

# Why do good people suffer?

## (some thoughts from a Christian perspective)

A major difficulty with this question is answering the question of 'who is good?' This is extremely hard to define, due to the fact that in reality there are very few good people in the world, if any, who are consistently good all the time, including myself. On the other hand, if we take a more positive approach and think that there are many good people in the world, then we might have to say that the majority (let's say 80%) of people in the world are supposedly 'good'. If that is so, then do we say that it is the other 20% of people that are the evil ones who both **create** the evil that the good ones suffer **and** deserve the evil they experience?

If we are honest with each other we need to admit that we are all bad and hurt other people at various times throughout each day and throughout our lives. Equally, most, if not all people, can be loving and accepting, generous and caring, even if only occasionally or only to the people they love or value (Hitler was). But as to whether people are 'good' or not also depends on how high up you put the 'bar' to leap over. For me genuine good is when you love your enemies. This is Jesus definition. After all, as Jesus says, even robbers look after fellow thieves, or bikies look after their families and mates, but true love is when you love also your enemies. Otherwise we are only operating on a tit-for-tat basis, which means that there is no potential to break the cycle of returning evil for evil, and we simply remain within our comfortable ghettos with 'them' outside.

In most cases in life, people suffer due to the selfishness and evil of other people which they both passively and incidentally allow and also actively create. Some of these instances of suffering would include the following:

1. Careless use of motor vehicles which create horrific losses of life, and even more frequent injuries which can result in long term illnesses and disabilities which might last a lifetime.
2. Abuse of power, ranging from work-place bullying to international aggression This then creates wars and the displacement of people from their homes and takes people away from their families, friends and means of making a living.
3. Greed and excesses of wealthy citizens and the waste of resources which are not fairly shared with those less well off. This results in poor living circumstances, limited sanitation, and lack of access to the basics of life, all of which lead to disease and premature death.
4. Dishonesty by people in sexual relationships (boy/girl friend; marriage; de facto, homosexual; etc) which results in one partner being personally devastated by the betrayal, or unfaithfulness, of the other person. This in turn often leads to

difficult or nasty separations and a disrupted family life, especially if children are involved.

5. Neighbours and family and friends who do not care for an estranged member of society because that person has too many difficulties or is different from us. Sometimes this person becomes so desperate they resort to taking their own life.

6. Laziness and complacency of people who do not check equipment on public transport, work places or fun rides at amusement parks, resulting in catastrophes for those using them.

7. Inadequate provision of alternative safe and reliable housing for people who live in dangerous places where storms, earthquakes and tornadoes are known to be a regular feature of life.

8. The neglectful parent who occasionally or often does not treat their children with respect or give of their time to nurture, love, teach and train them. Equally, the adult children who neglect the needs of their aging parents and only care for them if there is something in it for themselves.

9. Children and teenagers who abuse the weaker children and isolate them and ridicule them, thus shattering their self-esteem and confidence. All of this can leave devastating life-long scars.

10. People in clans or groups (family, tribe, religion, nation) who characterise the different (supposedly negative) features of other 'groups' which can then begin the sliding scale towards demonization of 'the other'.

The Christian response to these tragedies and pain entails some of the following realities:

When God created the world he limited many of his abilities. These included the free will which he gave to Adam and Eve, and also to all humans. His liberating gift of free will meant that he effectively allowed the possibility of us to do good or evil. Our freedom has meant that God has sacrificed his power over us and stood back out of respect and love for us. But unfortunately we often have not chosen wisely in our freedom. Or we have chosen in narrow and selfish ways, rather than seeing the larger needs, picture and consequences of our actions.

God has also limited himself by the creation of the laws of physics and science. Having made these laws, he cannot just whimsically change them every time a person might push or abuse the boundaries. For example, God cannot always change the laws of gravitation when a person accidentally drives off a cliff (or is pushed). We might ask "Why did not God rescue this person in this accident?" Is God 'All-powerful' or omnipotent? Can God just do away with the realities which he has constructed, including his own guidelines and very being? Can God make

a stone so heavy that he is not able to lift it up? Can God make  $2+2=5$ ? Can God make a circle into a square? Has not God limited himself by his creation and laws so that there is order and system and predictability in the world? All of these are the very items that science is discovering in the magnificence of God's creation. Can God break these laws, either whenever he wants to, or even whenever he wants to have compassion on someone? What if God continually broke these laws and made it rain whenever we ran out of water so that our crops would grow every year? Would we not become so lax that we did not value and wisely use the water that we received? What if God healed the woman who was beaten by her husband each time this happened, would this be a long-term sensible way of addressing the issue? Sometimes our idea of what God should do is more for our own immediate gratification and to provide a simplistic solution. The chaos that then follows is graphically visualised in the movie "Bruce Almighty". This does not mean that God cannot on occasions break these laws and graciously create miracles, but we are not to see these as means by which we cut corners and do not also live responsibly and lovingly.

Another important reality to reaffirm is that God has entered into our tragedies in the person of Jesus Christ, who entered our suffering world, initially as a refugee and then as a compassionate healing person. He was a person who stood up for those isolated and shunned by society such as lepers, traitors, prostitutes and the mentally disturbed. He also provided relief for the terminally and chronically ill, the blind and lame, and many other situations of human suffering. When he called to task the religious and political leaders of his day who relied on power, force and social inequality, he was wrongfully accused and given a 'kangaroo court' which sentenced him to physical suffering through 39 lashes and finally a cruel death by crucifixion. He called people to follow him in his cause, saying that we find true life, not by fleeing from suffering, but by embracing suffering and loving the people who suffer. So Jesus turned the concept on its head and said that the good person will experience suffering and will compassionately relieve and carry the suffering of fellow human beings. The primary reason Jesus came into the world was to 'give his life as a ransom for many' and in turn he said to his disciples: "If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." (Luke 9:23, 24)

So the question we are addressing would be turned around to read:

"Why are 'good' people **not** suffering? It might also be rephrased as a statement: "If you are a genuinely 'good' person, your goodness will share your own suffering with Christ and in turn embrace the suffering people around you." For a Christian, the ultimate example and source of strength in this endeavour is the person of Jesus Christ, who out of love for humans did this very thing and continues to do so through his body, the church. These are 'saints' who do not do this in their own strength, but allow Christ to live in and through them.

This is not done for masochistic reasons, or for 'eternal rewards', but because Christians believe that they have been loved and embraced by Jesus, even though their goodness is only partial, and even though they themselves are creators of suffering in the world. In turn they are then called to follow Jesus Christ to alleviate any suffering they see around them, and embrace compassionately those who are suffering.

Another question in all this is our limited perception of what is suffering and who is suffering. If we take the example of the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer we see the following: He was a potentially brilliant pianist, who then decided to become a theologian and Lutheran pastor. By the age of 21 he had completed his PhD and two years later completed his second PhD which enabled him to lecture in the university in Berlin at the age of 24. This he did for several years until Hitler came to power. From the first day of Hitler's rule in 1933, Bonhoeffer spoke out publicly against him and for the Jews whom Hitler was trying to exterminate. Throughout the time before the war Bonhoeffer continued to speak out and he was the principal of an underground seminary to train pastors, until the Gestapo closed it down. He was then banned from lecturing in the state universities and from preaching. He was offered lecturing positions in the US where he could have stayed until the war was over, but he returned to Germany on the last boat before the war began. Soon after the start of the war he was drafted into the German army working in intelligence. In this capacity he worked as a double agent, working with those in Germany to assassinate Hitler. He was arrested on suspicion a few years later (just weeks after becoming engaged) and then interrogated, but they could not find any evidence to convict him. They nevertheless kept him in prison at Hitler's request. However, soon after the failed July 20 1944 assassination of Hitler occurred, the many others involved in the plot were arrested, and then they were all finally hanged in the last weeks of the war. Bonhoeffer was 39 years of age when he died. In his brief life he had written ground-breaking theology and had lived it. His last words were: "For me, this is the end, but also the beginning." Since then his life and writings have been very influential in the crushing of the apartheid movement in South Africa and the development of Liberation theology throughout the Third World countries in the 60s and 70s and beyond.

For him and his family it was truly a loss, but God used Bonhoeffer's commitment to follow Christ and live for others who were suffering. This has inspired and reshaped the thinking and actions of millions of other people since then. Bonhoeffer moved to a new stage of living with God and would no longer suffer at the hands of a cruel despotic regime which he had relentlessly opposed.

Suffering is intertwined with Bonhoeffer's and our lives and yet God can recreate something new and better out of it if we open ourselves to him working through us, for ourselves and others, whether we are supposedly 'good' or 'bad', because ultimately we live by faith and God's grace.

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