?”

“Well, yes, there is, but you won’t be able to see it here. You’ll need to go down High Street to the public library. There’s a large picture hanging on the wall there, entitled ‘Artist’s Impression of the New Town Hall. That will give you a pretty good idea of what’s coming.”

Preview of God's Kingdom

People who cannot imagine why God allows so much suffering in the world are like that small boy. They fail to realise that pain and death are only like the scaffolding and building materials. These things are here for a time until their purpose has been served, and then God will do away with them.

The Bible explains that God is planning a glorious future for the world. It gives us a kind of "Artist's Impression" of what this world will be like when God's work with it is complete. It tells us how Jesus is coming back again, to set up God's own Kingdom here on earth. In that Kingdom the faithful followers of Jesus will be given everlasting life, and they will serve him for ever in a perfect world.

At present suffering is needed in the world, whilst God is developing the characters of those men and women who want to be in His Kingdom. But when enough characters of the right type have been formed, there will be no more need of suffering. Then God will make big changes in the world. In the final stage of the Kingdom there will be no pain, no suffering, no sin, and no death.

In that day, when all these temporary things have been cleared away, there will be no doubt that the Architect of the Universe has been building wisely.

Marjorie's Favourite Chapter

Marjorie Lawson is never free from pain, but on some days she suffers more than others. I called to see her once on one of her off days, and she was obviously relieved when I said that I would not stop long.

"But before you go", she asked, "would you read my favourite chapter for me?"

I asked her what it was, and she told me— Isaiah 35. "I might have known", I said to myself as I found the place in my Bible, "that it would be a chapter about the Kingdom."

She listened expectantly as I began to read.

"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come . . . and save you.'"

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert"

"the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall

obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

I said goodbye, and walked slowly down three flights of echoing stone stairs to the street. Behind me lay Marjorie, with her pain and her Bible. But she was stronger now than when I had gone in. While I read to her, a tranquil expression had lit up her face. The furrows of constant pain were no longer so noticeable. Marjorie was thinking of the dawn of God’s new age, and she was well content.

Three Crosses on Calvary

Three crosses stood on the hill of Calvary. Three men hung there, dying. The Lord Jesus Christ in the centre, and on either side a condemned thief.

They were face to face with the problem of suffering in its most intense form—death by torture. It was too much for the two thieves. They began to curse Jesus.

When people are in trouble nowadays, they say, “If there really is a God, why doesn’t He put a stop to all the suffering in the world?” The thieves said something very similar— *“If you really are Christ, then save yourself and us too!”* (See Matthew 27: 44; Luke 23: 39).

After a while, one of the thieves became silent. At last he turned and rebuked the other thief, who was still cursing at Jesus.

“Have you no fear of God? You are under the same sentence as he. For us it is plain justice; we are paying the price for our misdeeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23: 40, 41, New English Bible). Then he turned to Jesus, and pleaded, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”*.

And Jesus promised him that he would (Luke 23: 42, 43).

We Are There, Too

Those two thieves form a parable of the whole human race. We are all represented there, on Calvary. We too are all suffering, dying people, and, as the thief said, “For us it is plain justice”. We are condemned sinners, who deserve to die.

Like the two thieves, we all start off as God’s enemies. In our early years the problem of suffering is too much for us, as it was for the thieves. We complain about our pains, and think that God has been unfair to us.

But after a while the problem of suffering sorts us into two different groups, just as it distinguishes between the two thieves.

The first thief represents those who never learn any better. They go all through life asking, “Why does not God deliver me from my suffering?” Like the first thief they die in their ignorance, with no promise of a future life.

The other thief stands for all those who come to accept the problem of suffering, and its answer in Jesus Christ. They come to see that God knows best; that He is wise and just and loving in the way He directs our lives. They learn that this present world of suffering is only temporary, a training ground for the Kingdom to come. Like the wise thief they cease to be preoccupied with their present troubles, and concentrate on asking, “Thy Kingdom come. Remember me when Thou comest!”

These are the people who die with the promise of a place in God’s Kingdom. They are the ones mentioned in this New Testament vision of the future Kingdom:

“these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.”

“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water.”

“And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7: 14-17).

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