

Questions of Faith
How Can A Loving God Allow Suffering?
Psalm 73
January 24, 2010

In the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti there has been an outpouring of care and support for the Haitian people. From around the world, relief supplies have been shipped to Haiti.

In the midst of this great response to such a tragic event, Rev. Pat Robertson has the gull to say the Haitian people were getting what they deserved because of a pact they made with the devil.

We can get angry at him, we can discount him, we can ignore him, but what he did with his comment was follow a pattern that has been around forever. How do you explain the bad things that happen to people? What do you say when people suffer?

If you believe God is in charge of everything, that God has a plan, then there must be a reason for the earthquake.

Pat Robertson was trying to make sense of the tragedy while defending God's actions?

Though most reasonable persons do not agree with Pat Robinson about the cause of the earthquake, many do struggle with God's role in the devastation. How can a loving God allow suffering?

There are many that refuse to believe in God because of the pain and suffering in the world. How can they reconcile a loving God with the pain that so many have to deal with?

That question about suffering is the number one question people have about God. When surveys are taken, that is the issue people struggle with. Theodicy is the term that deals with this question. Theodicy looks at the providence of God. What is it that God does? Does God cause the suffering? If God doesn't cause the earthquake, why would God allow the earthquake to happen?

To help us look at this question I think it would be helpful to look at six (6) types of suffering. As we look at each type, we can see where, or how God might be involved.

The first kind of suffering is “self-inflicted”. In these cases we can easily acknowledge that God played no role. One example that hits close to home is my mother. Her name was Shirley. My mom died in 1990 at the age of 56. Though her death was attributed to a collapsed lung, her body was weakened by cancer.

How did she get cancer? She smoked! She may have started smoking when it was fashionable, but she didn't stop when evidence showed the connection between smoking and cancer. Besides the smoking my mother had a poor diet and did not get any exercise. No wonder she died so young.

For most actions there are consequences. Some people decide to take part in risky activities. When the outcome is tragic, we really can't put the blame on God. Does that mean God doesn't care? Not at all! I believe it pains God to see anyone suffer. We just have to remember God gives us the freedom to do smart things or to do not so smart things. We make the choice and we face the consequences.

This free will brings me to the second kind of suffering that is “suffering brought about on by another person”. In these cases the person did nothing, but because of the intentional or unintentional actions of another person, there is injury, loss maybe even death.

One of the most glaring examples of this is child abuse. So many adults walk around with memories of abuse when they were children. They were abused either physically, mentally or sexually by an adult. In most cases they knew their abuser. How could God allow such a thing to happen? These were innocent children?

This suffering caused by another person takes on a macro level. If we think of the last 100 years, we have many examples of enormous suffering brought about by one person. You have Hitler, the Khmer Rouge, and the various dictators over the years including Saddam Hussein. Many have by injured, tortured, relocated, rapped, and killed for no reason at all except their race, religion or political view.

How can God allow all this? It goes back to the freedom. We are free to do as we wish, for good or for evil. We can be a blessing or we can be a curse. We can be angry at the results this sometimes brings, but we need to consider the alternative. Without freedom, we would be moral robots. God could have programmed us all the same, but is that the world we want? Do we want no choices? If we really think about it, I believe we would rather have our diversity of thought than be a bunch of animatrons!

The third type of suffering is “due to poverty”. It is estimated that more than 1/3 of the world’s population lives in poverty. A non-Christian points to the hunger, to those pictures of the babies with extended stomachs and say no God would allow for that.

That is a very good concern. My question would be, is there enough? Is there enough food grown on this earth to feed everyone? Are there enough natural resources on and in this earth for everyone to have clean water to drink, food to eat and a place to live? I would say yes. In business terms we would say the problem is not with production but with distribution.

As a global community we all share the blame in not eradicating hunger. When we raise our hand and point a finger at God for the hunger, there are three fingers pointing back at us.

I understand it isn’t easy, especially with corrupt governments and leaders, but if there was a will, we would find a way.

The next kind of suffering relates to what we are now struggling with concerning Haiti, “suffering caused by natural disasters”. Most home insurance policies will handle almost everything except, “acts of God”. That is a funny term to use to describe floods, earthquakes, and tornados.

We know what causes all those disasters. Rain falls from clouds, not because of Angels crying. Tornados are caused by high and low pressures coming together. God doesn’t twirl a finger and we get a twister. Likewise, God does not stomp the earth to cause an earthquake. There are earth plates, and fault lines.

All these are part of the natural forces God set into motion as part of creation. In most cases we benefit as a result of these forces. Rainstorms

bring needed water for our plants. Even floods bring rich silt to the flood plains. The shifting of the earth's plates formed the beautiful mountains we enjoy.

The earthquake happened in Haiti because of pressure within the earth, not because of anything the Haitian people did. God is not punishing anybody. If anything God is weeping over the loss of so many lives and the hardship of the people.

As humans we enjoy living in beautiful places, we love a water view. Unfortunately, many of those places are prone to floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, typhoons, and earthquakes. It's a risk many are willing to take. It's a tragedy when the disasters hit, but not a total surprise.

The next type of suffering I would describe as "tragic events". Many accidents fall under this category. You are driving along and out of the blue a deer runs into the road, or there is a patch of black ice. There is a crash. There may be a death, but there might be a head injury or paralysis.

When I was serving my first church the local funeral home had called me to lead a funeral service for a high school senior who died in a snowmobiling accident. Here was this young woman with her life ahead of her, now dead. What do I say to the family? What do I say to most of the senior class that showed up for the service?

Some pastors, like Dr. Robertson, might have said she was being punished for something she did. There are other pastors that might have said God needed this person in heaven. Both of those explanations put God in a bad light. Would I want to follow a God so harsh or so random? No way!

Another explanation that drives me crazy is that God is using this death in order that others may come to believe. If I heard that, it would turn me against God not towards God.

For that family, for those students, the reason for that young woman's death was simple to explain. When you are driving a snowmobile at night, at high speed, in a field and you hit a wire you did not know was there, it will cause serious damage maybe even death.

Where was God? God was with her while she breathed her last breath. God was with her to carry her home to life eternal. Why didn't God prevent the accident? Sometimes, for some unknown reason, God does seem to intervene, but in most cases gravity and other forces of this planet are left to operate as normal.

To be safe, we could like that boy in the bubble, who because he had no defense against germs, he never left his house. But how enjoyable would that be. If you remember, that boy got bored, thus a bubble was made so he could leave his home. To live means to take risks.

The last kind of suffering involves “the pain and decline from within our bodies”. Disease impacts our lives in so many ways. Cancer, Alzheimer's, Lou Gehrig's, and many other conditions wreak havoc to our lives and those we love. Where is God in this?

Our bodies are remarkable machines. Though sturdy, they are delicate in the balance of our cells. If any of those cells get mutated, or infected, bad things can happen to our body. The same things that gives us different color hair and eyes can also cause suffering.

God set things into motion. God's design is good. The imperfections happen as time goes on and variations occur in the body. So where is God when the illness occurs? God is there to bring comfort and strength. God is there to encourage and inspire those doing research to fight the disease.

There is much suffering in the world. Our atheist neighbors use that pain, as proof there is no loving God. I would point to the suffering and say it shows just the opposite. How do we make it through the pain and suffering? By God's grace!

God does love us. God suffers when we suffer. Rather than leaving us along in our pain, God is there to give us hope and courage. Last week we had our first NOOMA Study. It will be the 1st and 3rd Wednesday evening of the month. We looked at the storms that come to everyone's life. We then looked at the scripture in Matthew 7, where Jesus talked about those that build their home on a foundation of stone verses those that build on sand.

When we put our faith in God, we have that solid foundation that can help us when the suffering comes. My prayer for you is that you keep that connection with God strong. It won't shield you from pain, but it will help you make it through it.