

What Should We Do About Suffering?

By Dave DeWitt

Most Christians writing about suffering (myself included) deal with the question, “Why do we have suffering?” I wrote about it in my Moody Press book, “Answering the Tough Ones.” There, I suggested that the only way to prevent human suffering is to eliminate human free will, which eliminates the possibility of love. We are suffering because we choose (and our original parents chose) to disobey God. But most Christian analysis of suffering (including mine) does not deal with the question, “What should we do about it?” And I thought that question was worth some consideration. First, I would like to look at the answer of a few of the world’s major philosophies.

What the World Says about Suffering

Atheism

There are two kinds of atheists: (a) naturalists who believe there is nothing but matter and energy of the material universe, and (b) those who believe suffering eliminates the possibility of a good God. We shall here only consider the latter. These atheists tell us that a good God would not allow the suffering we experience, therefore, no such God exists. The argument goes like this:

1. The world is full of suffering.
2. If God was good, He would eliminate suffering.
3. Suffering is not eliminated.

Therefore, either God is not good, or He does not exist.

God would be, by definition, good.

Therefore, God does not exist.

There are three observations to make about the atheist’s reasoning:

First, the atheist logic would be nullified if we simply add the word “yet” to point #3. God has not eliminated suffering “yet.”

Second, atheists have no moral absolutes. So where do they get the idea that something is good or bad? Without a morality, they can observe that suffering exists, but cannot conclude that it is bad. To say suffering (or God) is bad, they must borrow the morality of a biblical world view.

Third, without any exception I am aware of, atheists believe in evolution. But their logic also eliminates evolution. Let’s use the same argument they use against a belief in God:

1. The world is full of suffering.
2. If evolution was good, it would eliminate suffering.
3. Suffering is not eliminated.

Therefore, either evolution is not good, or it does not exist.

Evolution is, by definition, good.

Therefore, evolution does not exist.

But we should notice that in all this, the atheist has done nothing to alleviate suffering. Atheism only eliminates God, not suffering. If evolution is how everything got here, then it causes tremendous suffering. It should either be hated or declared non-existent.

Progressivism

The liberal answer to “What should we do about suffering?” is put our hope in progressive morality and technology. Morally, we should accept (“love”) everyone (such as those promoting abortion, feminism, destruction of the family, and teaching LGBTQ to young children). We should also put our hope in the progress of technology, things like medical advances and artificial intelligence.

But moral and technological “progress” does not seem to reduce suffering. CBS News reported,

Nearly 50,000 Americans died by suicide in 2022, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Thursday. The number of suicide deaths was on a downward trend in 2019 and 2020, but it increased by 5% in 2021, and then further increased by 2.6% in 2022 to 49,449, the CDC found. [August 11, 2023, cbsnews.com/news/nearly]

Gallup reported this about depression:

The percentage of U.S. adults who report having been diagnosed with depression at some point in their lifetime has reached 29.0%, nearly 10 percentage points higher than in 2015. The percentage of Americans who currently have or are being treated for depression has also increased, to 17.8%, up about seven points over the same period. Both rates are the highest recorded by Gallup since it began measuring depression using the current form of data collection in 2015.” [news.gallup.com/poll/505745]

It certainly does not seem like taking God out of schools, homes, and society and replacing Him with progressivism, reduces suffering. To hope in progressivism seems a poor answer to the question, “What should we do about suffering?”

Agnosticism

Agnosticism is not actually a world view. It tells us how to think about truth, but it does not suggest any truth for us to think about. Many turn to it as a mind-set (or avoiding a mind-set) for dealing with difficult questions. But agnosticism is self-defeating. Agnosticism tells us truth cannot be known. In this case, the truth about suffering cannot be known. But if truth cannot be known, then the idea that truth cannot be known, also cannot be known. So some truth must be knowable. Even if the truth about suffering cannot be known, that does nothing to alleviate suffering, nor does it tell us what to do about it. Not knowing is a strange thing to put our hope in.

Buddhism

Buddhism is all about suffering. It teaches “Four Noble Truths:”

The First Noble Truth—Suffering is universal.

The Second Noble Truth—Suffering is caused by desire.

The Third Noble Truth—The way to liberate oneself is by eliminating all desire.

The Fourth Noble Truth—Desire can be eliminated by following the “Eightfold Path” (which is a works’ system common to most religions).

There are two basic problems with Buddhism when it comes to eliminating suffering:

1. The logical problem with Buddhism is, “If suffering is eliminated by eliminating desire,” then should we desire to eliminate desire? If the elimination of desire is desirable, then suffering is inevitable because it calls for a desire, namely, the desire to eliminate desire. So the Buddhist has done nothing to eliminate suffering.
2. Approximately 2500 years ago, Siddhartha Gautama declared himself “the Buddha,” meaning “enlightened.” But his enlightenment did not eliminate suffering, it only eliminated humanity. A being which has no desires would not be human.

After the four noble truths are complete, we still have a universe full of suffering. Buddhists have not reduced suffering at all, nor have they answered the question of what to do about it. To place hope in eliminating desire requires desire, which, according to Buddhism, is the cause of suffering. And if someone should accomplish such a thing, they would no longer be human.

Hinduism

Much of practical Hinduism is polytheism, which sacrifices things to appease the gods. This is rare today but common through most of history. Polytheism does nothing to reduce suffering, it only uses

superstition to imagine the help of the gods. Today, Hinduism represents pantheism, which says suffering is not real. Geisler points out the problem.

The Hindu says the world is not real, it is maya (an illusion). But how does he know this? In fact, if the world is an illusion, how can we distinguish between reality and fantasy at all? If what we think is real is not, then what real standard could we possibly use to judge that the world is not real?

According to pantheists, individual minds do not exist. They are themselves aspects of the illusion (maya) and, therefore, provide no basis for explaining the illusion. But if the mind is part of the illusion, it can provide no basis for explaining the illusion. [Norman L. Geisler, Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999, p. 582]

Hindus can pretend, imagine, or believe suffering is not real, but they cannot eliminate the reality of suffering. How can we place our hope in believing suffering is not real when the mind we use to hope in it, is also not real?

Islam

Islam believes suffering is, like everything else, the will of Allah. But the will of Allah cannot be known. What can be known is submission to imams. In Islam, submission justifies ignoring suffering.

Chuck May put it this way:

Islam means “submission,” and Muslims are those who submit. But there is no virtue in submission, per se. Ghengis Kahn, Hitler, Stalin, and Saddam Hussein believed in submission. Submission is only valuable when connected to truth or virtue, but it cannot, by itself, determine either ... The moral mistake of making submission a virtue allows immorality to be considered virtuous. Many non-Muslims ask something like, “How can these people think it’s good to murder innocent civilians?” The answer—in part—is that they aren’t focusing on the value of life as a virtue. They are focusing on submission as a virtue. The true value or virtue of these leaders, or their ideology, is simply not to be questioned. Questions violate the very nature of submission. [Chuck May, “The Five Major World Religions,” p. 33 (relationalconcepts.org)]

The Muslim answer to suffering is to consider it part of the will of Allah, dealt with by submission to Muslim authority. But submission by itself only ignores suffering, it does nothing to eliminate suffering.

What Does the Bible Say We Should Do about Suffering?

The Bible takes suffering head on, literally, graphically, with no modifications or apologies. Let’s consider three paramount biblical examples.

First, Consider Job. The book of Job is a manual on suffering. And if Job was written near the time it occurred (about the time of Abraham, after 2000 B.C.), then it is the earliest book of the Bible. So the first thing God revealed in literal form was an example of suffering. Job lost his children, his wealth, and his health, all because of a contention between God and Satan, about which Job was never informed. Job and his friends tried to figure out why God was causing Job’s suffering. The consensus was that Job did something wrong, and he was being punished. Job agreed in principle, but he did not know what he had done that was wrong. So he wanted an explanation from God.

At the end of the book, Job got his desired audience with God. Instead of explaining anything about Job’s suffering, God asked Job some questions like: *Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?* (38:4), *Have you ever in your life commanded the morning?* (38:12), *where is the way to the dwelling of light?* (38:19) *who has put wisdom in the innermost being or given understanding to the mind?* (38:36), *Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook? Or press down his tongue with a cord?* Not knowing any of the answers, Job responded, “Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth” (40:4) and “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (42:2).

Why we are suffering seems to be none of our business. God gave Job no reason for his suffering (Job 38-40). Job's answer was to **trust** an all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present, just, eternal, sovereign, infinite, unchanging, holy God, who is also **good** (Genesis 50:20; Psalm 100:5; 119:68; 73:1; Luke 18:19; Romans 2:4; 1 Timothy 4:4).

Second, Consider David. Although David suffered from his own sin, much of his suffering was from his enemies. Saul tried repeatedly to kill him (1 Samuel 18–19), his own son led a rebellion against him (2 Samuel 15:6), those whom he helped lied to him (2 Samuel 16:3), and those who hated him cursed him (2 Samuel 16:5-8). David's suffering is best expressed in Psalm 22:1-2.

“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest.”

Did God ever answer David's request for relief? Not that we know of. But in the midst of all his suffering, before he was relieved of any of it, David added this.

“Yet You are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel. In You our fathers trusted; they trusted, and You delivered them. To You they cried out and were delivered” (Psalm 22:3-5).

God never told David why he was suffering. David did not try to explain his suffering. He did not trivialize his suffering. He actually paraded it before all Israel in the form of a song (Psalm 22). What David did with his suffering was to **trust** an all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present, just, eternal, sovereign, infinite, unchanging, holy God, who is **good**.

Third, Consider Jesus. As the author of Hebrews put it, *Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession...who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God* (Hebrews 3:1; 12:2). Jesus was the divine Son of God in the flesh. *All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.* The Son of God created the universe (John 1:1-4; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2). That universe was also cursed by God into suffering because of Adam's sin (Genesis 3:17-19). Then the Creator *who knew no sin* (2 Corinthians 5:21) emerged Himself into that suffering. Jesus experienced shame, ridicule, rejection, persecution, bereavement, betrayal, mockery, scourging, and a torturous death on a Roman cross. In agony, Jesus repeated David's cry in Psalm 22: *“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”* But when He was about to die, the last thing Jesus said on the cross was, *“Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.”* What God the Son did, in the midst of His suffering, was not to eliminate it but to **trust** His Father, an all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present, just, eternal, sovereign, infinite, unchanging, holy God, who is also **good**. The gotquestions web site has this comment:

When asked how much God cares about the problem of evil and suffering, the Christian God can point to the cross and say, “That much.”

What About the Future

Does the Bible say that God will end all suffering in the future? No, it doesn't. The Bible says

God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

God will end all suffering for those who receive Jesus Christ as their Savior, but He will intensify suffering for those who reject Him, those who continue in their sin (John 1:12; Revelation 20:14-15; 21:1-3).

Conclusion

The answer is to trust God. But only biblical Christianity has a good God to trust.