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The Enigma of Pain and Suffering (In the Context of Exodus 1:15-25)

All suffering is a result of our living in a fallen world (Gen 3:1ff). But, we must take care how we communicate this message because some people are victims of suffering for which they were not directly responsible (e.g. an aborted child or a victim of a crime). Mistakenly, they often feel pangs of guilt, wondering what they have done to offend God. On the other hand, many people choose to blame others, even God, for suffering rather than take responsibility for suffering's presence in our world. Others become bitter, especially if they are under the chastening judgment of God, fail to accept the grace of God for their trial, and believe that they are suffering unjustly (Heb 12:15).

The advent of the severe persecution, suffering, and ultimately infanticide of Hebrew children in Egypt raises several questions. Why did God allow this to happen? Why didn't God stop this cruelty? Why didn't God rescue the Hebrews before things got so bad? These are significant questions that deserve a correct response. First, God is not the author of pain and suffering. God clearly warned Adam not to eat from the tree of the "knowledge of good and evil" [knowledge by experience instead of by discernment, see 1 Cor 2:10-16], because it would result in suffering and death, Gen 3:16-17. Second, anywhere you witness suffering and pain, it is an affirmation that at present we live in a fallen and sinful world where the wages of sin are pain and death, Rom 6:23. The infanticide of Exodus 1:15-22 was a grim testimony to the consequences of the fall of Adam. Third, innocent people are often the victims of the ravages of sin in our world. The first such victim was Abel, who was slain by his brother, Gen 4:1-15. Fourth, the number one factor overlooked in questioning the "whys" in our world is the fact that WE are responsible for the way things are in this world, NOT GOD!

People often erroneously refer to violence, ravages of the elements, pain, and destruction as if they were God's work by calling them "random acts of God." This is a failure to accept our own responsibility for the world in which we live. The last time I checked, God placed human beings in the world and gave them "dominion" over it. The Hebrew word "dominion" is *radah*, and it means a vested authority for which the recipient is held accountable as a steward, not an owner. "The earth is the Lord's," but it is we who have made a mess of it! But one day soon, He is coming again to redeem all of His creation, remake it, and remove from it all the persons and forces of sin and corruption that have brought pain, destruction, and death to our present world.

Seven Causes of Human Suffering

1. Suffering is a witness that sin is present among the human family. We get clues to this in Genesis 3:14-24 with an explanation of the curses and suffering sin brought, and the consequences are seen in chapter 4:1-26. This suffering included alienation from God (3:8; 4:5), murder (4:8), lying (4:9), judgment (4:10-12), polygamy (4:19), and celebration of sin (4:23-24). Whenever we sin, others are inevitably and negatively affected. Human suffering is the by-product of Satan's lie, Gen 3:4.
2. Some suffering comes from other persons. Because of the sinfulness or negligence of others, suffering may often come in the form of persecution, violence, malicious acts, vengeance, treachery, etc., especially against believers, Exod 1:15-22; Matt 5:10-12; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 3:13-17.
3. Some suffering comes from our own negligence. It is a result of our negligence against ourselves or others and our own failure to observe the laws of God, Prov 6:9-11; 10:4; 19:15.
4. Some suffering comes from God as judgment for sin or chastening as with Korah's rebellion, Numb 16:31-35, or as chastening as described in Prov 3:11-12; Rom 3:23; 1 Cor 11:29-30; Heb 12:5-8; Jude 1:7.
5. Some suffering comes from Satan because of our witness and our relationship with God, see e.g. Job 1:6-12; 2:1-10; 1 Pet 5:8. The Adversary seeks to destroy us with his fiery darts; therefore we are warned to put on the whole armor of God, Eph 6:10-20.
6. Some suffering comes from our intentional disobedience of God's will. Samson is a perfect example of one who sacrificed his call and usefulness to God by yielding to his fleshly appetites, see e.g. Judg 16:1-21, esp. v. 20; Saul, 1 Sam 15:22-23; David, 2 Sam 12:1-15, esp. v. 10; 1 Pet 2:20; 4:15.
7. Some suffering is allowed by God. He uses suffering, either self-inflicted or from others, for our edification as Job in #5 above and the life of Paul, Rom 8:28; 1 Pet 3:14, 17; 4:19; or He uses it to bring judgment on the wicked, Gen 19:12-29; Lev 26:30; Deut 25:1; Ps 9:16; 37:28; Eccl 3:17; Rom 2:1-3.

The Forms of Suffering

1. Mental and Spiritual Anguish - Why doesn't God do something? Some suffering manifests itself in mental or spiritual pain, Ps 37, 49, 73.
2. Physical Illness or Personal Injury - Why did God allow this to happen to me or someone I love? Some suffering is from physical illness or other kind of physical impairment, Ps 41:8; 77:10.
3. Persecution - Why doesn't God vindicate me? Some suffer persecution unjustly; others may justly suffer persecution, Ps 5:8; 42:9; 43:1-2; 55:3; 140:1 (cf. Matt 5:11-12)

4. Death - Why doesn't God care what happens to me or those I love? Some experience death as punishment justly (thief on the cross - Luke 23:39-43) or unjustly (Stephen - Acts 7:1-60, esp. 54-60), or even for the glory of God (John 11:40).

Ten Purposes of Human Suffering

1. Some suffering is for our purification. Suffering causes us to draw closer to God and more carefully evaluate our lives to purge us of known sins of omission and commission, Mal 3:3; 2 Tim 1:12.
2. Some suffering is for our maturity, growth, and development. Some sufferings come to teach us patience and endurance in trusting God, 2 Cor 1:6; Phil 1:29. In 1 Pet 5:10, four words are used to describe the positive benefit to a believer who suffers. The four words are: (1) the word "perfect," Greek καταρτίζω, *katartizo*, "to complete," "to prepare"; (2) "establish" or confirm, the Greek στηρίζω, *sterizo*, "to make fast," "to establish"; (3) "strengthen," Greek σθενώω, *sthenoo*, "to strengthen"; and (4) "settle" or establish, Greek θεμελιώω, *themelioo*, "to lay the foundation of" something or someone.
3. Some suffering enables us to achieve humility. Sometime suffering comes to us to humble us and shift our focus from self to God by crucifying our own selfish will, Gal 2:20; Phil 1:21.
4. Some suffering enables us to bear fruit. Some suffering is allowed by or even caused by God to enable us to bear fruit in our walk with God, John 15:2, 8; 2 Tim 1:3-5.
5. Some suffering from God is for our chastening. Some suffering comes as chastening from God in order to help us to recommit ourselves to Him when we have drifted away, Deut 8:5; 2 Sam 7:14; Job 5:17; Ps 6:1; 38:1; 118:18; Prov 3:11; 19:18; Isa 26:16; 1 Cor 11:32; Heb 12:6-11.
6. Some suffering is simply to bring glory to God. Sometimes God allows us to suffer in order that we may have the privilege of bringing glory to God when He intervenes to remove the suffering in some miraculous way, John 9:1-41; 11:1-46 (see especially 11:40); Rom 8:17; 2 Pet 3:9.
7. Some suffering equips us for greater service. Suffering endured provides us with a testimony of grace and comfort received from God that allows us to share and comfort others who experience similar trials and suffering, 2 Cor 1:4; 1 Thess 3:4.
8. All suffering is either a prelude to glorification or a warning of eternal punishment. All sufferings of those who are believers and love God are a prelude to receiving the "crown of life," Jas 1:12; Rev 2:10; cf. Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 13:9-13.
9. All suffering in this life has a redemptive purpose. God is not willing that any should perish, Isa 30:18; Rom 2:1-4; 2 Pet 3:9.

10. All suffering after this life is over is an eternal punishment. God warns every person to avoid eternal condemnation, 2 Pet 3:10-17; Rev 20:14-15; 21:7-8.

Psalms of Comfort (13, 40, 42, 77, 90)

1. These psalms were of particular comfort to believers in time of suffering, although there are many other psalms that fall into this same category. In general, the psalms help the sufferer to sense God's care and in some cases, to hear God's instruction on the subject of suffering.
2. The list of ten purposes helps us to see that even when God allows us to suffer or is the origin of our suffering, He is not a capricious God. He has a plan and a redemptive purpose to allow us to achieve our best in life.
3. The psalms of comfort help to set in perspective the reality that this world is not the final home of the believer. God knows about the suffering, and He will use it to the best advantage in the life of a believer (Rom. 8:28).