

Is suffering good for anything?

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IN THE FACE OF LARGE and small tragedies in life — a lengthy illness, the sudden death of a child, the loss of one's spouse, a life-altering accident, an act of violence or war — religious people are often asked if they can make sense of all the suffering that occurs in the world. People ask questions such as:

- Why does evil exist?
- Why does God allow such terrible things to happen?
- How can you continue to believe in a God when you see such things taking place?

It is natural to ask such questions, especially when a tragic event or moment of suffering happens to us personally or comes to affect the lives of those closest to us. People of faith are not exempt from asking the very same questions under the same circumstances. In fact, events of suffering, injustice or death can often cause doubts or even a full-blown faith crisis to occur in a believer's life. The experience of such events seems to be a contradiction to the good news hoped for and promised by faith.

Indeed, suffering can be experienced as one of the most troubling and mysterious dimensions of human existence. It affects everyone; it can occur at any moment in our life, often without warning. When wrestling with this mystery, people often turn to philosophies and religions to search for answers or to apply some meaning to this confounding, and often painful, riddle of life. Likewise, Christianity puts forward a unique response to the question of suffering in the world.

Christians believe that God created the world in goodness. God imbued the whole world (including the human beings within it) with a share of divine goodness, called grace. In creating this graced universe, God also created a world in a

state of journeying toward its ultimate perfection. On this journey, we recognize that people come and go from our lives, that bad things sometimes happen to good people, and that imperfection exists alongside perfection. Natural disasters, too, such as earthquakes, tornadoes and tsunamis can bring terrible destruction. We experience suffering whenever such things occur in the natural world and Christians share in these sufferings as much as anyone.

Alongside these natural phenomena, however, is a kind of suffering that arises out of the free choice of human beings to place their own selfish desires ahead of the grace-filled ways of God. Christians call such selfish choosing sin, and sin never has God as its source. Sin is "an abuse of the freedom that God gives to created persons so that they are capable of loving him and loving one another" (CCC, 387). We suffer whenever we encounter sin — either directed towards us, or perpetrated by us — in the world.

One of the greatest truths revealed to the world, however, is that God can bring about good things from evil situations. This is demonstrated in countless biblical stories and in the lives of faith-filled men, women and children throughout the centuries to this day. Through such examples we come to know a God who is compassionate and merciful, who forgives sins and saves in times of distress.

God's love and mercy are demonstrated in an ultimate way in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus experienced suffering in the same way that all human beings experience it. He was disappointed about his disciples' lack of understanding of his mission and ministry. He was frustrated with the religious leaders of his day. He grieved over the death of a beloved friend. Furthermore, Jesus experienced horrendous injustices committed

toward his person: he was arrested, tortured, nailed to a cross and killed. Upon the cross he cried out in anguish: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Yet, in the midst of this suffering, God did not abandon Jesus. Rather, as the gospels tell us, God raised Jesus from the dead and opened the way for anyone who enters into the life of Christ to also experience life beyond death, and joy beyond sorrow. This is the great hope of the Christian faith!

Christ's rising from the dead does not exempt any of us from experiencing pain, sorrow and suffering in life. As we unite ourselves more closely to Christ's Passion and Death, however, and Christ joins his sufferings to ours, we have the assurance of knowing that God is with us in our pain and

that the grace of God will sustain us through it not only in the next life, but already now in this earthly existence. God's love for us will ultimately have the last word over any evil that we may experience in this life. This is the journey of the Christian life, the basis of Christian spirituality, the reason for Christian hope, and the Christian response to the problem of evil and suffering in our world.

Encountering the sufferings of others, Christians don't present answers; but in Christ we walk in solidarity with others. We pray for one another and carry each other's pain trusting in God's power to transform.

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Questions for discussion

1. Have you experienced deep suffering? If yes, has it called your convictions into question?
2. What does it mean to unite your sufferings to Christ?
3. Have you shared suffering with another? How? What did that feel like?
4. Do you think there can be any meaning in suffering?