

towards ▶ belief

Suffering

Series Introduction

Atheists and genuine seekers regularly put up several topics as challenges to the Christian faith. This series will explore 9 of those topics. The aim of this series is to address these belief blockers. While each topic is separate in itself it will be helpful to you and the group if you come for the whole series.

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Read the following three quotes:

How can you believe in God in a world of suffering? (Craig Keener)

You often hear people say if there's an all-powerful God and He's all loving, there wouldn't be any suffering. And that kind of makes sense because if there was an all-powerful God, He could end suffering. If there were an all loving God, it sort of makes sense that He would end suffering. (John Dickson)

If we're saying as Christians that actually God is all powerful, that He's omnipotent, He can step in and do whatever He likes. He can stop suffering if He wants to. And yet He chooses not to. I think for some people it's a really understandable concern to question whether or not that God is worth trusting. (Vince Vitale)

WATCH THE DVD

GOD'S EXISTENCE

If there were an all-loving God, it sort of makes sense that He would end suffering. But we don't know that for sure. How do we know? The philosophers have worked this through for centuries. How would we know that a God of infinite wisdom could not have loving reasons for allowing pain to continue? So you can't use suffering to disprove God's existence. (John Dickson)

Read Genesis 1:1, Psalm 136:1-16, Acts 17:24-29

Q1. What do these verses suggest about the Bible's view of God? Discuss God's key attributes.

Q2. Which of God's attributes does suffering call into question? Discuss.

HUMAN FREEDOM & RESPONSIBILITY

Genesis 1:27-31; 2:15-17; Psalm 8:3-9

Q3. When God says the world and humankind were 'very good', what should we understand by this?

Q4. Humans were created as God's image bearers. What do these verses imply about human freedom and responsibilities?

HUMAN REBELLION

Genesis 3:14-19; Exodus 34:6-7.

The Universe God made seems to have been without suffering & death. However human freedom has enormous risks with dire consequences when abused. Freedom and love go hand in hand.

If our choices are to be serious choices, if they're really to be open to us which way we choose, we're going to choose badly sometimes and people are going to suffer. And that is the first reason of why there's

suffering – because God has given free will to people and that’s a blessing. But the suffering is an unfortunate consequence of the blessing. (Richard Swinburne)

Q5. What are the consequences of human rebellion on our relations to God, each other and the world?

Q6. After the fall can we say that ‘everything happens for a reason’? see Luke 13:1-5 Discuss.

THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

Job 2:1-10; 40:1-8; 42:1-6

Q7. Did God explain to Job ‘why’ he suffered? Discuss. What conclusions did Job come to about God and his suffering?

JESUS AS IMMANUEL (GOD WITH US)

Isaiah 53:1-6 John 1:1-3, 14, 18; Hebrews 2:16-18

Q8. What do these verses tell us about Jesus and suffering?

Q9. Does the fact that Jesus suffered greatly help us when we are suffering?

It’s the fact that God entered into this world in the person of Jesus, suffered betrayal from friends, physical torture, injustice and eventually crucifixion. That for me is not so much the answer to the question of suffering but it tells me what God is like. God entered the world and did that for me. He knows my pain, not just because He’s all knowing but because He’s experienced it first-hand. And I can cry out to this God with all of my doubts, with all of my anger and know that He is that kind of God – not distant in the corner of the universe, watching us or mocking us, but here with us, suffering with us. And that makes the difference. I can trust Him with all the other stuff because I know what His heart is like. His heart is like someone who would give Himself for me. (John Dickson)

NB Jesus not only suffered with us he suffered for us: to deal with our rebellion and sin. Romans 5:8-10. His death and resurrection are the platform for hope and abundant living. John 10:10

SUFFERING HAS NO PLACE IN GOD’S NEW CREATION

Revelation 21:1-4, 2 Peter 3:8-9

Q.10 Describe the ‘new heavens and the new earth’. What will become of suffering?

NB The human longing for suffering to end is an inner residual of being created in God’s image. Therefore one of the great dilemmas facing Christians when it comes to suffering is holding in tension God’s sovereignty and his love. If God is all-powerful and all-loving why is there still so much suffering? The answer is ‘eschatology’ (a theology of the future). God will finally and fully remove it one day. And one reason for holding back this final curtain is to allow for more people to repent and follow Jesus.

SUFFERING CAN DRAW US NEAR TO GOD

Lamentations 3:19-23; Psalm 13:1-6; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Q11. Prayer is one of those vital, yet deep mysteries of human life. Why is prayer helpful? Discuss.

Prayer doesn’t come easy for me. But it was during that time that I really began to understand intercessory prayer. I knew people were praying for me and I couldn’t get through a day without those prayers making a difference in my life. (Stanley Hauerwas)

SUMMARY

1. Suffering is a 'mystery' - why God allows it and only intervenes sometimes
2. Suffering was never intended to happen and is a result of human actions (sin) – we live in a fallen world where bad things happen
3. Jesus suffered with us and for us to show us how loving God is.
4. Suffering will be removed in the new creation – thus we have hope
5. Some suffering has the positive outcome of producing character, patience and empathy in us

SHARE & PRAYER