

Can we believe in a good God when faced with intense tragedy?

by Dr Harold Coop.

The problem of human pain and suffering, is perhaps the deepest philosophical puzzle of all. Some think it incompatible with the existence of a loving God, or that Christianity has no answer, so is disproved. No one has a complete answer, but to my mind that doesn't prove either of the above conclusions, nor that the Christian explanation is not the best one. Perhaps a description of that, necessarily brief, will help some people.

Suffering has been divided into that which is caused by man and that which is not. The former is easier to accept, as a consequence of free will. If God had made us robots, we would not be free to love or hate, to kill or cure. Parents want a loving child, not a robot.

Some argue, "How could a good God allow last month's murder of that little girl?" So how would you organize the universe? As the killer's hand descended, would a larger hand come down from the sky? If God wanted humans with a capacity to choose to love, we had to have the free will to decide between good and evil options. Only that freedom can result in goodness; no alternative is possible. Goodness and kindness can't exist without the possibility of evil and cruelty.

And the latter have a purpose in alerting us to the meaning of life. If we say evil and cruelty are "bad" or "wrong", this must imply a moral universe and a God behind it. If the universe is completely mechanistic, what is wrong with infinite cruelty? But most people and societies believe that cruelty is wrong. As C.S. Lewis has argued, this universal moral conviction or law tells us something inescapable about the universe, and he says that God speaks to us through beauty, but shouts to us through pain.

In addition, if great pain afflicted only evil people, there would be no goodness; being "good" would be being prudent! So if there is a God who took the astonishing step of creating a creature capable of reciprocal love and true choice, evil choices had to be allowed. We must distinguish between what God allows, rather than intends. Thus are allowed the most horrific tortures and wars and human abuses of adults and children, and useless killing of good people.

If God allows free will, that must allow ghastly things, even those done by evil distorters in the name of religion, directly opposite to the principles of love basic to all religions. We don't abandon medicine, science or the law because of distortions and dreadful things done in their name; we must look beyond, to the true underlying principles.

Suffering caused by natural events or disease is more difficult, though even here, a passion about priorities would mean fewer people in poverty, needing to crowd into earthquake areas or to denude forests. The horrors of disease would be greatly lessened by now, if we had spent all the money for wars on medical research, and administered politically a world as passionately devoted to goodness and kindness as were the saints. An international calculation has estimated that we spend around 12 times as much on armaments as on improving infrastructure.

Some complain that a good God should not allow such unfairness in the world. Could a “fair” world, free of man-made and natural evil, work? Would robbers and cheats be always frustrated? Would disease affect only people past age 70, and be limited to 10 minutes? And accidents likewise? Poverty would disappear ; all would be rich? It is hard to postulate any physical or mechanical world in which we could have real choice , responsibility and adventure without any possibility of things going severely wrong. Our greatest heroic efforts for good, and our heroes could not exist.

Suffering must be random, and therefore grossly unfair sometimes, to avoid limiting true freedom. The rain must fall on the just and the un-just, as Jesus noted Freedom, good and evil are inextricably inter-twined; they're a package.

Next, we must balance the evil against the tremendous good on Earth. Our world has vast and breathtaking beauty, challenge, and exciting adventures. Our minds can make tremendous discoveries, wonderful art, and our bodies achieve the glories of sport. But above all, we can love, finding our deepest meaning, and we can marvel at how good some people can be, in the ultimate act, self-sacrifice.

But having said all this, we're left with a gap. The good sometimes seems only just to balance the evil, it all seems barely to break even. Meeting a parent whose child has cancer, or is going blind, we fall silent - though sometimes because words seem so inadequate and presumptuous, in the face of another's suffering so deep, rather than because there are no answers at all.

So what answers does Christianity offer? We cannot understand everything, but there are lights in the otherwise complete darkness, and they are better lights than any other philosophy offers.

First, with all religions, it asserts that the totality of our situation in our world cannot fully be understood in terms of merely a chance conglomeration of atoms. People sometimes state that "it all just happened by random chance." There are immense scientific problems with this view, beyond this article's scope. (But briefly discussed in the article on Science and Faith.) In addition, chance can't explain our understanding of the moral law, and, above all, our certainty of which side we should back, even if we don't always do so.

We can prove by science that the world is round, but we can be equally sure of other non-scientific things, by experiencing them, never being able to prove them. For example, a clever debater could persuade some that my mother, widowed when I was five, did not deeply love me, that social conditioning, fear of peer criticism, a false belief system etc., all pushed her by mechanical psychological processes into her devoted life. I could not absolutely prove to you otherwise. But I know with certainty that the argument is false - and why? - because I *knew* her and experienced the all-encompassing depth of her love, in many testing experiences, over so many years. Christians believe we can *know* and experience the loving personality of God also - by seeking.

There are other things we all experience and can know. Truth is better than a lie, kindness than cruelty, love better than hate. All these things show a moral law outside ourselves. We

feel we should follow it even to our disadvantage. That conscience is the thumbprint of our creator. How could it come from random molecules, when self-interest is more profitable? If we did not experience all of those things (good and bad), how could we understand their meaning?

I have argued that there is a purpose and a morality to life because that belief alone enables us to accept there could be a meaning to suffering. We can accept more if we know there is a goal in the end, and that our life is a temporary indication in time of something of far greater significance. In our lives we keep examining minutely the particles in our small beam of light in a dark room, instead of looking along it to the heaven beyond. In this egocentric age, we think this life looks like the whole, so it is our right to be comfortable. How small is our view.

A wise parent sometimes lets a child stumble. Love is greater than just comfort. What if suffering helps to teach us something? Sometimes it does. From it arise the most selfless examples of love. Without suffering, there would be no Mother Teresas or Martin Luther Kings, or countless thousands of other saintly people and heroes. Whether they are tidal waves, poverty or congenital abnormalities, these “uncaused” evils are the main spur to relief efforts, the passion for medical and other research, for self-determination, for reforms, and good politics.

Sometimes only years later, we realise what a period of pain has taught us, how it has made us more sympathetic. The most sympathetic response is often from those who have similarly suffered. Our human family grows closer. And often the heroism of the sufferer is more impressive than the railing against God of the observer. CS Lewis asks: If there is a God who has a purpose for us, to develop our very best character traits and knowledge of him, would that purpose be fulfilled by a world in which every day a good time was had by all?

Nevertheless these things still don't easily justify severe suffering. Some suggest it's God's capricious will, or that disease is a punishment, or due to lack of faith (which Job denied). Such views are un-Christian, and those who alleviate any suffering do God's will. If God is truly loving, suffering must be permitted and endured only for a deeper reason.

So, a proposed world with no suffering or free will raises huge problems. Neither is it axiomatic that all suffering is purposeless. But there's still a gap. We're not yet satisfied.

We come, therefore, to the profound phenomenon of Jesus Christ with the preposterous belief that God entered this world personally for the love of us. Not only was his teaching, revelation, and example, of a depth which can give us new truths throughout a lifetime, or through centuries, but in addition God became *involved* personally in human suffering, a situation unique to Christianity.

On the cross, Jesus Christ showed that God's answer was not that of power to stop it, (as we would expect), but of suffering, sharing with us anguish to the greatest extent possible. Christ did not explain suffering away. He shared it with us, showing it can have a meaning we cannot yet fully understand. Human experience confirms that when we are in pain in a hospital bed, we want explanation and understanding, but we most dearly want someone we love, there, holding our hand. The best help in suffering is not an explanation, but a person, who has also experienced suffering.

Christ spoke little in philosophical terms, preferring simple stories with deep meaning. And his unequivocal emphasis was that God loves us profoundly, as shown in his exemplary life, trusting God, and loving people whatever it cost him, even under torture. He said that we also must learn to know God so that we can trust him, and should become like little children.

Children understand enough to ask life's many questions, and to rail against some hard decisions of their loving parents, but not enough to understand the complex answers and reasons. But they trust their parents' love.

Here is a later story from New Zealand, which may help explain this principle: A shepherd's horse stumbled, and its flying hoof caught and fractured the leg of his favourite dog. The shepherd dismounted, made a splint and tore up a shirt. But he had to bind the twisted leg onto the splint to carry the dog home. In its excruciating blinding pain, the dog frighteningly snarled with intense ferocity. It placed its bared teeth over the shepherd's hand.

But it did not bite. Somewhere deep in its doggy brain, something told it that even this could not mean it did not trust its master. There must be something more, some meaning beyond this unbearable pain. What made the difference was the love and trust it had learnt of the person holding it.

Christ told us we can't know all the answers, but Christians believe it is possible by prayer, reading, and common worship, to learn enough of God's personality to enable trust.

But there's a catch. We've got to put considerable energy (like "all thy heart and all thy mind") into seeking to know God. This requires humility, and the risk of having to change our ways. In this instant gratification, egotistical, television age, those attitudes aren't selling very well. Each generation thinks it knows more than previous ones, ours, in this small country, most of all. We say, almost proudly, that New Zealand is a secular society. But the world has gone through godless times before, Christianity has broken many hammers, and the growth of Christianity in Africa and China is exponential.

And what of the alternative explanations of suffering? For the atheist, cruelty is purely that; there is no hope of meaning or anything better beyond. All is negative. The agnostic belief is little better, and if you don't know the reason for existence, isn't it the most important thing in life to search the minds of the best thinkers and saints to find out?

Many thoughtful Christians believe that, in all these matters, evidence clashes with evidence. But we believe we can seek and find enough evidence of a loving God to know enough to trust and find comfort, and that trust can be increased by church attendance and regular efforts to commune with the mind of Christ.

Reading:

From our church library:

The first chapter in Lee Strobel's book "The Case For Faith" is titled:
"Since Evil and Suffering Exist a Loving God Cannot"

Medal-winning and best selling author Philip Yancey's book "Disappointment With God" is a sensitive and moving work, worth repeated reading. It addresses honestly the questions: "Is God unfair? Is he silent? Is he hidden?"