

Why is there Pain and Suffering in the World?

If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth, only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair.

C. S. Lewis

This is an essential starting point, if you really want an answer to this question. We want a real and reliable answer to this question – not just wishful thinking.

This question presupposes that grief, pain, suffering and the like are somehow wrong or abnormal. They are elements of human life which should not exist.

This is a relatively modern view.

For approximately 1800 years, Christianity and western society in general assumed that there was a difference between physical health, and mental, emotional or spiritual health.

The normal or desirable state of physical health has always been regarded as feeling good, healthy, no pains or aches, with occasional inevitable illnesses. However, the normal or desirable state of emotional/mental/spiritual health could best be described, historically, as contentment. (Derivation: *holding it all together*)

Irregular seasons of joy and sadness and fear were regarded as normal. So words like 'enjoyment' were used to describe the putting of joy into life.

Because you couldn't control sickness or death, you expected occasional sadness.

Because you couldn't control external threats, there was always fear.

Happiness, in its original meaning, a meaning it held until early in the 20th century, meant 'chance' or 'lucky'. There are still echoes of this meaning in words we use such as 'perhaps', or the older 'mayhap', or 'happenstance'.

Only since around the end of WWI have we developed the idea of happiness as the normal state of mental health. The growth of the relatively new science of psychology cemented this thinking. We generally think that happiness is a state in which we:

- Have no worries;
- Have no stress; and
- Are constantly upbeat.

The fact that none of these is, in fact, an achievable human condition accounts for the fact that our most commonly-diagnosed 20th century illness is depression.

Previous ages knew the secret of having worries, but being content despite those worries; of having stress, but using that stress for good; of recognising the value of silence and reflective melancholy or at least soberness.

Contemporary society demands happiness as a constant state of being. So we turn to things that we think will achieve this state for us:

- Shopping;
- Entertainment;
- Possessions;
- Travel.

We have normalised happiness and pathologised disaffection. In former times, disaffection was what galvanised us to do better, to become better – internally better, that is. It was part of being human.

We are fascinated by the troubled lives of celebrity film stars and sports or media personalities. We gawp at their dysfunction, and borrow from them some respectability for our own dysfunction. Even worse, we encourage their ‘celebrity sin’ to give us moral permission to trivialise and normalise our own sin and brokenness.

None of this ought to be a surprise for us. Although it is relatively recent phenomenon in western Christian society, these attributes have more or less characterised all societies which have abandoned the truth of the one, true God.

Paul describes much of what I have been talking about in Romans 1: 18-32 (and I've given a short summary of his argument at the beginning of each section, **in highlights.**)

Over the centuries, people have deliberately suppressed the truth that God exists, and God is not pleased:

¹⁸But God's angry displeasure erupts as acts of human mistrust and wrongdoing and lying accumulate, as people try to suppress the truth about God.

The truth about God has always been clearly obvious – anyone who looks honestly at the created world could see first of all, the fact that God is powerful, and second that there is a deep mystery or transcendence about him:

¹⁹But the basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! ²⁰By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being. So nobody has a good excuse.

Here's the truth about history: people knew about God but they preferred to pretend that they didn't, and used this pretend ignorance as an excuse for the rebellious way they really wanted to live:

²¹What happened was this: People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn't treat him like God, refusing to worship him, they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. ²²They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life. ²³They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand.

God responded by saying: “Well, if you want to conclude that I'm not worthy of your attention, I'll return the compliment! ” And, oh what a sorry mess that has got us into! Instead of living within God's goodness, the whole race fell deeper and deeper and deeper into degradation and brokenness:

²⁴So God said, in effect, “If that’s what you want, that’s what you get.” It wasn’t long before they were living in a pigpen, smeared with filth, filthy inside and out. ²⁵And all this because they traded the true God for a fake god, and worshiped the god they made instead of the God who made them—the God we bless, the God who blesses *us*. Oh, yes!

²⁶Worse followed. Refusing to know God, they soon didn’t know how to be human either—women didn’t know how to be women, men didn’t know how to be men. ²⁷Sexually confused, they abused and defiled one another, women with women, men with men—all lust, no love. And then they paid for it, oh, how they paid for it—emptied of God and love, godless and loveless wretches.

²⁸Since they didn’t bother to acknowledge God, God quit bothering them and let them run loose. ²⁹And then all hell broke loose: rampant evil, grabbing and grasping, vicious backstabbing. They made life hell on earth with their envy, wanton killing, bickering, and cheating. Look at them: mean-spirited, venomous, ³⁰fork-tongued God-bashers. Bullies, swaggerers, insufferable windbags! They keep inventing new ways of wrecking lives. They ditch their parents when they get in the way. ³¹Stupid, scheming, cruel, cold-blooded. ³²And it’s not as if they don’t know better. They know perfectly well they’re spitting in God’s face. And they don’t care—worse, they hand out prizes to those who do the worst things best!

If we jump ahead to chapter 8 of the same book, Paul adds some more explanation:

¹⁸Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will give us later. . . . ²⁰Against its will, everything on earth was subjected to God’s curse. ²¹All creation anticipates the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from its current bondage to death and decay. ²²For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

²³And even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, we also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us.

Although we could turn to any number of Biblical passages, both Old Testament and New Testament to demonstrate the truth of the human condition, these two passages reveal to us the following facts:

1. The world is broken, damaged, severely dysfunctional, both because of the general introduction of evil into the world, and because of specific, deliberate human sin.
2. This brokenness is evident at the natural, physical environmental level, and in the randomness of tragedy and accident.
3. It is also evident at an individual human, personal level, which in turn affects every aspect of human relationships:
 - a. Marriage and family life
 - b. Romance and sexual behaviour
 - c. Commerce and work life
 - d. Government and political life
 - e. International relationships

4. The brokenness is also evident at a physical level in each human being, in the incidence of sickness, pain, aging, and death.

In former centuries, and still in non-western countries, this brokenness is understood to be an indispensable part of the human condition. Michael Ramsden wrote this:

My job takes me around many different parts of the world in order to answer people's questions about the Christian faith. I find it fascinating that I have never been asked this question in India, a country that certainly knows a lot more about suffering than many of us in the West. I find it even more intriguing that Christians who write books in situations where they have known unspeakable torment because of the gospel do not normally raise this as an issue for themselves either.

In the west, former generations used the term 'providence', to describe the ups and downs of human life. They invoked the name of God to help them in a difficult and dangerous world. Consider this ancient prayer from St Augustine:

Blessed are all your saints, O God and King,
who have travelled over the tempestuous sea of this life
and have made the harbour of peace and felicity.
Watch over us who are still on this dangerous voyage.
Frail is our vessel, and the ocean wide:
But as in your mercy, you have set our course,
so pilot the vessel of our life
toward the everlasting shore of peace,
and bring us at last to the quiet haven of our heart's desire;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What ancient peoples knew, and what we have largely forgotten – or to use Paul's more challenging accusation – **what we have deliberately ignored despite knowing it full well** – is that our brokenness and our dysfunction is a marker of our fundamental separation from God.

When suffering comes from what we call natural disasters such as the Haitian earthquake, we must recognise that these are not the result of God getting angry with us, but rather of the general effect of a world damaged by evil. Jesus himself explained this when asked about why some local natural disasters had occurred in his day.

If we do not want to accept the Biblical view of the reasons for suffering, the only option left to mankind is to deny the existence of God and take one of two approaches:

- We can pretend that man is capable of solving all his problems, and that we can resolve our deep cosmic loneliness by funding expensive space research programs to look for life elsewhere in the universe; or
- We can try to forestall the inevitable lapse into despair by the relentless and selfish pursuit of pleasure.

Christianity stands in deep contrast to both of these views. It admits that while there is indeed a problem of serious magnitude, the problem is not either in our "humanness" or the world, itself. Rather, something has gone wrong.

We find in being human, both a deep and sacred honour, and yet a profound disgrace. We were created to be the absolute pinnacle of God's creation, in a world that was so wonderful that the morning stars sang for pure joy at its creation, and all of creation worshipped its creator.

When we recognise that things are broken, we also enable a glimmer of hope that there just might be a cure to our brokenness. The Gospel of Jesus Christ provides the substance for that hope.

It is not that we find ourselves less fallen, or closer to perfection than others, nor that we find in the practice of our religion a means of escaping the world of brokenness, guilt and suffering. Our children still die, our relationships still cause us pain and sadness. But the Christian's great advantage is that we are aware of the causes of our own broken humanity within a broken, fallen world and we have heard the message of hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I said that we have **heard** the message.

One of the strangest verses in the Bible is that one where it says that **Jesus learned obedience through suffering**. (Hebrews 5: 8)

Why did Jesus have to learn obedience? Wasn't he perfect? Wasn't he God's son?

The word, 'obedience' comes from the Latin word 'audire', to hear. When we are obedient to our parents, we hear what they say and we do it. Hearing and doing are closely linked in terms of obedience. Remember Jesus told a parable about this – the two sons whose father asked them to go and work in the fields. They both heard, but only one did what the father wanted.

Jesus suffered. There is no doubt about this. And in his suffering he identified with humanity who need to hear God. Not to hear *from* God, but to hear God; to hear God **and to do** what he wants. (Too many people in our age want **to hear from God**, it seems to me, rather than **just to hear and obey him**.)

Jesus carried out perfectly what you and I need to do – to hear God and to follow him. He lived the perfect human life that Adam was created to live. Adam failed and Jesus succeeded. Because of Adam's failure, obedience (hearing and doing) now comes with suffering. That is its price, and it must be paid. It cannot be bought for less.

In our human parenting we know this deeply. Our children suffer often with real tears, before they learn obedience. In our suffering, we may have to ask what it is that we need to hear.

Don't hear me say what I am not saying here! It is not that God kills our children because he wants to tell us something. That would be blasphemy. But in the accidental or natural processes of this broken world, and our damaged humanity, whether we encounter them as a family tragedy, as a tsunami in Asia, what is it that I must hear from God in order to recover my lost humanity in him?

God calls us through the Gospel, not merely to be Christians, but to be truly human.

The Gospel is the promise, not to take us out of this world to live with him on a heavenly cloud in a pie in the sky heaven, but to recover our once noble and perfect humanity. This is why Christ came to be human. This is why he laid aside his godliness and took on humanity – to show us the grandeur of our lost humanity, and to provide a way that we could take it up again.

He has given us a glimpse in the Sermon on the Mount of what the world could be like – indeed will be like – when he restores it, too.

All of the pages of the Bible rustle with the expectation of a new and better world, a world where we live as humans, at peace with each other and with the environment, and with the animal kingdom, and in perfect relationship with God. We are never called to be other than human. Our humanity is redeemed – bought back again in the human death of Jesus.

When Jesus died, he defeated all the powers of evil that caused the brokenness of this world. He defied the ultimate enemy of man, Death, and defeated it. He took authority over the evil one, and declared that the power and authority of evil were now limited both in scope, and also in tenure. But for us, who are living in this time in between Jesus' resurrection and his second coming, we are living in the **Now, but Not Yet** of Jesus new Kingdom.

In this in-between time, we benefit from the victory of Christ, in terms of our forgiveness of sin, and even in the power of sin over us, but we still have to live in a world that is not only tainted, but governed by evil. The King of Kings has apparently permitted the evil power of Satan to still hold sway in this world – even though he is a defeated foe. If you want it in Narnian language, the witch's evil has been defeated, but there are still battles to be fought and lives to be lost, although the outcome of the war is absolutely not in doubt. And those who make the supreme sacrifice will live again.

Sometimes the power of prayer and God's miraculous intervention destroys some of the effects of that wickedness, (we have occasional miraculous healings or provisions) but often, evil appears to prevail.

I did say, "appears to prevail". We ought not forget that for every person who dies of a disease, hundreds more are cured or prevented from it by advancements in western medical science. For every person killed in a natural disaster, hundreds more are helped by generous aid agencies, many of whom are directly Christian. It is a narrow and

ultimately self-centred view that says that evil in this world is more prevalent than grace.

And furthermore, the whole witness of the New Testament is that we can live in the midst of pain and suffering with joy. Although tears streak our faces at times, we can still know the peace of God in our hearts.

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, he has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And has shed his own blood for my soul.

Our starting point is that this world is characterised by suffering. It is a badly broken, damaged world. This is the message of Romans 1 and 8, which is so deep that it demands to be read over and over again, hundreds of times till it starts to penetrate, not because our brains are thick, but because of our thick flesh – our humanity which is not sufficiently spiritually alive to understand it easily.

The whole world is broken. It groans in its deep decay, earnestly desiring liberation. And it hurts. We hurt who live in it. C. S. Lewis posed the question: “The real problem is not why some pious, humble, believing people suffer, but why some do not.”

The suffering is the norm; it is the expected thing when we live in a broken world. How come some escape it? But this is for Stu to try to answer next week! This is the heart of his sermon topic.

Please recall the position I started with: if we do not search for and hold onto Real Truth, if we simply try to stand on wishful thinking and false ideas, we will, when the thing flies apart, end in Despair. But if we search for and find Real Truth, then no matter how uncomfortable it is, at times, and no matter how much everything falls apart around us, we will find a Place to Stand.

Real Truth about these things will lead us into the sunny uplands of understanding. There may be tears, there may be pain – no, let’s be blunt – there **will** be tears and there **will** be pain, but through the curtain of our tears, we will find the strength and the will to praise him who loved us and made us his own.

His name is Love and Goodness – and there is no darkness in him. You can afford to trust him with your life.