

THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN SUFFERING

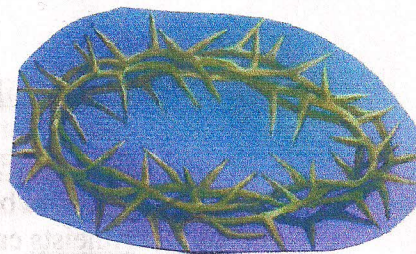
Preliminary Remarks:

- 1 Beware of discussing this if you are in the middle of a crisis of suffering.
- 2 This is not an academic exercise – it is a real daily problem for all of us.
- 3 We will not get final answers till we see Jesus face to face in Heaven.
- 4 But it is worth investigating so that we can know a little more here and now.
- 5 This is a mystery so it is like walking into a mist – you only see a little bit step by step. With mysteries, each answer raises further questions. We can apprehend but not comprehend, ie. we learn bit by bit.
- 6 We do not have the right to put God in the dock and ask questions as if we were the judge and jury, but we can come as confused children to our Heavenly Father with sincere doubts (not throwing mud).
- 7 If God answers us He is being gracious; He does not have to answer us.
- 8 We are not neutral and above the issues. We are up to our eyes in suffering or even in causing suffering.
- 9 If an answer is given, what makes us think that we can discern it or understand it? It is a big universe and we have only tiny brains so why should we assume that we can understand it and why should we presume to pronounce on it?
- 10 Before being tempted to criticise God, we should stand in His shoes for a bit (but then we can't do that).
- 11 Ask yourself why am I asking about human suffering at this time and place? Is there a special reason?
- 12 Do you really want answers or would you really prefer not to know the half of it?
- 13 What sort of an answer do you have in mind? What would satisfy you as an answer?
- 14 How do you think we can best approach the problem? Where are answers most likely to be found? Should we look to get immersed in some suffering and see it from the inside or should we step back and reflect when we are not suffering so much?
- 15 Are you starting with a predisposition, a prejudgment, a prejudice in favour of God or against God... as a believer or an agnostic or an atheist?
- 16 We must look into the problem of human suffering because –
 - a. it really bugs us and attacks our faith
 - b. it puts so many people off God
 - c. it is something children will ask us about
 - d. it is something sincere enquirers will ask us about
 - e. it is something critics throw at us

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN SUFFERING?

- (a) List examples of suffering.
- (b) So what exactly is the problem about it?
- (c) Home-in till the heart of the problem is stated succinctly and clearly.

- Note:
- 1 Suffering is universal – we all suffer.
 - 2 There are very many problems within the problem of human suffering
 - 3 It is painful when we suffer... and when we have to watch others, innocents/loved ones suffer...
 - 4 Suffering seems so indiscriminate (with no rhyme or reason).
 - 5 Suffering unjustly is far worse than suffering justly when we deserve it.
 - 6 Suffering can be worse than death.
 - 7 Animals just suffer when they are suffering, but humans anticipate it and also reflect upon it. eg "I'm worried about going into hospital next month"... "I'm now in hospital for a month"... "I was in hospital last month" – 3 months suffering instead of an animal's one month!
 - 8 There is a difference between pain and suffering: Pain is physical sensations; Suffering is mental anxiety maybe due to pain, bereavement, remorse, guilt, worry, humiliation, embarrassment etc. While in hospital we suffer: pain + worry eg about the family, the house, death, permanent disability, the operation, meeting other patients and staff etc.
 - 9 Emotional suffering can sometimes be harder to bear than physical pain.
 - 10 We can control pain i.e. use mind over matter eg athlete, soldier
 - 11 We can even embrace and enjoy pain eg masochists, rugby players, mountaineers, pot-holers
 - 12 There are two basic categories of types of suffering:



Moral Evil = immorality, bad human behaviour e.g. selfishness, envy, greed, deceit etc. These cause a lot of suffering....ie suffering arising out of our and other people's badness

Physical Evil = natural disasters eg floods/droughts/earthquakes/tsunamis/volcanoes/diseases/deafness/blindness/mental illness...ie nothing to do with us; external factors outwith our control

Atheists cannot both (a) deny that God exists and (b) blame Him.

Believers have the problem of explaining how God and suffering co-exist in this world.

THE PROBLEM DEFINED

Epicurus (c300 BC) How can we hold each and all of these three statements:

- 1 God is all powerful
- 2 God is all loving
- 3 Suffering Exists

Anthony Flew the philosopher wrote: "Either God cannot abolish evil or He will not:

If He cannot, then He is not all-powerful

If He will not, then He is not all-good."

Look more closely at each of these three statements and examine our terms -

Q What does Omnipotent mean? Things God can't or won't do?/ Free Will?/ Inflexible Scientific Laws?

Q What does Love mean? Tough Love/ Love Hurts (Cross)/ Parents let baby fall so it can learn to walk.

Q Is Suffering perhaps not as bad as we thought? It is bad, often worse! It's no illusion.

WHY IS THERE SUFFERING?

(A) Why is there suffering? i.e. What OR Who causes suffering?

The Theodicy Oscars: And the Nominations are -

- 1 Que Sera, Sera
- 2 Ourselves
- 3 The Devil
- 4 God - directly or allows it

(B) Why is there suffering? i.e. What is the purpose of it? (If there is any purpose to it).

Possible answers include....

- 1 Punishment
- 2 Warning
- 3 Education
- 4 Discipline
- 5 Refinement
- 6 Moral Muscle Workout
- 7 Consequences
- 8 Free Will
- 9 Make Us Help Each Other
- 10 Other suggestions



THE HOW QUESTION

Everyone who suffers asks a lot of Why questions....Why me? Why now? Why this? etc.

However the only reason we ask these questions is in the hope that answers to them will help us to cope with our suffering. So, the real question is: HOW? "How can we cope with suffering?"

Comforts:

- 1 Past experience of God's love
- 2 God is with us and in control
- 3 God can bring good out of evil
- 4 Eternity in Heaven

Attitudes:

- (1) PESSIMISM - the world is a terrible place
- (2) RESIGNATION - endure it
- (3) STOICISM - hide your hurt
- (4) MELIORISM - fight fate even when futile
- (5) OPTIMISM - hope for the best
- (6) RESENTMENT - rebellion, anger, bitterness, blame

The Christian Attitude

*** Jesus helps us through (not out of) suffering.

*** The key word is participation:

- Jesus participates in our little ups and downs in our daily lives
- We participate in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, in His life

*** We face crucifixions in the sure and certain hope of resurrection

*** We win in Jesus who created the way through from "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" to "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He is the Way.

