

God, What on Earth are You Doing?

An Honest Conversation

How long, O LORD, will I cry for help,

and you will not hear?

I cry out to you, "Violence!"

Yet you do not save?

(Habakkuk, the Perplexed Prophet)



David George Moore

Dedication:

To Reese and Yudi

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“Since we are east of Eden, our only options are the illusions of a fool’s paradise (i.e. modern hedonism and yuppiedom) or the realism of spiritual combat.”

Peter Kreeft¹

“I did not recognize in the fashionable God who was taught me, Him who was waiting for my soul. I needed a Creator; I was given a big businessman!”

Jean-Paul Sartre²

“Those who think that the happy life is found elsewhere, pursue another joy and not the true one.”

Augustine³

Introduction

Struggling with God’s Goodness in a Terribly Broken World

Pay attention to who has control of the microphone.

We, and I am talking about us Christians, tend to put people up front whose testimonies declare that victory in all areas of life has been pretty much achieved. There is certainly nothing wrong highlighting how God is in the business of changing people for the better. However, if everyone up front tells a story of *getting over* some destructive habit, sin, or compulsion, rather than underscoring how they are currently making progress, but still stumbling, what kind of message are we sending? Not a fully biblical one, I’m afraid.

¹ Peter Kreeft, *You Can Understand the Old Testament*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1990), 28.

² As quoted in A.W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* ed. by Gerald B. Smith (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 2003), 10.

³ Augustine, *Confessions* trans. by Henry Chadwick (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 10:22.

The Bible says that “a righteous man falls seven times yet still gets up.” (Prov. 24:16) Since seven is the number of perfection we could say this is a perfect amount of falling! Seven is obviously not to be taken literally.

Placing the microphone in the hands of those who fail to communicate any present struggles is a recipe for disaster. It sets up the speaker *and* the hearers for disillusionment. It is poor preparation for facing the difficulties of living in a fallen world.

So, pay attention to who has the microphone! What you hear may be preventing you from understanding some important truths, especially the kinds of things you wish were not true. Your Christian growth will be stunted if you ingest the attractive, but misguided message that God simply exists to fix all our problems.

A Concerted Attempt at Honesty and Hope

I have worked hard to provide an honest and hopeful description of what it means to trust God with our suffering. It is easy to proclaim the “goodness of God” when circumstances are generally pleasant, and suffering is minimal. It is much more challenging to believe that God is truly committed to our well-being when acute suffering, the kind that is not going away anytime soon, abruptly enters our life.

Like C.S. Lewis after losing his wife Joy to cancer, we may feel that God is absent. And it can be an absence that mocks our trust in a God who is supposed to care. Many Christians don’t like to acknowledge the silence of God, but Lewis provides the candid and raw reflections of a person who suffers not only the loss of a spouse, but also wonders whether God is now AWOL:

When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him...you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that silence.⁴

God could change our circumstances. At the very least, He could tone down the intensity of our suffering. But many times He doesn’t, and so we are left with a bewildering list of

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1976), 4.

questions, nagging doubts, and the temptation to abandon our confidence in God altogether.⁵

Learning to trust God in the midst of intense suffering is a process which usually contains many twists and turns.⁶ That certainly was the case for C.S. Lewis who wrote two books on the subject of suffering. The first one, *The Problem of Pain*, sought to address some of the typical questions about suffering. Rather predictably, Lewis underscored things like human freedom. *The Problem of Pain* has some helpful insights, but it is what I like to call a “rather neat and tidy book.” Suffering is presented in such a way that the reader is invited to conclude, “Oh yes, I see, this suffering of mine makes sense after all.” Lewis was a bachelor when he wrote *The Problem of Pain*.

On the other end of the spectrum is *A Grief Observed*. It is like reading the dark and desperate reflections of a friend’s private journal.⁷ As mentioned in the quote that leads off this chapter, this second book on suffering was written as Lewis tried to “make sense” of his wife’s death. The ache Lewis felt was too raw for neat and tidy, philosophical truths, no matter how true they happened to be.

Suffering has many causes. More on that a bit later. Furthermore, everyone processes their suffering differently. Different Christians tend to emphasize different things about God, so what it means to trust God during times of suffering is no simple matter.

Let me bring in a bit of levity to make a serious point. I vividly remember our young sons playing with a favorite train set. Well, our oldest son was playing with it while his younger brother was trying to join in. David was typically good at sharing, but not on this occasion. Spying out an opportunity to wow our sons with some godly wisdom, I asked, “Hey David, what do you think Jesus would do?” At the very least I was hoping David would respond, “Jesus would share the train.” Instead, David briefly looked my way and nonchalantly declared, “Jesus would make another train.”

My son was focused on the power of God while I was focused on God’s generosity.

Different Christians will focus on different things about God, but two things remain constant for everyone: the desire to know God is still on our side and that there is a grand

⁵ Reading literature on the Holocaust like *Night* by Elie Wiesel raises this most vexing issue of the human experience.

⁶ A wonderful meditation is Philip Yancey, *Undone: A Modern Rendering of John Donne’s Devotions* (Nashville, TN; Rabbit Room Press, 2023).

⁷ It is not unusual to see the two books by Lewis characterized in this sort of manner. For example, see Armand M. Nicholi, Jr., *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2002), 210.

purpose behind (and beyond!) the suffering.⁸ To feel abandoned by God and/or believe the suffering “is a waste” is simply too great a burden. It can shatter the confidence of the most resilient saint. Two biblical scholars put it well in speaking about Job:

It is extremely significant that Job drops his “court case” against God at the *vision of God*, and *not only after his temporal goods are restored* (cf. Job 42:10-17). This reveals that the central struggle for Job during his period of suffering is not the loss of his children and property—horrible and tragic as those are—but the experience of alienation from God. In the final analysis, it is this experience of being abandoned by God that draws out of Job his deepest longing...⁹

When we are suffering like Lewis did after the death of his wife, we need something in addition to arguments as to why there has to be so much pain in the world. We are in need of regaining confidence that God is truly for us (Rom. 8:35-39) and that His will is indeed “good, acceptable, and perfect.” (Rom. 12:1,2)

I know what it is like to wonder whether God is genuinely good. My first battle came during my early studies at seminary. It was not my own suffering which spawned the doubts. Rather, it was thinking more deeply about the fate of those who don’t know Christ. Passages like Matthew 7:13,14 which describe *many* taking the way which leads to destruction were challenging my confidence in God’s goodness. Was this passage teaching that a loving God is allowing many people to go to hell? Even though I have studied this topic quite a bit,¹⁰ it continues to be an area I must trust God with.

More recently, my own chronic pain and financial hardships forced me to wrestle in new ways with the God I believe to be true.

Some things in life can’t be understood when we are going through them. Painful events have certainly been that way for me, *and* for the friends who have shared their own stories of grief with me. The intensity, bewilderment, and sadness make it nearly impossible to understand what is happening. Some clarity may come from the rearview mirror of life. However, since the road of suffering will be long for many, clarity may wait until we leave this mortal existence.

⁸ A terrific read is Zack Eswine, “Listening for the Sound of Reality: The Melancholy of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Haddon Spurgeon,” Paper presented at Mental Health Association of Indiana (Carmel, Indiana: Christ Community Church), June 2, 2006.

⁹ John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2018), 552. Emphasis theirs.

¹⁰ My reflections were later published. See David George Moore, *The Battle for Hell* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995).

Suffering can so consume one's attention that survival, however we define it, becomes the priority. We may still be able to reflect on our trials while we are in the midst of them. I often captured my thoughts on paper. My musings were honest and raw. Even though I feverishly scribbled away, I always had a sense that my reflections were fragmentary and disjointed. Suffering carries a unique disorientation.

Intense suffering can tempt us to hide. Loyal and wise friends are a cherished necessity during times of great suffering. More on that in a moment. I am grateful for many dear friends who have been consistent and godly companions. Several of them have had or continue to have their own battles. I am also glad for a wife and family who have navigated their own struggles with confidence in God, especially when the path forward was not clear.

I've certainly seen God's faithfulness in a myriad of ways throughout my life. Even so, I still carry a substantial trunk loaded with questions. Suffering reveals and challenges what one truly believes about God. Suffering strips away pretense and the things we unwisely lean on for security.