

Where Is God When It Hurts?

from *God: Knowing Our Creator* by Max Anders

“Madame,” I said, “if our God were a pagan god or the god of intellectuals—and for me it comes to much the same—He might fly to His remotest heaven and our grief would force Him down to earth again. But you know that our God came to be among us. Shake your fist at Him, spit in His face, scourge Him, and finally crucify Him: what does it matter? My daughter, it’s already been done to Him.”

— *George Bernanos, Diary of a Country Priest*

*T*he most difficult question people ask is, “Why does God not relieve human suffering?”

The problem of human suffering and the apparent senselessness of it is, perhaps, the single greatest dilemma people face with God. It seems that either God is a bad trick played on man, or man is a bad trick played on God. A perfect God and a suffering man don’t seem to go together. Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, said that anytime he gets into a discussion about religion, the conversation eventually turns to: “Why do the righteous suffer?” Dorothy Sayers once wrote: “The only question worth discussing is ‘Why do the righteous suffer?’”

How can God be good and still allow His children to suffer? “God how could You have let my baby die?” “How could You have let my husband lose his job and our life savings, and his self-esteem?” “How could You let me get into a terrible divorce when I tried so hard to save the marriage?” “How could you let me languish in this physical pain. Why don’t you fix it?” “How could you let my wife die this slow, excruciating death from Alzheimer’s disease?” “How *could* You?”

C.S. Lewis wrote these words in the midst of deep grief after his wife’s death from cancer:

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. 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 the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become (*A Grief Observed*).

Does God go away when we hurt? Does He bolt and double bolt the door of heaven when we are suffering? It is, as Lewis said, “the problem of pain.” If God is all good and all powerful, why pain? Some people think that God must not be all good, which means that He doesn’t really care about evil. Others believe that God must not be all powerful, so He can’t do much of anything about it. When all is said and done, we may not understand God. Or we may not be able to reconcile evil with how God can be all good and all powerful. This means that we don’t understand what His purposes are and how our ideals don’t coincide with them.

Perhaps there are ways, however, to reconcile pain and God’s character. As we’ve mentioned in a previous chapter, the Christian life is one of hope. Maybe the Bible will help us approach some answer for this universal human dilemma.

How Do We Reconcile Our Pain with God's Character?

We recognize that there are spiritual realities that transcend our comprehension.

Pain Is Universal

All people in all times everywhere have suffered. Certainly, some people have easier or harder lives than others, but suffering has always been a part of the human experience. This is true from the most primitive and godless cultures to the great people of the Bible. Joseph suffered terribly. So did Moses, David, and Daniel. So did Paul and James. What about Jesus? It should come as no surprise to us when we suffer. "Affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble spring from the ground; yet man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:6-7).

We Lack Information

We can also assume there are reasons for our sufferings that we are unaware of. We may have to admit that we simply do not know. This goes back to the question of why God allowed sin to enter the world in the first place. That question has never been answered adequately. But since God is all good, there must be an explanation, which we cannot fathom.

There are many things about God that we are too little to carry. We just don't have all the information, or we don't have ability to understand. There are millions of things I don't understand. For example, I cannot read a computer manual. I work on a computer all the time, but the only thing I can do is word processing, which is virtually "nothing" compared to what computers will do. People who fully know computers live in an entirely different world than I do. I will never forget the time I crashed my hard drive. This was the rough equivalent of hitting my computer on the head very hard, so that it forgot everything it ever knew. I had given it the wrong command, and it erased its memory. It first even asked me if I was sure I wanted to do that. But I was out in the ozone somewhere and said, "Yes." Obedient monster that it is, it immediately obliged and erased everything it knew. It forgot that I had ever entered and stored anything in its memory. I had two entire books I had written in the memory, as well as a lot of important information concerning the church I was pastoring. The screen went blank. I typed some stuff, and the screen remained blank. My computer was in a coma.

The effect on me was dramatic. I sat there in stunned silence trying to comprehend the significance of what had happened. For some time I was unable to admit that it had happened. Surely there was some way out of this. But, no. I had crashed my hard drive.

I left my office for a meeting where others were waiting for me. I lumbered into the room, slumped into my chair, and groaned the unthinkable, "Men, I've crashed my hard drive." A tense silence filled the air. Then someone ventured to speak. "Maybe you haven't lost everything. Maybe you have just lost the ability to get to everything." That is like saying, "Maybe your computer is not in a coma. Maybe it just has amnesia which a good doctor can correct." So I phoned the good doctor, "Magic Phil," who restored my hard drive. In several hours and for \$250, the memory was back.

I wish I could explain to you how this man restored my computer, but I can't. I sat and watched him a while. Without a computer manual, he typed stuff that looked like "swearing" in the Sunday cartoons. No words. Just hieroglyphics. I say "without a computer manual" because to me it is like saying that he typed from memory the first twenty pages of the phone book.

I go to the lengths of telling this story because it illustrates the fact that there are people who are far above us in intellectual power, and yet they are still human. There are people who know things that we will never understand. Maybe your weakness is literature, or plane geometry, or physics. The people who send rocket ships to the moon or who operate on the human brain are intellectually above the rest of us. Yet they are still only human. If there are humans who dwarf us intellectually, why should we be surprised if God dwarfs us intellectually? There are things which God knows, which make sense to Him, which we don't know or can't understand. Accepting the finite limitations about our suffering is a second step in coping emotionally with the fact that pain exists, yet the Bible says that God is good and all-powerful.

How many times have you been puzzled by something, only to have it resolved later? You smack your forehead with the palm of your hand and say, "Ooohhhh, Of course." I am convinced that, when it comes to unexplainable suffering, the first sound most of us will hear in heaven is our hand smacking our forehead followed immediately by the surprised cry, "Ooohhh! Now I see!"

When on earth we cried, "Oh, God, when I was hurting, why didn't You heal me? When I was suffering, why didn't You come to my aid? When calamity was coming my way, why didn't You hear me? When I was alone, why didn't You visit me?" When we get to heaven, we will pause momentarily, and say, "Oh. Now I see."

Our second step is to assume that there is yet some information, some understanding, which we don't have.

We Lack Intellectual or Spiritual Ability

Next, we must accept that our ability to comprehend is limited. Let me tell you another story about Sugar Bear. (Please forgive me. She was just such a good source of illustrations.)

When she was about six months old, we began to try to train her. The first command was "Come." The book said that you were to say, "Come," and if she didn't come, you were to go get her and bring her to where you were when you said "Come" and that you were to do that in an enclosed space until she learned to come to you every time. Then you were to graduate to an open space. I don't know if that was the best way, but it did work.

However, at first, Sugar Bear didn't understand what it was all about. She was intimidated by this change in her routine and this limitation on her freedom. She got apprehensive and insecure, and thought that we were unhappy with her. Her eyes clouded over and she became immobile. She feared the whole world.

"Why are they doing this? What have I done? Why don't they like me anymore?" her eyes seemed to be saying. We continued to love her and work with her, and the day came when she learned not only that command, but every other command which we needed for peaceful co-existence.

After she learned what we wanted and was reassured that we still loved her, everything was OK. But until that time, she was very unhappy. We had tried to explain to her: "This is not going to hurt you. We aren't angry with you. This is for your own good. This will make your life safer and better, and improve our relationship." Nothing mattered. She wanted out. Given the option, Sugar Bear would have bailed out of the learning process without a second thought. But we cared for her too much to let her. So we worked with her, and pushed through the apprehension and insecurity, and the result was a dog that was safer, more pleasant to be around, and had a better relationship with us. She was raised to a higher level of canine existence because of us.

Of course, the point is obvious. God works with us. But we cannot understand what He wants, and what He is doing. We get apprehensive and insecure. We may even get a little rebellious, as Sugar Bear did from time to time. We just don't have the ability to understand all that God is doing with us. But if we let Him, God will keep working with us, to push through the barrier, and raise us to a higher level of human existence.

We Must See Things From God's Point of View

While we cannot know all that God knows regarding our suffering, we can, however, learn to see things from God's point of view. God does not want to be your genie in a bottle. He does not want to be your cosmic vending machine. He does not want to be the solution to your equation. He wants a relationship with you. He wants you to know Him and to love Him. He has created the world so that nothing in our Christian life will work very well unless it forces us to deepen our relationship with Him.

Prayer won't reduce to an equation. Understanding how to live the Christian life won't reduce to an equation. Finding God's will won't reduce to an equation. If you are not doing what you can to get to know Him, paying attention to your successes and failures, learning how He works, and getting to appreciate Him, it won't work.

To understand what God is up to, we must go back to original creation. God describes in profound understatement what He did, in stages, and, after each stage, said, "It is good." When He finished with all the stages, He said, "It is *very* good." In Job we read, "The morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy." Proverbs continues the buoyant mood: "I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind."

"Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" God cries. "Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus lamented, "How I have longed to gather you to My self as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you refused Me!"

God longs for an encounter with us. He longs for a relationship with us. He longs to know us and have us know Him. He longs to be intimately related to us. He longs for us to love Him, and to believe him, and believe *in* Him, and follow Him. In response, He promises untold blessings. Typically, like an undisciplined child or untrained dog, we won't follow Him completely enough, long enough to taste the blessings.

We get frustrated, or the pain gets too intense, and we begin to resent God. We clench our fists and grind our teeth and squint our eyes in rebellion. Why doesn't God fix our problems?

We have not yet begun to see things from God's point of view. From God's point of view, He is not out to get us, nor is He out to neglect us. He is out to make us like Him, and for reasons hidden deep in the mysteries of His will, He allows and uses pain.

However, God is not unaware or unaffected by our suffering. He does not leave us to suffer alone. He is not regaling the departed saints in a celestial party, oblivious to our plight, waiting for the day when we will finally join them. Rather, God is with us, always. When we hurt, God hurts. He feels our pain. He takes in all our pain. In some mysterious way, a God who is complete and lacks nothing links Himself with our suffering.

When it comes to God's identifying with our suffering, I have always felt that Jesus had credibility, because He came to earth and suffered for me far more than He asks us to suffer. So when He asks me to suffer, while I may not enjoy it, He has credibility with me. The Bible teaches that Jesus delighted to do the Father's will, but He did not

delight to go to the cross. Scripture says that Jesus “endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). Luke 22:44 indicates that in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was in emotional agony, and sweat profusely. Hebrews 5:7 says He cried. He asked for the help of friends who deserted him in Mark 14:32. He had to have angelic assistance to continue (Luke 22:43). Again in Mark 14, He said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” So if Jesus asks anything of me, I feel a sense of fraternity with Him. Anything He asks me to suffer will be less than He suffered for me.

But I confess to struggling with God the Father. It always seemed unfair to me for God to be up in His celestial glory, untouched by the ravages of sin in the world, telling me to be patient, that it would all be over some day, and we’d get our reward.

However, as I searched the Scriptures, I discovered how wrong I was and how I missed the fact that anything Jesus the Son experiences is also experienced by the Father. God feels our pain. He takes it into His own heart. When we hurt, God hurts. Not only does he feel pain for us, but for all those on earth; and not only all those on earth, but all those who have ever been on earth, and all those who will be on earth. Those of you who are parents know how much pain you go through watching your children hurt. When they are in physical or emotional pain, your heart breaks with them. In the same way, God hurts when He sees us hurting.

Scripture says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Where is God when it hurts?

He is on the cross, taking to Himself in Christ the pain, agony and terror of all the suffering of all the world for all time. As believers, we are united with Christ. When we suffer, God the Father suffers. When we are in pain, God feels and hears and cares.

No, God does not escape. He has chosen not to escape. Even from heaven, when I hurt, God hurts, and so I no longer cry out, “God, why don’t you make it stop hurting?” He is hurting with me. In fact, we must not fail to marvel at how God’s coming to us in Jesus the Son is the most potent way God could and did drink deeply from the bitter waters of human suffering. And so there must be a reason for suffering which lies beyond me.

I have been struck so many times when a parent takes a child to visit the doctor or dentist and the child either fears pain or feels pain. The child cries out from the bottom of his soul when the parent hands the child over to the doctor. Yet when it is all over and the doctor hands the child back to the parent, the child does not recoil from the parent for handing him over to such pain. Rather, sensing that there is some higher good, and sensing that the parent is hurting even as the child hurt, the child grabs the parent’s neck, and buries his face into his shoulder, and at last is comforted.

We must try to see our suffering from God’s point of view. He cares. He hurts with us. He obviously would prefer that we not suffer and promises that there will come a day when we

will not suffer. But for reasons hidden in the mystery of His will, He has allowed suffering

to come into creation . . . but with the suffering, He suffers, too.

We Must Believe that Our Suffering Matters

Obviously, then, our suffering matters to God. For instance, there is purpose behind it. In Hebrews 12:5-9, we read:

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges

every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? (NASB).

Yet there is a level on which we cannot see or know the reason. We cannot understand. When suffering comes on that level we must trust, by faith, that it matters to God....

In his book *Disappointment With God*, Philip Yancey writes about the "Great Wager." The Book of Job, Yancey wrote, is more than a book on suffering; it is a book about faith, the heart, which is the Great Wager in chapter 1. Satan wagers that if God takes away all blessing from Job, Job will curse God. God allows the wager. Yancey wrote:

When people experience pain, questions spill out . . . the very questions that tormented Job. "Why me? What's going on? Does God care? Is there a God?" This one time, in the raw recounting of Job's travail, we, the onlookers . . . not Job . . . are granted a view behind the curtain. What we long for, the prologue to Job provides: a glimpse into how the world is run. As nowhere else in the Bible, the book of Job shows us God's point of view, including the supernatural activity normally hidden from us.

Job has put God on trial, accusing him of unfair acts against an innocent party. Angry, satirical, betrayed, Job wanders as close to blasphemy as he can get . . . just to the edge. But Chapters 1 and 2 prove that, regardless of what Job thinks, God is not on trial in this book. Job is on trial. The point of the book is not suffering: Where is God when it hurts? The prologue dealt with that issue. The point is faith: Where is Job when it hurts? How is he responding? (165)

Yes, there was a wrestling match in Job, but it was not between God and Job, it was between God and Satan, although . . . most significantly . . . God had designated the man Job as His stand-in. The first and last chapters make clear that Job was unknowingly performing in a cosmic showdown before spectators in the unseen world (168).

Elihu, one of Job's accusers, said, in essence, "Job, you must have sinned terribly to have brought this suffering down on your head." Elihu was flat wrong, however. The opening and closing chapters of Job prove that God was greatly affected by the response of one man and that cosmic issues were at stake.

"The 'Wager' offers a message of great hope to us all," Yancey concludes. "Perhaps [it is] the most powerful and enduring lesson from Job. In the end, The Wager resolved decisively that the faith of a single human being counts for very much indeed. Job affirms that our response to testing *matters*. The history of mankind . . . and, in fact, my own individual history of faith . . . is enclosed within the great drama of the history of the universe (170).

The Bible hints that something like that may be happening to us when we suffer. The suffering which we go through which makes no sense to us at all is perhaps a cosmic drama in which we are not alone, though in our pain we feel very much alone. Perhaps at that moment when we feel most alone, most abandoned, perhaps at that very moment the eyes of heaven and hell are focused most sharply on us, to witness our faith and the triumph of God's grace. Thus, when we feel most removed from reality and purpose, we may be the most involved in them.

Sometimes God does give us a glimpse behind the veil. In my book *30 Days to Understanding How Christians Should Live*, I wrote about a lady in a church I pastored. Her husband, a school teacher, had applied for the unusual position of going into space aboard a NASA space shuttle. He had all the prerequisites. He was bright, well educated, an excellent communicator, a popular teacher, and so on. Their excitement grew as they envisioned that he might be the first non-astronaut in space. From the wife's point of view, it was not even really the possibility. It was the probability. There was no one more qualified than her husband.

While their hopes were at their highest, they were abruptly and cruelly shattered. A technicality beyond their control prevented getting the extensive application in on time. In the most favorable scenario, it would be one day late. No, there could be no extension; no late papers, as it were. No, they would not grant an exception. No, he would not be the first non-astronaut into space, not because he was not qualified but because the application would be one day late.

The lady who told me this story was crushed, devastated, angry with God. It was a bone that stuck in her throat. She couldn't get over it until the day of the launch, that is. Watching the *Challenger* on television lift off and surge into that brilliant, cloudless blue sky, she said aloud, "That could have been my husband. God, how dare you!" The moment the words passed her lips, the *Challenger* exploded in a ball of flame, divided like a huge wishbone, and dropped lifelessly to the ocean below. Everyone on board had died. She fell backwards onto her bed, shaken to the core.

We are not usually given glimpses behind the scenes like this. But it strikingly helps us see that there is more going than meets our eye. What we see is not all there is. Our thoughts do not encompass all information. Therefore, we must always hope in God, and trust His actions, His timetable, His providence.

When you suffer, take strength. Take encouragement. Your life matters. It counts. God knows you. He loves you. He has not abandoned you. You are not alone. When you hurt, He cares. When you are lonely, He cares. When you are confused and fearful, He cares. He is not off in a corner of the universe paying attention to something that really matters. He is living within your heart, calling and hoping that your faith will remain strong in the struggle. And, He promises to set all things straight one day. What a celebration that will be!

How Is Jesus Our Example In Suffering?

Jesus set the example of total trust and obedience to God, even in suffering.

We can look to Jesus for an example of how we can endure suffering. When He was on the cross, he cried out, "My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken me?" This is a quote from Psalm 22:1-3:

My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer; And by night, but I have no rest. Yet Thou art holy, O Thou who art enthroned upon the praises of Israel (NASB).

In this remarkable passage, we see the psalmist David, crying out prophetically, because he feels utterly forsaken. He says that both day and night he cries out, but God does not answer him. Yet without any explanation for God's silence, the psalmist affirms the holiness of God: "Yet, Thou art Holy...."

Ultimately, our suffering may drive us to only this confession. We are free to cry to God. We may get no relief. We may get no answer. Yet God is still holy.

Again, Jesus provides an example for us as recorded in 1 Peter 2:20-24:

For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it, you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed (NASB).

Jesus simply took it, trusting in God to get Him through it, and trusting that in the end all would be well. No matter how hard, God will see you through it, and in the end all will be well. Trust also sustained the martyrs whose sufferings are described in the remarkable book, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. It tells story after story of early Christians who were martyred for their faith. Hebrews 11 says the world is not worthy of such people. In the providence of God, He calls some to higher degrees of suffering than others, and in the end, when all suffering for God's people will end, they will stand before the Lord and the hosts in heaven, and it will be declared to all the celestial hosts, "The world was not worthy of them!"

Why Do I Need To Know This?

1. If I don't know this, I may think that I am alone when I wrestle with why God doesn't relieve human suffering.
2. I may think there is something dreadfully unspiritual about myself if I'm angry with God about suffering.
3. I may feel alone and abandoned by God when I personally suffer.
4. I may not have a way of relieving the intellectual tension created by unexplainable suffering.
5. I may not realize that I need to study the life of Jesus to gain a better perspective on how to go through suffering.
6. I may not know how to appropriate the grace of God during times of trials.