

How Can A Loving God Let Bad Things Happen?

One does not have to look far to see or hear about tragic, devastatingly painful events that seem to defy logic and reason. The list of painful circumstances that people have endured is endless. Many have suffered terribly through the untimely death of loved ones, serious, debilitating illness, financial losses, abuses, mental illness, abandonment or other traumas. Some may ask: "Where is God and why he would let such terrible things happen?", "Who or what is the source of these tragic events?"

There are times that bad things happen in the universe that are beyond our capability as mortals to understand. God addresses this in Isaiah 55:8-9: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."* Paul says: *Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways! (Romans 11:33)* Just as when we were children, incapable of comprehending our parent's point of view, we are not always able to grasp God's motives or inaction.

Satan is the original and primary agent of all pain and suffering.

Satan was once one of God's angels. He was originally named Lucifer, a word meaning "morning star". Initially he was perfect, full of wisdom and beauty (Ezekiel 28:15,17). He was anointed and ordained by God as a guardian cherub in the Garden of Eden. Then he became corrupt, wicked and violent. When Lucifer became full of pride and decided that he wanted to share the throne in heaven with God, he was thrown down to the earth and banished from heaven. His name was then changed to Satan meaning "adversary" (Ezekiel 28: 12-19; Isaiah 14).

The Facts:

1. Satan would like for us to believe that God is the cause of our difficulties and the source of temptation to do wrong. The truth is that Satan introduced evil into the earthly and celestial realms (Ephesians 6:11-13). He and his followers often pretend to be children of God, dispensing false information and planting seeds of doubt and discouragement. Satan does evil "in the name of Jesus", appearing righteous while making others feel guilty and unsalvageable. The ability to make others lose hope is one of Satan's greatest weapons. The Pharisees imposed a legalistic religion on others that they didn't practice themselves (Matthew 23:2-6). They were self-centered and acted religious only to gain attention from others without regard for those they were called to serve. When the Pharisees acted in this manner, Jesus was outraged and called these religious leaders and their converts "sons of hell" (Matthew 23:15).

And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. (2 Corinthians 11:14)

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. (James 1:13)

2. All disorder and sinful behavior is from Satan. He is the author of every evil practice and has been doing his work since his separation from God. He himself lost his place in heaven due to envy and selfish ambition (Isaiah 14).

He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. (1 John 3:8).

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (James 3: 15-16)

3. Satan is always on the prowl scheming and looking for opportunities to discourage, deceive and inflict pain. He is a formidable adversary who finds joy in tragedy and suffering. Satan never relents and always believes he will prevail given the right set of circumstances.

Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." (Job 1:7)

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take our stand against the devil's schemes. (Ephesians 6:11)

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10)

4. Satan works not passively but ruthlessly and aggressively against all good, taking as many prisoners as possible to do his work.

And that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:26)

5. Satan blinds the minds of some, planting false doctrine and promoting spiritual deception. He misleads and distorts truth so that believers abandon their faith and follow him.

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4)

Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. (Luke 8:12)

6. Satan is capable of inflicting physical and mental illness. Although the Bible distinguishes between those with evil spirits and other types of illnesses (Matthew 4:24; Mark 1:32; Luke 7:21), all pain and suffering originates with Satan. Paul called his “thorn in his flesh” a “messenger from Satan”, clearly attributing the source of his suffering to Satan (2 Corinthians 12:7). Jesus’ ministry included the healing of those under Satan’s power.

He (Jesus) went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts: 10:38)

Thought Questions:

1. How has Satan caused pain and suffering in your life?

2. Who in your life, if anyone, did Satan “devour” as described in 1 Peter 5:8? How did he do this?

3. Did he cause you or others to believe that God was the cause of your difficulties? If so, how?

Did Satan “masquerade as an angel of light” as described in 2 Corinthians 11:14? If so, how?

God is the source of good, not evil.

Love is God’s trademark. (1 John 4:18) He is perfect and always works for good (Matthew 5:48; Romans 8:28). He does not take pleasure in evil and hates wrong-doing (1 Peter 3:12; Psalms 5:4).

Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love and he relents from sending calamity. (Joel 2:13)

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” (1 Peter 3:12)

Those who purposely cause pain and commit abusive and evil acts are acting as agents of the evil one.

Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. (3 John 1:11)

As Christians, we are God’s ambassadors and agents for good (2 Corinthians 5:20; 3 John 1:11).

We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5;20)

God has power over evil.

God is more powerful than Satan (Romans 16:20); he was the source of Jesus’s power as he healed those under Satan’s power (Acts 10:38; Luke 13:16). Jesus was sent to destroy his work (1 John 3:8).

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet (Romans 16:20).

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts 10:38)

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. (1 John 3:8)

In addition to the healing discussed in the previous section, another example of Jesus' power over Satan is described in Luke 13:10-17. He was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath and saw a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. Her body was bent over and she could not straighten up. Jesus put his hands on her and healed her (Luke 13:10-13). When the synagogue ruler criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, he attributed the woman's infirmity to Satan saying:

Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her? (Luke 13:16)

Thought Questions:

1. Have you seen evidence of God's power over Satan in your life? If so, how?

2. Describe how an "agent for good/ambassador" helped you through a difficult time.

If God has power over Satan, why does he allow bad things to happen?

Even though God loves us (Romans 8:35-38) and has the power to stop Satan's work, he sometimes does not intervene. In fact, he did not intervene even at the request of his son, Jesus asking that God take the cup of suffering on the cross away from him (Mark 14:34-36).

Even though he loves us, God allows us to endure hardships for several reasons:

1. To foster spiritual strength, maturity and perseverance.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:7)

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10)

We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Roman 5:3)

2. So we can witness and strengthen others.

But God has mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with the worst of sinners. Then others will realize that they too, can believe in him and receive eternal life (1 Timothy 1:16).

*(Jesus to Peter telling him that he would deny him three times after his arrest.)
Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (Luke 22:32)*

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

3. So we are faced with a crisis of belief or test of faith that provides an opportunity to make a new decision to walk with God.

Then they (Paul and Barnabas) returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. (Acts 14:21-22)

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

4. To demonstrate that He will be there for us during difficult times; trust can only be gained when it is tested. We may suffer emotional and physical pain but ultimately tragic circumstances cannot win against God's power and the promise of heaven for those who believe.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (Psalms 34:18)

When I said, my foot is slipping, your love O Lord supported me. (Psalm 94:18)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? (Romans 8:35)

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. (Psalms 145:8-9)

We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. (1 John 5:21)

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them (Romans 8:28).

5. So we will yearn for something better, a heaven where there is no death, mourning or pain. The promise of heaven has been confirmed with an oath by God so that we can have this hope as a source of encouragement and an anchor for the soul (Hebrews 6:18).

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

He (God) will wipe every tear from their eye. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:4-5)

Does God punish us by letting bad things happen?

We are God's children (Romans 8:16-17). Because God is a loving father and we are truly his children, sometimes he allows us to endure hardship. This does not mean that we are being punished for something we have done. Getting through tough times is part of the parent-child bonding process. We bond with our children not only during happy times but by being present during their sickness, losses and daily struggles. A loving, trustworthy parent will be there for his child when he is in pain offering encouragement, protection and support. Children whose parents are not supportive and nurturing during their struggles often fail to bond or form healthy emotional attachments. God is always there for us when we are hurting.

God does sometimes discipline us. Discipline is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as training that corrects, molds or perfects. This is different from punishment which involves retribution for wrong doing. The motive for discipline is always love, not anger. However, discipline may include natural consequences for poor choices. We know that undisciplined children lack the maturity necessary to make good choices and live productive lives. In Proverbs 13:24, we are told that a man who withholds discipline "hates his son" and a loving father is "careful to discipline." Colossians 3:21 tells fathers to not aggravate their children or they will become discouraged. (Also see Ephesians 6:4)

We are disciplined because:

1. We are God's children whom he loves and enjoys. His love is unfailing even if He does not like our behavior. The term "son" used in the following verses applied to men and women (Galatians 3:28)

My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves as a father the son he delights in. (Proverbs 3: 11-12)

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons, for what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline) then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. (Hebrews 12:7-8)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? (Romans 8:35)

2. We gain wisdom from hardship including the ability to make wise and Godly choices.

Fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Proverbs 1:7)

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid. (Proverbs 12:1)

3. We can develop spiritual maturity Christians and share in his holiness and peace.

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for your good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:7-11)

God has designed life to be full of the unexpected so that we might realize that we are not in charge and cannot our future. He loves us and wants the best for us just as we want good things for our own children.

To better understand God as a loving parent who establishes appropriate boundaries, consider your own children or a child you know well:

- Would you allow your child to do whatever he or she wanted without limits or consequences?
- If you did not set limits, would it be likely that your child would learn from his or her mistakes?
- If your child never experienced hardship or consequences, how would this impact his or her life?
- Would you gain pleasure from seeing your child make mistakes or experience pain?
- Would you withhold love based on your child's behavior or would you continue to love the child even if you dislike the behavior?

- Would you be supportive and available when your child is in pain?

Thought Questions:

1. Describe a painful event in your life. What did you learn from this experience?

2. Why did God not intervene? Mark each item that applies to the situation you described in question 1.

- _____ So you could gain spiritual strength, maturity and perseverance
- _____ So you could witness with your experience and strengthen others
- _____ So you would be faced with and resolve a crisis of belief or test of faith
- _____ So God could demonstrate that he will be there for you during difficult times
- _____ So you would want to be in a place free of evil and yearn for heaven
- _____ So you would be corrected, molded and perfected.

3. How did God demonstrate his presence during this difficult time?

Bad things can happen to good people.

Painful circumstances are not always a result of our own actions. Job endured the loss of everything he had at the hand of Satan; yet God considered him to be a blameless and righteous man (Job 1:1). Ruth and Naomi lost their husbands and sons, living in a land suffering a great famine; yet both were Godly women (Book of Ruth). Christ suffered beatings, hardship and a painful death, yet was sinless (1 Peter 2:21).

But what about Matthew 5:45? This scripture seem to suggest that God makes bad things happen.

Matthew 5:45 - He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

When considered in its historical context, this passage actually emphasizes God's mercy, rather than his power to bring calamity on those who alienate themselves from him. In the times in which this was written, drought was commonplace. Rain comes for both the righteous and the unrighteous.

When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future. (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

God allows us to experience both good times and bad times so that we have free will and the opportunity to choose him and his ways. If he removed evil from this world, he would be eliminating our power to choose. The true fiber of our moral core is reflected in the actions and decisions we make when life is not going well. This is particularly true of decisions we make when there is no time for deliberation.

When Jesus encountered a man blind from birth, his disciples asked him if the man's sin or the sin of his parents was responsible for the blindness. Jesus told them that neither had contributed to this disability because it had happened in order for the work of God to be displayed in this man's life. The man was then healed when Jesus made some mud and put it on his eyes (John 9:1-11).

God equips us to deal with hardship.

God will always give us what we need to deal with life's challenges. When in the depths of trauma and painful situations, this is sometimes a difficult concept to grasp. But God loves us and wants us use our experiences to witness his presence to others.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

The resources that God supplies often include:

- Supportive friends
- Supportive family, or "family of choice" members who act as family when our own families fail us
- Church family
- A God-directed "agent" or "ambassador" who offers support and/or redirects our path
- Emotional strength when we think none is left
- Prayer as a personal connection with Him

- Counseling and other emotional and spiritual resources

If anger at God or emotional pain prevents us from prayer, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us and communicates our needs to God.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. (Romans 8:26)

God will always provide a way, no matter what difficulties you encounter.

And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

God has a plan for you and a direction for your life.

For those who love and trust in him, he takes our mistakes, pain, and suffering for his glory and as a witness to his greatness.

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them (Romans 8:28).

For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

(Paul describing how God used his failures and sinful experiences for the greater good.) Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life (1 Timothy 1:16).

An Example of God’s Plan: The story of Ruth and Naomi: (Ruth 1-4)

Naomi’s husband and two sons died. Alone without her sons and husband and in the midst of a famine, she and her daughter-in-law Ruth returned to Judah where the crops were good. Discouraged, Naomi told the women who greeted her upon her return to call her Mara which means “bitter” instead of Naomi meaning “pleasant”.

“Don’t call me Naomi,” she responded. “Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the Lord has

brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me.” (Ruth 1:20-21)

But God had a plan and provided for her and Ruth. Ruth married Boaz, a wealthy and influential man who provided for her and Naomi. Ruth bore a son with Boaz who was the grandfather of David and was in the genealogical lineage of Jesus. Naomi cared for the baby “as if he were her own”. The women of the town then told Naomi:

“Praise the Lord, who has provided a redeemer for you family! May this child be famous in Israel. May he restore your youth and care for you in your old age. For this is the son of your daughter-in-law who loves you and has been better to you than seven sons!” (Ruth 4:14-15)

Thought Questions:

1. How has God equipped you to deal with a difficult situation?

2. What evidence tells you that God helped you through?

--Scriptures are from the New International Version and New Living Translation of the bible.