

WHY DO THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER?

By Denver Cheddie

One of the seemingly greatest paradoxes and injustices of the Bible is that righteous people – those whose lives are pleasing to an omnipotent God – are allowed to suffer and face hardships in this world. But one thing that's clear is that God does allow the righteous to suffer – unjustly from a human perspective.

There are those who would insist that God is too good to allow the righteous to suffer without a cause. They believe that Christians only suffer if they commit some sin or somehow open the door to the devil. However to believe such is to totally neglect Peter's discussion in 1 Peter 3:19-23. Even Jesus suffered unjustly. Certainly He did not sin, and He is our example in suffering. If they persecuted Him they would do the same to His followers (Matthew 10:25). Although it is true that many people suffer as a result of personal wrongdoing, it cannot be denied that many believers undergo hardship through no fault of their own. The Bible clearly allows for such a possibility, and God definitely permits it.

Some [1] would even suggest that the reason Job suffered is because he allowed fear into his life (Job 3:25) and hence opened the door for Satan to come in. However it must be observed that God had a completely contrasting verdict on Job (Job 1:1,8; 2:3; Ezekiel 14:14). Besides such fear is not uncommon to any normal human being, including Paul, the apostle (2 Corinthians 11:3) [2]. One wonders, if Job had really opened a

door to the devil, why Satan still needed permission for God to remove the hedge of protection, which obviously was still there. People who accuse Job of such atrocities more aptly fit the description of his “miserable comforters” than diligent students of scripture. Job was a righteous man who suffered for no direct fault of his own – only because a sovereign God allowed it to be so. The important question is not “if” or “whether” the righteous suffer, but “why”.

Why Do They Suffer?

A search of the scriptures reveals a number of answers to the above question. They are as follows:

1. *God sees eternally whereas we see presently.* Although God is interested in our earthly welfare, He is much more concerned about our eternal well being. His greatest act of love was to offer salvation to men, not health, wealth and honor – although it sometimes includes the latter three. This would explain why He allowed the apostles and early Christians to be martyred and to suffer such loss. From an earthly perspective, it would seem that God forsook them, but from an eternal perspective, they are in heaven safe in the arms of their Lord – a much better standing than the best enjoy on earth (Philippians 1:21). God has a much different outlook on this life than we do. He is alpha and omega, we are here and now. So a lot of what we call suffering is not the same from God’s eyes.

2. God uses suffering and hardship to produce in us godly character. Job was not perfect in the sense of being sinless before God, but rather blameless before men. God, through Job's suffering, exposed to him a lot of pride and self-dependency that was hidden in his heart (Job 42:3-6). Although this was not the direct cause of Job's misery, God did use his hardship to make him a better person – one who would be much more capable of handling that with which He wanted to bless him (Job 42:10,12).

It is a New Testament fact that God uses fiery trials to purify us (James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6,7).

3. Suffering keeps us dependent on God. Judging from some of Job's statements, it would seem that human nature tends to forget rather quickly that all of man's good eventually comes from God (James 1:16,17). Man eventually sees himself as the source of these blessings and subconsciously begins to depend on his own ability and possessions. He is in need of constant reminder that it is God who gives him the power to get wealth (Deuteronomy 8:17,18). What better way to remind him of that than for God to keep him in a state where he has no choice but to trust his Creator? Hardship is one way of accomplishing that.

4. Our personal sufferings are a source of encouragement to others. God, being eternally minded, is concerned about every generation of human existence. Man is only concerned about his own. The essence of Hebrews 11 – the faith hall of fame – which climaxes in 12:1, is that the faithfulness of the Old Testament saints during suffering was to be an

example and encouragement to us. Through similar reasoning, Jude 3 exhorts us on the basis of the sufferings that the apostles and early Christians went through. We have also been greatly blessed by the stories of Christian martyrs throughout the centuries. It would seem that from God's perspective, much of our suffering is intended to be a source of edification to others as well as future generations who would name the name of Christ. And what a rebuke to the devil it was when he tried to get Job to renounce God, but instead, not only did Job prevail, but now Christians everyday are being encouraged and strengthened by Job's perseverance (James 5:11). Our sufferings could have similar effects on other believers.

Our Attitude

So as righteous people, our attitude to suffering should not be one of complaining, bitterness or resentment. If it were the result of personal sin, we should be repentant. Otherwise, our prayer should not just be, "Lord let this cup pass from me", but rather, "Thy will be done". God's answer would be, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

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[1] See Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis*, (Eugene, Harvest House Publishers, 1993): 66, 391 for examples of those who condemn Job.

[2] Some fears are clearly demonic e.g. Matt 10:28; 2 Tim 1:7; 1 John 4:18, whereas others are normal human emotions and reactions e.g. Job 3:25; 2 Cor 11:3. Such would include ordinary concerns about the future, as opposed to worries. There is even a godly fear.