

RANDY ALCORN



The
Goodness
of
God

Assurance of Purpose
in the Midst of Suffering

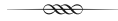


MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

Contents

<i>Introduction: A Search We All Share</i>	1
1. Tragic Choices <i>Determining the Origins of Evil and Suffering</i>	8
2. What's Wrong? I Am <i>Accepting the Reality of Inherited Sin</i>	20
3. Alternative Answers <i>Examining Explanations for Evil and Suffering</i>	26
4. A Clash of Worldviews <i>Investigating Relativism, Atheism, and the "Problem" of Goodness</i>	36
5. The Great Drama <i>Reviewing the Roles of Evil and Suffering in Christ's Redemptive Work</i>	42
6. Why So Much Evil? <i>Questioning Why God Allows Evil and Delays Justice</i>	50
7. God's Control and Our Freedom <i>Discovering How God Rules Despite Our Choices</i>	65
8. Are We Promised Prosperity? <i>Recovering a Biblical View of Health and Wealth</i>	74

9. The World We Long For	83
<i>Exploring God's Eternal Solution to Evil and Suffering</i>	
10. Wanting More Clarity	92
<i>Wrestling with the Reasons for Our Suffering</i>	
11. What We Can Do	106
<i>Finding Perspective in Our Suffering</i>	
<i>A Final Word: This Changes Everything</i>	111



I know the things that happen: the loss and the loneliness and the pain.... But there's a mark on it now: as if Someone who knew that way Himself, because He had travelled it, had gone on before and left His sign; and all of it begins to make a little sense at last—gathered up, laughter and tears, into the life of God, with His arms around it!

—PAUL SCHERER

Introduction

A Search We All Share

During the two years it took to research and write my large book *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil*, many people asked me what I was working on. I expected my answer—containing the words *evil* and *suffering*—would prompt a quick change of subject. Most, however, expressed keen interest and asked penetrating questions. Several launched into their own stories, as if having received permission to uncork the bottle.

What, after all, is more universal to human experience than suffering? And what can be more important than the perspective we bring to it?

WHEN IT'S DEEPLY PERSONAL

You may be looking for answers to a philosophical problem or an intellectual struggle. Or you may be looking less for answers than for hope. When a child has fallen off a bicycle, her father doesn't give a lecture about nerve endings, skin tissue, and the role of blood as it's pumped by the heart. He reassures the child that he's there for her, and "everything will be okay." For you, the answer may simply be "God really does love me."

If something like abuse, desertion, debilitating disease, or the loss of a loved one has devastated you, then suffering isn't theoretical or philosophical. It's deeply personal.

In writing his magnificent story of redemption, God has revealed truths about himself, us, the world, goodness, evil, suffering, and Heaven and Hell. Those truths teem with life—the blood of man and of God flows through them. God speaks with passion, not indifference. To come to grips with the problem of evil and suffering, you must do more than hear heart-wrenching stories about suffering people. You must hear God's truth to help you interpret those stories.

Maybe you're holding on to years of bitterness and depression. You blame someone else for your suffering—and that someone may be God. You will not find relief unless you gain perspective.

But perhaps you fear that any attempt to “gain perspective” will deny or minimize your suffering, or that of others. I promise you, the Bible doesn't minimize suffering or gloss over it, and neither will I.

At times, each of us must snuggle into our Father's arms, like children, and there receive the comfort we need. God doesn't just offer us advice, he offers us companionship. He doesn't promise we won't face hardship, but he does promise he'll walk with us through our hardship.

THE QUESTION

A Barna Research poll asked, “If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?” The most common response was, “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?”¹ This isn't merely *a* problem; it's *the* problem. And for the culture at large, it appears to pose a greater difficulty now than ever. Unlike the average person in earlier centuries, we today have a far higher assumption and expectation of comfort, health, and prosperity.

When people take time to reflect on life's meaning in this world, no question looms larger than this one: If God is good...*why all this evil and suffering?* If God loves us, how can he justify allowing (or sending) the sometimes overwhelming difficulties we face? How we answer this question will radically affect how we perceive God and the world around us.

We may want to turn away from the world's suffering and ignore the significance of our own pain; we just want it to go away. But despite the superficiality of our culture, we remain God's image-bearers—thinking and caring people, wired to ask questions and seek answers.

You won't get far in a conversation with someone who rejects the Christian faith before the problem of evil is raised. Atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens claim it proves that God doesn't exist. (Never mind that many who suffer most believe and trust in God, while many who suffer least don't.) British philosopher Antony Flew, a former champion of atheism, renounced his atheism during the past decade, citing the complexity of the universe and his belief in the overwhelming evidence for intelligent design. Flew did not, however, convert to the Christian faith, but only to deism. Why? He couldn't get past the problem of evil. He believes God must have created the universe, then abandoned it.

MY OWN EXPERIENCES WITH SUFFERING

I'm a fellow traveler with you on this road of suffering. In 1970, as a sixteen-year-old new Christian, I watched my friend Greg die from a horrible accident. In 1979, I had to tell my mother that her only brother had been murdered with a meat cleaver. Two years later, Mom died from cancer. About the same time, I was in the throes of an unjust lawsuit that cost me a job I loved and the ability to earn a normal wage.

In 1992 I was alone with my best friend from childhood when he died from cancer, at age thirty-nine. A few years later—alongside my wife, daughters, and brother—I held my dad’s hand as he died, a shriveled version of the vibrant man I’d known.

For twenty-five years I’ve battled a disease that daily affects my body and mind, and will probably shorten my life span. But all in all, if I’ve suffered a little more than some people, I’ve suffered a great deal less than others. And while seeking to understand the huge question of evil and suffering, I’ve realized my need for a deeper and wider perspective.

Along the way I’ve asked God to give me wisdom—and discovered that wisdom begins with the humility to say, “There’s a great deal about this I don’t understand.” In fact, if I imagined I had all the answers neatly lined up, what I’ve written wouldn’t be worth reading.

While researching this subject, I’ve read nearly a hundred books, listened to countless lectures and debates, and interviewed dozens of people who have faced great evil and suffering. That probably doesn’t sound like fun, yet I found something surprising: the journey was not only rewarding, but also fascinating, enlightening, and at times downright enjoyable. I know it sounds counterintuitive—shouldn’t meditating on evil and suffering be *depressing*? In fact, I’d already seen enough evil and suffering to feel deeply troubled. What I needed was *perspective*.

In my search for answers, I’ve beheld the God who says, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people... I have heard them crying out...and I am concerned about their suffering” (Exodus 3:7). I revel in God’s emphatic promise in the Bible that he will make a New Earth where he’ll come down to live with his people, where “he will wipe every tear from their eyes,” and “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

Often, as I've contemplated potentially faith-jarring situations, God has wiped away my own tears as I've sought his truth. While my journey hasn't unearthed easy answers, I'm astonished at how much insight the Bible offers on this most troubling of all subjects. And after much wrestling with the issues, instead of being disheartened, I'm encouraged—especially from seeing so much of God's goodness, love, holiness, justice, patience, grace, and mercy.

This journey has stretched my trust in God and his purposes, and I've emerged better prepared to face suffering and to help others who suffer. I feel I have much more to offer believers in Christ who may be questioning their faith, as well as unbelievers who consider the problem of evil and suffering their single greatest obstacle to faith. With that in mind, I invite you to join me on this journey that I've found so interesting, enlightening, and ultimately comforting.

WHEN LOSING FAITH IS *GOOD*

Evil and suffering have a way of exposing our inadequate theology. When affliction comes, a weak or nominal Christian often discovers that his faith doesn't account for it or prepare him for it. His faith has been in his church, denomination, or family tradition, or in his own religious ideas—but not in Christ. As he faces evil and suffering, he may, in fact, lose his faith.

But that's actually a good thing; any faith that leaves us unprepared for suffering is a false faith that deserves to be abandoned.

Genuine faith will be tested by suffering; false faith will be lost—the sooner, the better.

Believing God exists isn't the same as *trusting* the God who exists. If you base your faith on lack of affliction, your faith lives on the brink of extinction and will fall apart because of a frightening

diagnosis or a shattering phone call. As John Piper writes, “Wimpy Christians won’t survive the days ahead.”²

Only when you jettison ungrounded and untrue faith can you replace it with valid faith in the true God—faith that can pass, and even find strength in, the most formidable of life’s tests.

Unfortunately, most churches have failed to teach people to think biblically about the realities of evil and suffering. A pastor’s daughter told me, “I was never taught the Christian life was going to be difficult. I’ve discovered it is, and I wasn’t ready.”

Our failure to teach a biblical theology of suffering leaves Christians unprepared for harsh realities. It also leaves our children vulnerable to history, philosophy, and global studies classes that raise the problems of evil and suffering while denying the Christian worldview. Since the question *will* in fact be raised, shouldn’t Christian parents and churches raise it first and take people to Scripture to see what God says about it?

NO QUICK FIX

You’ll notice in these pages that I frequently quote Scripture. I do so because God promises that his Word “will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). God never makes this promise about my words or yours. That’s why I’m convinced that this book can accomplish God’s purpose only if it remains faithful to his words.

As you read along, I urge you not to let your feelings—real as they are—invalidate your need to let the truth of God’s words guide your thinking. Remember that the path to your heart travels through your mind. *Truth matters.*

So as you deal with suffering, by all means speak with a friend or

pastor or counselor, or join a support group. Do not, however, ignore truth in the process. Quick-fix feelings will never sustain you over the long haul. But deeply rooted beliefs—grounded in Scripture—will allow you to persevere and hold on to a faith built on the solid rock of God’s truth.

Drenched in his own tears, the prophet Habakkuk said,

How long, O LORD, must I call for help,
 but you do not listen?
 Or cry out to you, “Violence!”
 but you do not save?
 Why do you make me look at injustice?
 Why do you tolerate wrong? (1:2–3)

By including this and many similar laments in his inspired Word, God graciously invites our cries—so long as we remain willing to listen to his response.

The root issue behind Habakkuk’s cry—and behind our own similar questioning—is a problem that people have expressed in various ways, with different nuances. I’ll state it this way:

If God is all-good and all-knowing and all-powerful, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? Surely he wants to prevent it, knows how to prevent it, and has the ability to prevent it.

So why doesn’t he?

Notes

1. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 29.
2. John Piper, *Spectacular Sins* (Wheaton, IL: Good News, 2008), 57.