

## What's the Sense of Suffering?

**Trevor.** As you know Pastor, ever since our three children became involved in the youth club we've been coming along to church, on and off, for some months now. A lot that we hear you preach about is beginning to make sense, and Andy and Jane who live just up the road from us, are a big help. We asked you to call because Anne and I have been talking a great deal recently, and we have a problem that maybe you can help us with. Reading the newspapers is pretty miserable these days isn't it? I've heard it said that the history of the human race is the story of a mad-man, and looking around the world in this century alone I tend to agree. It seems that one brutal regime follows another and some of the atrocities committed are mind-blowing in their cruelty and viciousness. I'm thinking of the horrors of the Nazi extermination camps; the gulags of Stalin's Soviet Union; the killing fields of Cambodia and the napalm bombing of the Khurdish villages. More recently we have had the massacres in Peru and Somalia, and torture in Iraq and Serbia. There just seems to be no end to man's cruelty to man.

**Anne.** For me it's the horror of all those women and children dying of hunger and disease in Africa. I'm afraid that I'll get so used to seeing all those little bodies on the TV screen that it won't affect me anymore.

**Trevor.** That's already starting to happen. When a hurricane smashes into a town and its tidal wave washes away a few hundred people, or an earthquake swallows up a few thousand more, we find ourselves almost shrugging it off because somewhere else it's a lot worse.

**Anne.** But even the small-scale tragedies are so depressing aren't they? A mother murdered and left with a sobbing two-year old clinging to her dead body; a child finally losing the fight against disease after years of pain and dozens of operations; a teenager brutally assaulted and left dying; a father of a young family suddenly killed by a drunken driver. Some of the horrible crimes we read about make me scared for the safety of our own children.

**Trevor.** The world is a pretty miserable place to live in isn't it? With so many millions suffering all around us I sometimes feel guilty when I enjoy my food and health, or Anne's love and our home and children, or even when we go away on holiday.

**Pastor.** I've got your drift, and I think I know where you are heading, but suppose you tell me the real problem?

**Trevor.** Simply this: Since I've been going to church, the fellows at work expect me to have all the answers and they keep asking me when God is going to stop all the suffering; and why does he just allow it all to go on and on? To be honest, we can't always make sense out of suffering ourselves. I'm tempted to agree with them when they say things like: 'If I was God, I wouldn't stand back and watch babies die of starvation.' So what kind of God is it who apparently doesn't care?

**Pastor.** I can understand your problem; in my experience one of the most common questions people ask today is: 'Why does God allow all the pain and suffering in the world?'

**Trevor.** People expect Christians to have some answers don't they?

**Pastor.** Yes, and why not? I can't claim to believe in a sovereign God who created the universe and is in control of everything, and that in the Bible I have the answers to life's greatest questions - and then duck this issue of suffering.

**Anne.** Yes, if we've learnt anything since coming to church it's that you do try to face all the issues head on, and you get your answers from the Bible. So, how do you make sense of suffering?

**Pastor.** Just before we come to the Christian answer, let's not forget that by rejecting God no one solves the problem, they just reduce the possibility of a meaningful answer. If there is no wise God in control, then events are at best the result of circumstances often beyond our control, and at worst they are blind chance. Either way, we are on our own to make any sense out of suffering. In fact, without a belief in God we can never be sure of any ultimate meaning or purpose in suffering. Most of it may be a totally meaningless result of sheer chance.

**Trevor.** That's as hopeless an answer as the problem itself.

**Pastor.** Exactly! That's why in Ephesians 2:12 Paul speaks of the non-Christian as being 'without hope and without God in the world.' Those two things always go together. But even for some who have a vague belief in God there is no better hope, because they think God can occasionally make mistakes.

**Anne.** Surely no one believes in a God like that?

**Pastor.** I'm afraid they do. I recall hearing a clergyman comment after a terrible tragedy some years ago: 'This is one of those occasions when we have to admit that the Almighty made a mistake!'

**Anne.** That's terrible! I think I would rather believe in no god than believe in a God who makes mistakes.

**Pastor.** Of course. So let's try to think through the Christian response to suffering. Where do you think we should start?

**Anne.** At the beginning I suppose.

**Pastor.** What do you mean Anne?

**Anne.** Well, Trevor doesn't know this, but I've started reading the Bible and it seems to me that we don't get far into it before we learn that God made everything good, and that man messed it up.

**Trevor.** That sounds a bit simplistic to me.

**Anne.** In Genesis 1:31 we are told that everything God made was very good, and two chapters later we read of sin coming into the experience of men and women through their disobedience; that led to the murder of Abel by Cain and it was downhill from there on.

**Pastor.** Yes, but maybe Trevor is right. Perhaps that answer is a bit too simple.

**Anne.** I thought I was doing well!

**Pastor.** You are. But, whilst what you have said is absolutely true and exactly the right starting point, it still leaves some questions unanswered.

**Trevor.** Like what for example?

**Pastor.** If you believe in a sovereign God who knows everything, plans everything, and is in control of everything, why did he create a world in which he knew everything would go wrong and so much suffering would result? Why didn't he stop Adam and Eve from sinning?

**Trevor.** Pass!

**Pastor.** There are at least two answers to that. The first reason why God didn't stop Adam and Eve from sinning was because he wanted men and women to serve him freely and lovingly, and not just because he gave them no choice. Of course God could have stopped Eve's disobedience. He could have snatched the fruit out of her hand or he could have annihilated the devil even before the world was made. The devil was originally an angel created by God, but he turned against his creator. God chose to teach men and women the meaning of willing love and obedience.

**Trevor.** And the second answer?

**Pastor.** God knew that, in ways we will discover in a minute, men and women would learn more about their Creator and bring more honour to his name, if he allowed them first of all the freedom to go their own way.

**Anne.** Do you mean God allowed sin to come into the world with all its horrible results because that way we would learn to love God freely, and because somehow God would show his love in a world of evil?

**Pastor.** Yes. That's exactly what I mean Anne.

**Trevor.** Bit tough isn't it?

**Pastor.** Yes, it is. But haven't you found that the really important lessons of life are the hardest ones to learn? So, let me emphasise that God does take the ultimate responsibility for everything. He could stop all evil tomorrow - and he has promised that one day he will. Meanwhile he allows things to go on as they are. In Isaiah 45:7 God claims: 'I bring prosperity and create disaster.'

**Anne.** So we don't have to apologise for the fact that God could stop all the evil in the world even though he doesn't?

**Pastor.** Certainly not! If you suggest that God cannot stop the world from its madness then you make evil a bigger power than God himself - and there would be no hope left for anyone. By insisting that God is in total control we keep open the door of the Christian's ultimate hope.

**Anne.** Which is?

**Pastor.** We'll come to that later.

**Trevor.** All right, so God is firmly in control, even though it doesn't look like it, and he has plans, even though we don't know what they are!

**Anne.** That's a bit cynical Trev.

**Pastor.** No, Trevor's right. From where he is sitting that's just how it seems. Of course from where I am things are different.

**Trevor.** How different?

**Pastor.** We seem to agree that if the Bible is true, and I believe it is, we have the starting point that shows us the cause of all our suffering. Disobedience to God led to death; that is what God says in Genesis 3:3. But this was not just physical death, it was spiritual death.

**Trevor.** What does that mean?

**Pastor.** You have a picture of its meaning in Genesis 3:8 where we are told the man and woman tried to hide from God, and again in verse 23 where God banished them from his presence. Spiritual death is disobeying God, hiding from God, and being shut out from friendship with God. In the Bible death is separation not annihilation. Separation from God.

**Anne.** I suppose we all hide from God really. I mean, we don't want to listen to all that he says, and we certainly don't want God to see everything in our minds and lives.

**Trevor.** You mean we've all stuffed our fingers in our ears and run away?

**Anne.** Sounds like the children at bed time!

**Trevor.** So, all the suffering in the world results from the fact that we are not friends with God because we don't listen to him and obey him?

**Pastor.** Yes. Just think how much suffering would be avoided if everyone obeyed the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20 in the Old Testament, and the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7 in the New Testament.

**Trevor.** Can't say I know them very well!

**Pastor.** Perhaps not Trevor, but I can tell you there would be no disobedience to parents . . .

**Anne.** A brilliant start!

**Pastor.** No killing, no unfaithfulness in marriage, no lust, no stealing; no lying or gossip; no envy or jealousy . . .

**Trevor.** Hold on. Nobody's that good.

**Pastor.** Of course not. But who is to blame if God give us good rules and we break them?

**Anne.** We are, I suppose.

**Trevor.** But it's not possible for us to keep them all perfectly.

**Pastor.** You're right. But when you crash at a hundred and ten miles an hour, you can't escape the penalty of reckless driving by claiming it was impossible to hold your suped-up, turbocharged, three litre Merc. down to 30 miles an hour! You will be told that the law is there to protect you and others, and if you ignore the law, both the law-breaker and others will get hurt. In the same way God has given us instructions in the Bible how we are to live. Tell me, what do you think causes war?

**Trevor.** Basically man's greed for power I suppose.

**Pastor.** You suppose right. In this century alone war has resulted in the death of around one hundred million people; that is the entire population of the United Kingdom twice over! That's a lot of suffering, and it could all have been avoided if we obeyed God.

**Anne.** But what about the starving millions in the world?

**Trevor.** I think I can see the answer to that. Most of it is the direct result of war and greed. After all, there's more than enough food in the world to feed everyone, but much of it is in the wrong place and we're all too greedy to share it around. Isn't it amazing how we are told that relief supplies can't get through to some places and yet ammunition for the soldiers and fuel for the tanks gets in easily?

**Pastor.** So this human factor is responsible for the vast amount of the world's suffering, right down to the murdered mother, the drink-driver crash, and the Aids victim - in every case someone has been cutting across God's rules and someone else suffers.

**Anne.** There's also the human factor of people's mistakes. Sometimes suffering is the result, not of sin, but of error. A signalman misreads his time-table, or a driver

falls asleep over his wheel, or an engineer miscalculates the strength of his bridge. Why does God allow that sort of thing?

**Pastor.** There are times when you have to stand back and let your children make a mistake, because it is the only way they will learn to avoid the same error in the future.

**Trevor.** Yes, but I wouldn't stand back if they were about to kill themselves!

**Pastor.** Of course you wouldn't, but the real world of adult life is much more dangerous than a child at play. If God always corrected the signalman's mistake, turned the driver's wheel back, and kept the bridge standing in spite of the weak structure, we would become careless and lazy. We would never learn anything. Suppose God had moved the iceberg away from the White Star liner Titanic back in 1912. He would certainly have saved fifteen hundred lives, but the designers, who boasted the ship was unsinkable, would have continued to build similarly unsafe ships.

**Anne.** But so often it's the innocent who suffer.

**Pastor.** Sadly, you're right. But even the tragedy of a baby being born with its mother's drug addiction or with her HIV virus is a solemn warning that whenever we sin, other people are always affected. God tells us this in the Bible - but people don't listen, so God gives these terrible visual aids to demonstrate it. If our sins never affected anyone but ourselves, we would become more and more careless. Sometimes it is only the thought of what an action will do to others that makes a man or woman think twice. If we disobey the Maker's instructions things are bound to go wrong.

**Trevor.** Are you saying that if we leave God out of our lives he will leave us out of his?

**Pastor.** That's about right Trevor. In fact, in Romans 1:14, 26, Paul twice uses the phrase, 'God gave them over', and he lists some of the tragic results when people and nations turn their back upon God. However, even when God gives us over to our sin and its results, and allows such terrible suffering, there is a purpose in that. He is saying to the world: 'Look at the mess that comes when you leave me out. Stop, think again.'

**Trevor.** But all the suffering in the world doesn't seem to make people think about God. So if that was God's intention, it hasn't worked very well has it?

**Anne.** I don't know that that is altogether right Trevor. After all, it's got us talking about God hasn't it?

**Trevor.** That's true; and I suppose you can't blame the doctor if you fail to respond to his diagnosis and refuse to take the medicine.

**Anne.** That's a good thought! But I have a suggestion. I hope it doesn't sound wrong, but if I could give God some advice, I would suggest that he just gets rid of the biggest sinners and that would cut down a lot of suffering.

**Pastor.** How do you know he hasn't?

**Anne.** What do you mean?

**Pastor.** Well, how do you know God hasn't 'nipped in the bud' men who would have been worse than Stalin, or Hitler?

**Anne.** That's hard to imagine.

**Pastor.** Only because those are the worst type of men you can think of. Let me give you an illustration. When I was a student I used to work on a fruit farm during my summer vacations picking cherries, apples and plums. One year the farmer kept ducks for a change, and the day came when he sent me in to pick out the biggest ones for market. That was easy because some were really fat, and they soon went into the crate. But when I looked back at the ducks, there were still some that were bigger than the rest. They were not as big as the ones in the crate, but they were bigger than all the others in the pen. So I took them out as well. But there were still others in the pen bigger than the rest!

**Anne.** All right, I take the point. If God kept removing all the biggest sinners, sooner or later he would get to me!

**Pastor.** But the main point is that God is restraining evil to a degree you cannot imagine; the 'big' sinners in this world are not yet in the crate - but things could be a lot worse.

**Anne.** That's hard to imagine as well!

**Trevor.** I'm not so sure Anne. There could be a place without any love or beauty, kindness or affection.

**Pastor.** Actually there is Trevor, and the Bible calls it hell. But that's another matter.

**Trevor.** I can follow all you have said so far about suffering that is man-made. But that is only half the story. What about the natural disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes, and the diseases that are not the result of man's sin? You can't blame man when a mountain splits open and spews molten lava onto a town can you?

**Pastor.** The answer to that question is both no and yes. No, it's true that men and women don't have too much control over volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and earthquakes, nor over droughts or cloudbursts, but that is not the same as saying you can't blame man for them.

**Trevor.** I don't follow.

**Pastor.** Back at the beginning when God turned Adam and Eve out of Eden because of their disobedience, he also told them that the world would become hard to tame. Genesis 3:17 tells us the ground was cursed, thorns and thistles would grow up and only by 'painful toil' would man be able to eat his food. Death and decay came in, and, according to Paul writing in the New Testament in Romans 8:20-22, the whole of creation is bound to the principle of decay and it is 'groaning' under the results of man's sin. Only that ultimate hope I hinted at earlier will set creation free.

**Trevor.** You mean to say all the natural disasters are the result of that one sin by Adam and Eve? That takes a bit of believing doesn't it?

**Pastor.** It started there Trevor, but natural disasters are not just the result of Adam's sin, they are because of the sin of us all.

**Trevor.** Now it gets worse! How can my sin cause a volcanic eruption?

**Anne.** It did last Saturday when the car wouldn't start!

**Trevor.** Just ignore that one. I'm serious.

**Anne.** So am I!

**Pastor.** Trevor, it isn't true that your sin causes a natural disaster - God is the ultimate cause; but what I mean is that God brings these things into the world because of sin. You see, part of man's rebellion against God is to think he can manage alone. Man can walk on the moon and on the bottom of the oceans; he can heal diseases that were at one time certain killers; he can store vast banks of memory on a tiny silicon chip, and he can create enough power to vaporise a whole city. Man's great problem today is that he thinks and acts as if he were God. So, to bring man up short and knock him off the pedestal he builds for himself, God shows himself to be more powerful than the greatest power man can harness.

**Trevor.** You mean cosmic one-upmanship?

**Pastor.** Not really Trevor, because one-upmanship always has a selfish motive. God, on the other hand, wants to show man who is boss just so that we will enjoy the best possible life. Because we can't harness the billion volts of a single lightning flash, or douse the fifteen hundred degrees Celsius heat of a volcano, or hold the earthquake together with irons, God is shouting to mankind: 'You are not in control - I am; therefore turn to me.' Natural disasters are God's trumpet call to man to come to his senses.

**Trevor.** But people don't listen do they?

**Pastor.** Maybe not; but how much louder do you think God should sound the alarm?

**Anne.** Can I bring it all down to a more personal level for a moment? We all experience the weakness of growing old, falling sick and suffering pain. What's all that about?

**Pastor.** You may be surprised at this, but pain and growing old are two of God's greatest blessings.

**Trevor.** That's not surprising - it's just crazy!

**Pastor.** Well, look at it this way. From beginning to end the Bible teaches us that man has to die, and afterwards stand before God where he will be judged. If he passes the test he goes to heaven, if he fails then he goes to hell - you can check that out from Hebrews 9:27 and Daniel 12:2. If that is a fact, then surely the most important thing in life is for men and women to be ready for death and eternity.

**Anne.** Instead, most of us put off thinking about it and live as if we will last for ever.

**Pastor.** Exactly. So God has built in to our life the process of growing old. Every year as we pass another birthday and watch the grey hairs and wrinkles increase, we have our own personal visual aid to remind us that we will not last for ever, and that we would be wise to get ready for the end. So old age is a blessing. Of course if we ignore the message, then that's our own fault.

**Anne.** And pain? It's hard to imagine this world without pain.

**Pastor.** You don't have to imagine it Anne, you can see what it would be like. The terrible deformity of leprosy sufferers is not the disease itself, but the result of losing all sense of pain. Fingers and toes get cut and crushed, and since the nerves don't register pain the limbs just wear away.

**Anne.** I hadn't thought of that. So when our five year old Jonathan comes in screaming with pain I suppose I should be glad, even though he has only pricked his finger.

**Pastor.** You should be very grateful. Some years ago, Dr Paul Brand in the United States of America spent three years researching into a way of making an artificial pain response system for limbs that had lost feeling. He failed, but he wrapped up his efforts with the words: 'Thank God for inventing pain.'

**Trevor.** Ok, but does God have to make pain so severe?

**Pastor.** Have you got one of those alarm clocks that starts softly and gets louder and louder until in the end you just have to get out of bed and deal with it? That's the purpose of intense pain. A jumpy tooth says: 'Ring the dentist.' If I continue to ignore the warning, the raging inferno in my gums will soon force me to the telephone.

**Anne.** God isn't very selective in this question of suffering. Lot's of Christians suffer as well. They can die in agony like anyone else; they can starve, and some have been horribly tortured. When an aircraft crashes the Christians don't float gently to the ground, they get mangled and burnt like the rest. Why doesn't God look after his own?

**Trevor.** I'll have a go at that one. I guess its because God doesn't want people to become Christians just as an insurance policy against trouble, and also because he wants to show the world that his people are sufficiently tough to suffer with the world's suffering and still trust God.

**Pastor.** Brilliantly put Trevor. There are lots of examples in the Bible of men who suffered intensely and still trusted God. In fact that is the whole point of the story in the Bible about Job. According to Job 1:9-11, Satan accused Job before God of only believing because of what he got out of it - Job was rich, wise and popular, and he had a lovely family. God said: 'You don't know my servant Job.' In one day Job lost everything, but still he held on to his faith in God. Christianity is not about how to escape from the difficulties of life but how to face them. Through pain and illness, crashed hopes and bereavement, God often tests the faith of Christians in order to make them stronger, better, and wiser.

**Trevor.** We've done a lot of talking and I think I've forgotten some of the points you have made. Could you give a short summary of the Christian answer to the problem of suffering?

**Pastor.** I'll try. In the beginning God made everything perfect, but he gave Adam and Eve some rules designed for their best welfare. They broke those rules and went their own way. As a result of this sin, disease and suffering of all kinds, and finally death itself came into the experience of mankind because all of us have followed their bad example of trying to 'go it alone'. When we refuse to obey God's counsel found in the Bible he stands aside and leaves us to it - much of the suffering of our world is the direct result of this. But all the time God is doing three things. First, he is holding back sin and suffering to a degree we can never fully know - it would be a lot worse if God was not keeping control. Second, he allows man-made suffering to show us how much we desperately need God. And third, God uses natural disasters as trumpet calls to remind men and women that they are not master of this world or of their own fate. That's a rough summary of what we've said so far.

**Anne.** So you believe there is some purpose behind all kinds of suffering - even the very worst?

**Pastor.** Yes, I do. Of course there are things that happen that I don't understand; but I do believe that God has a wise plan behind everything that happens.

**Trevor.** So that's it then?

**Pastor.** No, it isn't. There are four vital things that God has done to take the sting out of the world of suffering. The first we have already mentioned on a number of occasions. In the Bible we have God's revelation of himself and how he wants us to live. Its message is clear from beginning to end, and its standards are the highest ever known to man. Although those who disobey the Bible have caused untold misery in the history of the world, those who obey it have saved the world from even worse suffering. So, God has spoken in the Bible. That's the first way he has dealt with the problem of suffering.

**Anne.** And the second?

**Pastor.** The second is literally out of this world! You may recall that as we have been talking together, I have twice referred to the Christian's 'ultimate hope'. Earlier Anne asked me what that is and I said we would come to it later. Well, we're there now. The positive message of the Christian faith is that when man turned his back on God and messed up the world God had made, God didn't walk away from man. Instead he had already planned for some people to enjoy eternity with him in heaven where there is only righteousness and peace . . .

**Trevor.** What do you mean by righteousness?

**Pastor.** I mean a way of living that pleases God in every part. There is no sin and no suffering in heaven. Let me read a few verses to you from the Bible that describe this. They are found in Revelation 21:3-4: 'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 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."'

**Anne.** That sounds great!

**Pastor.** It is; and it is God saying: 'Sin and suffering, pain and death need not last for ever.'

**Trevor.** You said 'need not last for ever' - do you mean they might?

**Pastor.** There is something very important I must tell you both, and that is that God has not only prepared this wonderful place called heaven, he has also planned for a day when everyone will have to stand before him and give account. We mentioned this earlier as well.

**Trevor.** That's the Day of Judgement isn't it?

**Pastor.** Yes, and the important thing about that day is that no one will escape it. In the New Testament, in Romans 2:16 Paul says God will judge men's secrets.

**Trevor.** You mean no stone will be left unturned and all the skeletons will fall out of the cupboard?

**Anne.** Sounds scary to me.

**Pastor.** It is scary. But it's also God's day of perfect justice. Those who cause so much suffering in this world through their greed and cruelty will be brought to account.

**Anne.** What's God's standard of judgement?

**Pastor.** In 1 Peter 1:16, we are told we must be holy because God is holy, and in Matthew 22:37, Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all our 'heart, soul and mind.'

**Trevor.** Well that seems to put us all in the wrong as far as God is concerned.

**Pastor.** Exactly! But I said there are four vital things God has done to take the sting out of the world of suffering. The first is by giving us the Bible to help us follow his best plan. The second is by the promise of heaven, a place without sin and suffering. The third is that God sent his Son Jesus Christ into this world in order to build a bridge between us and himself and to change the rebellious and cruel hearts of men and women.

**Trevor.** How did he do that?

**Pastor.** By his life and teaching Christ set the perfect pattern for us to follow. If we all made it our ambition to be like Christ and obey his words, much of the suffering would be removed from the world immediately. But since we all utterly fail to be like him, Christ took both our guilt and the judgement of God that we deserve for our sin upon himself. When Jesus died on the cross, he died in place of sinners so that God can forgive all that we have done wrong. He does this not by ignoring the punishment our sin deserves, but by satisfying his justice through his Son dying for us. The fourth thing God has done for us is to send the Holy Spirit to give a new life to those who trust in him.

**Anne.** What do you mean by a new life?

**Pastor.** In John 3:3, Jesus called it being 'born again'. God is not just in the business of forgiving sins but of changing lives, and the one is just as important as the other to God. Not only is he prepared to forgive the man or woman who admits they have been adding to the world's suffering by their sin - and that's true of each one of us - but he also gives his Holy Spirit to us so that we will have a great desire to please God and to live clean and holy lives. The real Christian has new values, a new love for others, and a new longing to be like Christ - and that saves a lot of suffering. Don't forget this: all through the history of the church it has been true Christians who have helped to stop suffering. It is people who are committed to Christ and his Word, the Bible, who have started hospitals, cared for the dying, provided for prisoners, fought against slavery, built homes for orphans, taken food to the hungry - the list can go on. Those who follow Christ have always been in the front-line of making sense of suffering.

**Trevor.** I can see what you mean by saying God has actually done a lot about the problem of suffering. It certainly makes sense and we must think and talk more about what you have said.

**Pastor.** I hope our conversation has helped, but remember this: If you turn your back on the Christian response to suffering and on God's answer, you will have to look for a better way. After all, the problem won't disappear. So I would encourage you not just to think and talk more, but to ask God to start answering the problem of

suffering with you. The best way you can help the world is to get right with God through Christ yourselves.