

Why Do People Suffer and Die?

Suffering and death is all around us. Hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, snowstorms are just some of the natural disasters that can cause incredible suffering and death. Tragedy also occurs through such things as car accidents, fires, plane crashes, and terrorism. Innocent people, men, women and children, are all subject to this downfall. Are some people worse sinners and therefore punished because of their sins by these tragedies? Why do these things occur? Why does God, who created all things, allow people to suffer and die? Is God to blame for this pain and suffering of humanity?

There were some who questioned Jesus about this topic. "There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all like wise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:1-5) So, according to Jesus, suffering does not mean one person is worse than another. Regardless of suffering and death, we must all repent, or we will perish.

Solomon, the wisest and richest man ever to live, spoke in this way, "I returned and saw under the sun that—The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill, but time and chance happen to them all. For man also does not know his time. Like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them." (Eccl. 9:11-12) The tragedies of time and chance can happen to anyone.

Look at the life of Jesus. He was sinless, and yet in the prime of his life, he pleaded with God saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will"...and a second time he went away and prayed, saying, "O my Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done"...and he prayed a third time, saying the same words." (Matthew 26:39-44) But He was not protected by circumstances or from unrighteous men. It was not God's will to deliver him from suffering and death at this time.

What about John the Baptist? He was in prison and beheaded! (Matt. 14:10) Paul's life was certainly filled with suffering. He was beaten, in prison, shipwrecked and much more and his life ended by murder. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28) Stephen was stoned. (Acts 7:59-60) Obviously, neither the righteous nor the evil are free from suffering and death.

How Do We View Life?

Perhaps our problem is the way we view this life. If we want to question God on why suffering occurs, maybe we should look to His word to understand better His outlook on this life, and our life in the future. The book of Revelation speaks of a time when there is no more death. (Rev. 20:14) God reveals through John a new heaven and new earth in which there will be "no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There will be no more pain," (Rev. 21:1,4) Paul also spoke of this time, "So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-56) So we

know there is a time coming when suffering and death will be no more! What a wonderful time to look forward to! This also means this world, this age of mankind, is not all there is, nor all that God has planned for mankind whom he created on this earth.

Abraham also looked for another land and a city. "He waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God...these all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them." (Hebrews 11:10, 13-16) John saw that city in his vision, "Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God". (Rev. 21:2-3) Abraham, father of the faithful, had his eyes and heart set on a future place to live prepared by God, a country and a city, not of this present age.

The faithful men and women of the Bible were sometimes delivered out of distress but sometimes endured great suffering even to the point of death. (Hebrews 11:30-38) But all of them "having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us." (Hebrews 11:40-41) These faithful men and women await the promise of a new heaven and new earth and beautiful new city of Jerusalem, when they are resurrected to eternal life.

This world is not paradise. Far from it! Paul said, "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Romans 8:20-21) God has a plan for this present decaying earth and for mankind who live on it. We look forward to a paradise, which is to come and "consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits the glory which shall be revealed in us." (Romans 8:18-19)

In this present age, we must be willing to suffer, as Jesus Christ also suffered when on this earth. "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him that we may also be glorified together. (Romans 8:16-17)

Look to the Future

Does this mean that life today is all suffering and no joy? Absolutely not, but we should all have a realistic understanding of the real need that all mankind has. We need God! In the model prayer Jesus gave, he instructed us to pray (Matthew 6:10), "Your kingdom come..." God's desire for us on this earth is to seek him, to repent of our sins and through faith in Jesus Christ to follow and obey Him. Adam chose to reject God and instruction from Him. He suffered the consequences, and because of his sin, death is our destiny. (Genesis 3:19, Hebrews 9:27, Romans 6:23) Do you think if this life was one of ease, without pain and suffering, that we would have a need for God? Ironically, it is usually in our times of trial that we seek God's help, and we turn to Him and are willing to repent. However, God's desire is to bless us now as well

as eternally. Jesus said to his disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life". (Luke 18:29-30)

Even in the midst of the troubles that seem to surround us, we can find encouragement and joy in living God's way. In Philippians 4:4-8 we are encouraged with these words, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! ... Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

Our lifespan on this earth is very short and therefore it is hard for us to visualize life as God does. With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. Therefore we must strive to look forward to the future world that God has planned for us, while He patiently waits on us to repent and seek Him. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Peter 3:8-9, 13)