

GOD'S PURPOSES FOR SUFFERING

Hebrews 12: 4-13 & other texts

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

What are some of the various ways that people respond to God in light of suffering and evil in the world and/or in their lives personally?

Some become angry with God and bitter. They become atheists or at least indifferent to God. The presence of evil and suffering is proof that God does not exist or is at least not involved in this world. Others come up with a description of God that will accommodate the reality of evil and the existence of God by limiting God's power over evil and suffering in some way. Others adopt a fatalistic approach, which remains passive in the face of evil and suffering. "It's God's will so there is nothing that can be done about it."

How has an experience of pain/suffering affected your view of God?

How important do you think it is to think through the relationship of God to evil and suffering and why?

Suffering happens to everyone. At the minimum everyone suffers death and most must endure the death of some whom they love. In addition, everyone suffers from illness and accident, broken relationships and broken things, adverse weather and adverse working conditions. However, suffering is not uniform. The experience of evil and suffering is a fact that cannot be denied. No one disagrees over this fact. However, what people do disagree about is what the fact of suffering means about the nature of God and man and the world we live in. The facts are not in question but what the facts mean is point of contention. As the Bible presents itself as God's word to humankind, describing the nature of reality it is not surprising to discover that it spends a great deal of time talking about the relationship of God to suffering. This lesson aims to examine a few of

the good purposes God has for sending suffering to his beloved children.

STUDY

1. Describe the suffering that comes to Job as related in Job 1 & 2. Concentrate on what Job would have experienced, not the details we are given about what is happening "behind the scenes."

In one day Job loses all of his flocks and herds through armed robbery and by natural disaster. Then all seven of his children are killed when a tornado strikes the house they are in and destroys it. Then Job himself is afflicted with boils. Then his wife, in utter despair, counsels him to curse God and commit suicide. Human evil, severe weather, viral infection and abandonment by a spouse all bring great suffering to Job.

2. According to Job (and the narrator of the book of Job) in 1:21, 2:10 & 6:4, who is responsible for his suffering?

God.

3. According to Job 1:12, 15 and 17, who is responsible for Job's suffering?

Satan, the Sabceans and the Chaldeans.

4. According to Acts 4:27-28 who is responsible for the death of Jesus?

Herod, Pontius Pilate, other Gentiles and the people of Israel killed Jesus and God killed Jesus. However, it is God's will which is ultimate. The humans did what God wanted them to do.

5. How do the following verses confirm that God ultimately stands behind all the evil and suffering that is in the world?

➤ Ephesians 1:11

- Isaiah 45:7
- Daniel 4:34-35
- Genesis 45:4-7 & 50:20
- Lamentations 3:38

6. How do the following verses show that God never does evil and never forces any demon or human to do evil?

- Genesis 18:25
- Deuteronomy 32:4
- Job 8:20
- James 1:13-17

7. How are we to put these two facts together?

The biblical fact is that God is so great that he is able to ordain evil and suffering in the world in such a way that he is never guilty of doing evil and is right to punish demons and men who do evil. God is completely sovereign and we are completely responsible for our choices. There is a mystery at work here that we do not fully comprehend. However, it is an error to say that God only knows the future and does not control it. It is an error to say that harm comes to Christians and God wishes he could do something about it but he cannot out of respect to human free will. God does with a good will what demons and men do with an evil will so that God is always righteous and men are always responsible for the evil they do and God is just to hold demons and men accountable. Humans have real choices with real consequences, yet our choices always serve to further God's good work in the world.

8. How do 2 Corinthians 1:9, 12:7-9, Hebrews 12:4-7, 1 Peter 1:6-7, 3:17, 4:19 teach that God sends suffering to his children?

2 Corinthians 1:9—Paul says that the suffering he endured in the province of Asia happened for a reason. Whenever something is said to happen for a purpose it means there is a person behind the action, acting with purpose. Neither demons or evil men would want Paul to rely more on the God who raises the dead, therefore, God himself must stand behind the suffering he endured. 2 Corinthians 12:1-7—the thorn in the flesh was given to keep Paul from becoming conceited. Paul asked God to remove it three times and God refused to remove it. There is no question that God sent the “thorn in the flesh” even though it also came from Satan as his messenger. Hebrews 12:4-7—The Christians were experiencing persecution yet the author tells them that God is disciplining them as beloved children. They are to endure this and all hardship as God's loving discipline. 1 Peter 1:6-7—It is necessary that the Christians endure trials of various kinds for a little while. Who says it is necessary? God does, as again, in v. 7 we are told that the trials come for a purpose, implying a person who is purposing the trials. Then in the other two verses in 1 Peter suffering is said to be the will of God.

God sends suffering to his children for good purposes.

9. According to Hebrews 12:10 what is the good purpose for which God sends the suffering? Practically, what does this mean?

To share in God's holiness is to share in that which makes God, God. It is to be a partaker of the divine nature. To share in God's holiness is not primarily about your moral behavior though that is included. It is about loving what God loves and thus doing what God does. It's like admiring Brett Favre's football skills and then saying, “If I could be half the football player that Brett Favre is, I would be happy. If I could share in his skill, how awesome that would be.” Then out of our delight and desire to be like Brett we work hard to improve our football skills. If you are a Christian it is God's goal for you to share in that which makes God so admirable, his very own holiness. We will never be God, we will always and only share in what he is in his being. But then notice in v. 14, it is by sharing in his holiness that we end up “seeing the Lord”. The suffering comes so that we will be taken up with what God is taken up with, the holiness of his own being. We learn, through suffering that he alone is what we need. It is by this

sharing in his holiness that we are made fit for heaven and an eternity of “seeing the Lord”.

10. How eager are you to share in God’s holiness and thus “see the Lord”?

God sends suffering to his children that we might share in his holiness.

11. According to 1 Peter 1:6 what is the emotional condition of Christians?

We are rejoicing in the coming salvation while we are grieving over the present suffering.

12. How are the trials described in v. 6?

They are necessary and of all kinds. We suffer sickness and broken relationships. We’re bored with our jobs. We lose our jobs. We experience accidents. Cars, homes, and toys fall apart. Plans change. The weather doesn’t cooperate. People sin against us and we cause suffering by our own sin. We are mocked, ridiculed, scorned, and sometimes killed because we are Christians. The catalogue of human trials that create grief is almost infinite and varies widely from Christian to Christian.

13. According to v. 7 what is the purpose for which God sends the trials?

He sends the trials to purify our faith in the same way the goldsmith uses fire to purify gold, by burning away all the impurities. God sends to each Christian the exact amount of suffering that is needed to purify that person’s faith so that we will make it to heaven. When we get to heaven by faith we will experience extreme and unending joy.

14. What is faith and why does it need to be purified?

Faith is being absolutely confident that all that God promises to be for me in Jesus is better than everything else in the whole world. It is

believing that Jesus will do all he promises and that what he promises is the best thing in the world. It is being confident that if I abandon all other pursuits and pursue my joy in God I will not be disappointed. It is knowing that to lose everything this world holds dear and to just have Christ is infinitely better than having all this world can offer but to not have Christ. My faith needs to be purified because I don’t naturally believe what I just said. I am in a constant struggle to believe God’s promises rather than the promises of sin. Therefore, God sends me trouble, which is a removal of some joy that this world offers to show me that he really is sufficient.

15. What are some ways that you have found your faith to be purified by difficulties?

God sends suffering to his children that our faith might be purified.

16. How does Peter tell these Christians to respond when they are persecuted because they are Christians?

He tells them not to be ashamed of being a Christian when they are persecuted as such but to praise God that they are Christians.

17. According to vv. 17-18 why should they praise God for being Christians even when they are getting beat up because they are Christians?

The reason to praise God for being a Christian is because the persecution and other painful trials are a work of God’s judgment. God is beginning his judgment of the world by beginning with the family of God, the righteous. Now this is not God’s condemning justice. He isn’t punishing Christians for their sins, for, as Peter himself says, Christ died for our sins, once for all. The suffering that Christians endure is a mark of God’s purifying fire. He is, by the suffering enabling us to share in his glory. However, the pain of the suffering is a taste of the final suffering that will come upon the wicked at the end of the ages.

In other words, Peter is saying, if we, who are loved by God and are going to live forever with him in eternal joy, suffer like this, what do you think will happen to those who do not obey the gospel of God, to the ungodly and sinners. We are to see in our sufferings a brief glimmer of the horror of hell and thus worship God that we have been delivered from that eternal agony. Be happy you are a Christian and this is as bad as it is ever going to get in your life. This is hard but hell is infinitely worse and you will never experience that, so be glad. It can always be worse than it is. Be glad that you are not going to hell. Praise God that you are a Christian headed for heaven and you will never experience hell, which is far worse than any suffering you might encounter here.

18. Would this thought help you to praise God for being a Christian when you are suffering? Why or why not?

God sends suffering to his children that we might praise God that we are not going to hell.

19. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 how does Paul contrast our present life with the future life that awaits us?

He describes this as a “wasting away” life. This life is full of trouble that is light and momentary. This is temporary. The future life is renewing life, a life that is eternal and contains a glory that is infinitely greater than or “heavier” than all the trouble of this wasting away life. It is a permanent life that will never end as contrasted with this life which is soon over.

20. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-29. What sorts of things does Paul consider “light and momentary troubles”?

Paul never married or had children. For at least 30 years of his life he was constantly on the road, never sleeping in his own home. He received 39 lashes on five different occasions, was beaten with wooden clubs and was stoned and left for dead. He daily lived with the wounds of these beatings. He spent many years in prison, yet he never did anything illegal. His life was a life of risk and danger and trouble and yet he calls these sufferings momentary and light.

21. How can Paul say that such extreme suffering is light and momentary? How is it that these trials do not cause him to lose heart and want to quit?

He says it in the same way that Olympic athletes who win gold consider three years of non-stop, daily, boring training no big deal. There has never been an Olympic gold medal winner who has ever said, “I regret all the suffering I endured in my training.” Every single one knows that the cost in suffering is not even worth comparing to the joy of having the gold medal. Every single one knows that there is a direct cause/effect relationship between the amount of suffering endured and the winning of the gold medal. The more they have suffered in training and the greater the barriers they have overcome, the greater the joy they have in the gold medal. It is a glorious thing to win a gold medal but it is more glorious for those who have overcome greater obstacles. Why is Lance Armstrong’s winning 6 “Tour de France” races so glorious? It is so amazing because he almost died of cancer. His victories are more glorious than would be those of any other cyclist because of the trouble he overcame. There is a direct, cause/effect relationship between the suffering of this life and the weight of glory in the next. The more suffering endured in Christ and with Christ, the more glorious heaven will be. The eternal happiness that will belong to all who endure suffering for the sake of Jesus will be infinitely greater than all the trouble endured to get there.

22. What makes it hard to fix your attention upon the future glory?

23. Have you ever been able to joyfully live with present pain because you are so full of hope in a future glory?

God sends suffering to his children that heaven might be more glorious.