Suffering

Saturday 4th July 2026

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Introduction

The problem of suffering (or evil) – is a challenge for believers and critics

If God is:

- All powerful
- All loving
- All knowing

Why does suffering exist?

Tim Keller: *'God will only give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything he knows'*

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The origin and nature of suffering

Creation is good

Genesis 1:31: *'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good'*

The fall introduces pain, alienation, toil and death: '*I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. …Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'* Genesis 3:16-19

'Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.' C.S.Lewis

'The Bible consistently teaches that the world is not as it should be.' Tim Keller

Bible passages: Genesis 1-3, Romans 5:12, 8:20-22

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Discussion: Paul's thorn

Read 2 Corinthians 12:6-10.

Where did Paul's thorn come from? (God, Satan, God & Satan, elsewhere, don't know)

And why?

Other examples

Job (1:6-12, 20-22, 2:1-9)

David's census (2 Samuel 24:1, 1 Chronicles 21:1)

Judas (Luke 22:3-6)

Church discipline (1 Corinthians 5:5)

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The limits of rational explanation

Job's friend Eliphaz to Job: '*Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?'* Job 22:5

God rebukes Eliphaz and the other friends

BUT Job doesn't receive and explanation but a revelation of God

'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways' Isaiah 55:8

Bible passages: Job 1-42, Isaiah 55:8-9

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The presence of God in suffering: Incarnation and crucifixion

'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.' Psalm 23:4

The idea of God's presence in our suffering is significant

'Only the suffering God can help' Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The incarnation reveals God as both transcendent and intimately involved in the world

'A God who cannot suffer cannot love' Jurgen Moltmann

The cross takes this further

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Matthew 27:46

'If we again ask the question, 'Why does God allow suffering?' we must look at Jesus' Tim Keller

Christianity's answer to suffering is not first a theory but a person

Bible passages: Isaiah 53, Matthew 26–27, Philippians 2:5–11, Psalm 23, John 11, Romans 8:26

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The transformational potential of suffering

'Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" Romans 5:3–4

'Suffering can refine us rather than destroy us because God himself walks with us in it.' Tim Keller

However, we mustn't romanticise suffering (Moltmann)

Bible passages: Romans 5:3–5, James 1:2–4, 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Participation in Christ's Sufferings

'The fellowship of sharing in his sufferings' Philippians 3:10

'Co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings' Romans 8:17

'The essence of discipleship is a life of following Jesus Christ, and this includes the possibility of suffering as he suffered' John Stott

Bible passages: Philippians 3:10, 1 Peter 4:12–16, Romans 8:17

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The power of lament and honest faith

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Psalm 22:1, Matthew 27:46

Jesus models lament on the cross.

Lament is a *'…complaint which makes the shrill insistence: Things are not right in the present arrangement. They need not stay this way but can be changed'* Walter Brueggemann

Bible passages: Psalm 22, Lamentations 3, Job

The hope of ultimate restoration

'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' Revelation 21:4

Bible passages: Romans 8:18–39, Revelation 21:1–5, 1 Corinthians 15

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