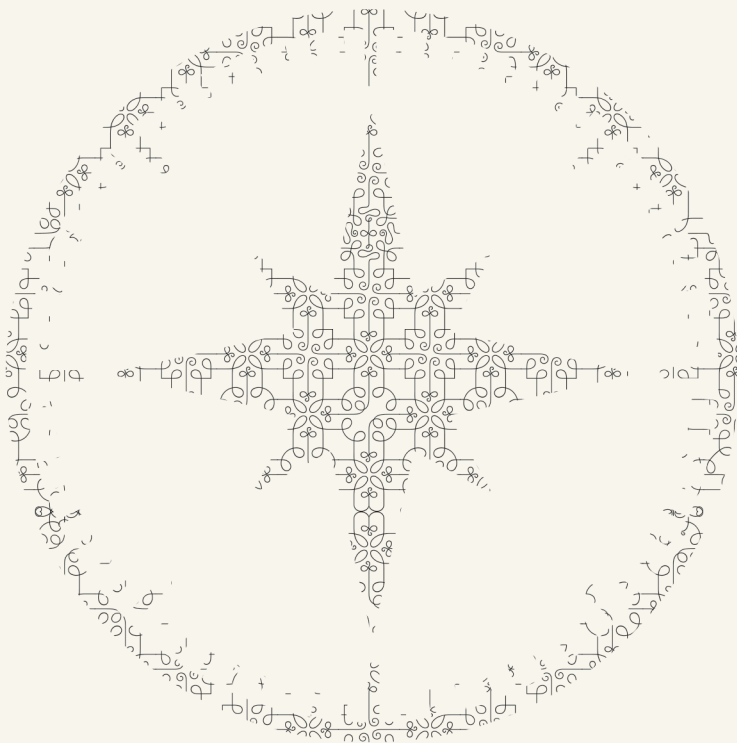


DIALOG

# *Searching for Answers*

EXPLORING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS  
ABOUT FAITH AND THE BIBLE



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A photograph of a person lying down, possibly on a couch or bed, with their head resting on a pile of clothes. A hand is placed on their forehead. The scene is cluttered with various items of clothing, including a grey t-shirt, a brown sweater, and a blue striped shirt. In the foreground, there is a clear plastic bag, a dark glass bottle, and a metal can. The overall mood is one of distress or suffering.

# Why Does God Allow Suffering?



The words of the psalmist express the prayer of those who suffer, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (10:1, NRSV) Those who suffer certainly understand the feelings expressed here. Suffering and faith often lead us to ask, “Why?” One way to express this question is, *Why does God allow suffering?* This is a perplexing question, but it is also very honest. The chapter will consider the meaning and significance of suffering.

## How does suffering challenge faith?

The basic challenge in the face of suffering is to understand the nature of God. The discussion of God takes place between two poles.

- *God is Sovereign.* This means that God controls every aspect of life. God determines all events, either explicitly (commands) or implicitly (allows). Such a God has a purpose or a will for each person. God does not change at all. He is the sovereign of the universe and the Lord of history. God does not move. He wills what He chooses and the purpose of prayer is to align our will to His. Those who lean toward this understanding of God point to images like God as Creator, Judge, Eternal, and so on.
- *God is Love.* This means that the most basic thing that one can say about God is that He is affected by creation. God has made room for His creation. This view tends to think of God’s power in terms of His capacity to be present in every twist and turn of life. God is dynamically connected to His creation. God loves and is moved by the object of that love. He is the most moved mover. He weeps with His creation. He has become immanent to His creation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He hears our prayers and He changes as a result within the everlasting intentions of God. Those who lean toward this understanding of God point to images in the Bible like Father and Shepherd.

What we believe about God determines how we face suffering. According to the psalmist, “For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you” (5:4). Later we read, “But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy” (v. 11). The challenge of faith amounts to understanding that God is present in suffering, not as its cause, but as its redeemer.

The truth we seek lies between these extremes (God is sovereign—God is love). God does have intentions for His creations. He seeks to work out His good will in ways that redeem.

### Reflect on this...

*If God is all-powerful, does it matter whether He commands or allows suffering?*

*How does the capacity of God to be present in our suffering change the manner in which we face the valley of the shadow of death?*

## How can we face suffering?

Suffering is unavoidable. It takes the form of violence, enmity, toiling amid thorns and thistles, persecution for righteousness sake, sickness, death, pain, and/or childbirth. Yet, even in the face of these challenges we are able to think about suffering redemptively.

*Take suffering seriously.* It would be obscene to pass evil over as if it did not matter. There comes a time in every life when suffering is not just what others experience; it is what I am experiencing now. We read in 1 Peter 4:12-17, 19:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief-maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear his name. For time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel . . . Therefore, let those sufferings in accordance with God’s will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.”

Suffering should never be romanticized. We should not attempt to name it by some benign label. We need not try to call it good, because it is not good. Yet, we cannot allow ourselves to get lost in the sea of agony that suffering can bring.

*Embrace our suffering in Jesus.* When we suffer we do so in the hands of our Savior. He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me that I am *not* alone even in the valley of the shadow of death. According to Paul:

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For if we hope for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:18-25).

This is a powerful passage because it gives witness to a God who is at work in the world to redeem it. It allows for suffering and it suggests a God who is invested in the suffering of creation.

The problem of suffering raises the most central of all theological questions. Does the suffering of the world, including creaturely life, affect God? Is God moved by my tears? Does God hear my prayers and change direction because of it? These are legitimate questions, but the answer is not easily unpacked and understood with a simple “yes” or “no.”

*As believers, we must face suffering redemptively through the Church.* It is in the church that we come to a place where suffering is finally and fully faced in the Christian life. Paul addresses the church at Galatia with these words, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). He also writes “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Colossians 1:24). In other words, if we are to face the

challenge that suffering presents we will do it together. God has called us to bear one another's burdens. We walk together toward that heavenly city as a people made new in Christ.

**The last word of the story is never despair, but the hope that our suffering ultimately turns to joy in the economy of God's grace.**

Our life together is a practiced hope. It begins in the waters of baptism and it is sustained at the Table of the Lord. We are strengthened in our prayers for one another. We are nourished through the preaching of the Word and its further enrichment in the vast theological resources that becomes apparent in the teaching office of the church. The two great metaphors for the Church in the New Testament are body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit. Both suggest mutuality along with our relationship in Christ. Both of these are social, that is, they can only be understood as "we."

When all questions have been considered we come to understand that the matter of God allowing suffering recedes in the faith that He is present to redeem our suffering. The last word of the story is never despair, but the hope that our suffering ultimately turns to joy in the economy of God's grace. ●

### Reflect on this...

*What is the difference between chronic and redemptive suffering?*



*How does suffering teach us lessons that other paths do not?*

*In what ways has this chapter helped in your understanding of suffering?*

## NOTES

Handwriting practice lines consisting of 20 horizontal dashed lines.





# *Searching for Answers*

EXPLORING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS  
ABOUT FAITH AND THE BIBLE

Reading scripture can raise difficult questions for us. Exploring our faith through these questions can deepen our trust and strengthen our relationship with God. But where do we go for answers?

*Searching for Answers: Exploring Difficult Questions about Faith and the Bible* is not designed to give pat answers to complex questions. Instead, this study will help believers think through the issues with which they may be struggling. It will provide ways for the Church to talk openly and honestly about questions of faith.

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