

If God is good, why is there so much suffering?

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When we asked for feedback on what topics people most wanted to discuss in this group, by far the most popular was:

“Science, suffering and God.

How does our understanding of science and our understanding of God come together in the face of issues like natural disasters and genetic diseases?”

For many, the question of suffering is the biggest barrier to believing in God or at least to believing that God is in any sense “good”.

We’re all too well aware – if only through our TV screens – of the effects of droughts, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and all kinds of diseases.

So if there is a God who thought up this Universe, is it not a distant, capricious, uncaring God?

And even if this doesn’t bother us as a philosophical problem.

It comes into sharp focus when we come face-to-face with personal suffering.

When it’s us or a loved one who has to cope

with a terminal illness,

or a life-changing accident,

or a mental breakdown.

When we cry out “why should this happen to me?”

I don’t claim to be an expert in suffering.

I have absolutely no desire to become an expert in suffering.

I don’t have all the answers.

But over the next few minutes, I’ll work through some key questions.

To provoke thought and discussion.

The three key questions are:

(1) “Why do bad things happen?”

(2) “If there’s a God, why doesn’t God stop bad things happening?” and

(3) “When bad things happen to me, is there a God I can turn to?”

So, first question, “Why do bad things happen?”

Now, it’s pretty obvious that a great deal of human suffering is caused by other humans.

It’s people who bully, abuse, torture, maim and kill; who get into fights and start wars.

Yet people are also capable of loving and caring and of extraordinary acts of altruism.

And it’s not just that some people are bad and some people are good.

Each one of us can behave badly and each one of us can behave well.

We all make moral choices.

We have what might be called “free will”.

Which doesn’t mean we can do absolutely anything we like.

But does mean we have a measure of responsibility for our actions.

And, quite simply, you can’t have a world in which people can choose to do right.

If they can’t also choose to do wrong.

A great deal of suffering is due to people behaving badly.
But what really concerns us is the suffering that isn't so obviously man-made.

Natural disasters; diseases...

Of course, these things are often compounded by human folly.

Famine exacerbated by political manouvering.

Earthquakes wreaking unnecessary destruction because of shoddy construction.

Disease left unchecked because of unfair distribution of resources.

But, nevertheless, bad things seem to be part of the make-up of the universe we live in.
So, if there's a God who thought up the Universe, isn't that God responsible?

This is where science helps, at least at one level.

Helps give understanding.

And helps provide solutions.

Science, which is a process for learning about the universe we inhabit,
helps us see the bigger picture of how our world works.

Helps us see events in the context of the processes that make this world habitable.

That make our physical existence possible.

Volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis

are linked to the dynamic geological processes that renew the earth;

linked to the movement of tectonic plates that provide the ores, that yield the metals
that enable us to till the ground and to build civilisations.

They're integral to this planet's workings, without which we couldn't exist.

They only become "disasters" when we happen to be in the way.

Storm and sunshine, flood and drought,

are manifestations of the dynamic climate systems that refresh the earth.
that make the ground fertile, that give growth.

The spin of the earth, the tilt of the earth, the pull of the moon,

the cycle of water flow, evaporation and precipitation,

bring us days and seasons, times for regeneration and times for harvest.

We need the variety and the variability.

They only become "disasters" when they take us by surprise.

Genetic variation reinforces our individuality,

and enables our species to adapt to changing environments.

But the processes that enable cells to mutate and adapt,

also enable cells to mutate and become malignant.

Pain, death and decay are unavoidable and necessary in the world as it is.

Pain, even though it causes suffering when extreme or prolonged,

is, first and foremost, an essential warning system to stop us damaging ourselves.

Just ask a leprosy patient about the dangers of feeling no pain.

Death – physical death – is the inevitable end for finite bodies.

Without death, this planet would soon run out of space and resources.

Decay feeds new life, recirculates essential elements.

Science helps us see the bigger picture of how our world works.
Helps us see that in this world, we can't have the good without the bad.
Helps us understand the marvellous, interwoven complexity of life.
And science helps provide at least partial solutions.
Ways to monitor and to some extent predict the course of natural events.
Ways to minimize the impact of events when they occur.
Science drives technology which helps us
build things that won't fall down when earthquakes hit;
control water distribution, so barren lands can flourish.
Science informs medicine, so
broken bodies can be mended;
diseases can be treated.

And for the scientist who believes in God:
The fascinating intricacy of life on this planet,
demonstrates the awesome wonder of the One who thought it all up.
The fact we have it in our power to do so much to reduce suffering,
is something to praise and thank God for.
And if we insist on building nuclear power plants near fault lines, or houses on flood plains,
if we refuse to share resources and won't apply our skills fairly,
then we can't blame God for that.

So, "Why do bad things happen?"
For the world as it is, we can't have good things, without some bad things.

But why is the world as it is?
That brings us to our second question:
"If there's a God, why doesn't God stop bad things happening?"

Well, what exactly do we want God to do?

Perhaps God should have made a completely different kind of world in the first place.
Well, if we're willing to believe the Bible, it suggests God did.

But He gave us a choice about which kind of world we wish to inhabit.

One in which we do what God likes.

Or one in which we do what we like.

It's expressed in a story of a man and a woman and a snake in a garden.

Now, people disagree about exactly how to interpret the details of that story,
but that needn't concern us now.

What's important here is that Adam – whoever, whatever and wherever Adam was –
truly represents us.

In the sense that: put any of us in the same position, we would make the same decision.

The suggestion is that world is as it is, because that's the kind of world we've chosen.

So, given the mess the world is, and the mess we continue to make of it,
perhaps God should simply do away with it, and start afresh.

Well, again, if we're willing to believe the Bible, it suggests God will do just that.

There will be a new heaven and a new earth. (Rev. 21:1)

Where there'll be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. (Rev. 21:4)

But for us, that's not, so far as we know, just yet.
Indeed, the suggestion is that decisions we make in this world,
will determine whether we enjoy that one.
One can think of this world, with all its difficulties,
as the proving ground for our participation in that oh so much better one.

So what about the world as it is now?
Why doesn't God stop bad things happening?
If God is all powerful, why doesn't God step in and intervene in every bad situation.
Make the bullet suddenly drop to the ground.
Hold back the volcano until the people are out of the way.
Destroy the nasty bacteria but leave the good ones.
Now, many people will testify that God does intervene in many situations;
intervenes in unexpected and amazing ways.
But what would it mean if God were continually to keep changing the way the world works?
There would be no consistency in the Universe.
The scientific method would be invalid.
And there's no sense in which we would have anything like "free will".

Just because God is all powerful does not mean God will act out of character.
Or that God will break His promises.
If we're willing to believe the Bible, God is a faithful God. (Deut. 32:4)
His purposes unchanging. (Heb. 6:17)
And God has promised that as long as this world exists,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night will never cease. (Gen. 8:22)
God isn't going to change arbitrarily the way the world works,
for as long as this world exists.

For the world as it is, we can't have good things, without some bad things.
And the world will continue as it is, for as long as it exists.
Which brings us to our third question:
When bad things happen to me, is there a God I can turn to?

Now, despite everything I've said.
Despite the arguments about "free will" and the need for consistency within the Universe.
It's still hard to comprehend a good God who'd sit idly by in the face of extreme suffering.

Now people have all sorts of ideas about God.
But are there any that successfully combine a good God with a bad, bad world?

Some people say "there is no God."
In which case, there's no sense to be found in suffering.
No ultimate justice. No absolute standard of right and wrong.

Some people say, in the light of the existence of the Universe and of us within it,
"there must be a God, but that God can't have any interest in us."
In which case it doesn't matter whether or not we believe in him, her or it.
It doesn't help us.

Some people imagine God as an indulgent granddaddy-type figure.

Who ought to pamper our every whim.

But a God who ignores the bad things we do, and allows evil to run unchecked;
is an unjust God, who can hardly be called “good”.

Some people think of God only as an angry God.

Keen to punish us for our wrongdoing; for the mess we make of things.

So suffering is our just deserts.

That sort of God may need to be appeased, but is hardly a God to love.

In the time of Jesus,

many religious people thought any suffering was a direct consequence of sin.

When Jesus passed a man born blind, his own disciples asked him:

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2)

Jesus’ answer:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” (John 9:3)

Jesus understood that anyone can be caught up by the bad things that happen.

But he went on to indicate that God can bring something good out of bad situations.

“but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”

So, when bad things happen to me, is there a God I can turn to?

Is there a God I can love?

Is there a God who can really understand what I’m going through?

The only sort of God I, at least, feel able to turn to;

the only sort of God I can relate to when in pain;

is a God who can share in suffering.

That’s a tremendously difficult concept:

A God who’s truly in charge of everything;

yet who can truly suffer.

It’s only the Christian concept of God

– with its Trinity and incarnation, its cross and resurrection –

that manages to resolve the seeming contradictions.

The concept of an awesome creator God who loves us so much:

He entered into human existence;

experienced the worst of human suffering.

A mind-boggling concept, but the only one which makes any sense, to me at least,

of a world in which bad things happen.

A God who is truly just and yet utterly loving.

A God who intervenes in this world,

but does so without breaking His own rules about how the world works.

A God we can relate to because He took on human form.

A God who faces suffering head-on, and thereby deals with the root cause of all badness.

If there’s any chance that such a God is real.

That God is worth knowing.