



The New Life in Christ

Lesson 13

The Problem of Suffering and Poverty

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

This is a very common question, one that disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ may often meet in their lives. We see people suffering in many ways throughout the world and non-believers tell us that this is proof either that God does not exist or that He is a God who does not care – if He did care then He would stop the suffering of the world.

The message of the Bible is that God *does* care.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”
John 3:16

Jesus is God’s only begotten Son, His beloved Son. God cares for the world so much that He asked His precious Son to die on the cross to take away sins.

However, the righteousness of God means that He will not simply ignore sin and allow it to go unpunished. After Adam and Eve had sinned, God told them that they would die and also that life would become hard. Adam would have to work to feed his family, the ground would be cursed and food production would become more difficult; Eve would have problems in child bearing. When He had told them these things, the Lord God said:

“Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil;” Genesis 3:22

Evil means trouble or bad things of every sort. Sometimes it comes as a result of the sins of men and women and sometimes it comes directly from God (Isaiah 45:7). The evil that God brought upon Adam and Eve, and all those who are descended from them, is experienced as suffering in their lives. Through it God reminds people of the consequences of sin. Why God does this we shall see when we consider the example of Job later in this lesson.

However, not all evil comes from God. Mankind has abandoned God’s laws and, in our lives, we suffer the consequences of our actions and those of our ancestors.

- Wars start because of man’s pride and lust for power (James 4:1)
- Many illnesses are the result of our own behaviour, for example:
 - i. Sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS are the result of immorality.
 - ii. Lung cancer is caused by smoking.
 - iii. Contaminated water is a major cause of dysentery and cholera.
 - iv. A major cause of epilepsy in Africa is from eating pork contaminated with a parasitic worm. Eating pig meat was specifically forbidden under the Law of Moses because of the diseases it may cause.
- Lack of rainfall in many countries is due to the cutting down of trees and the pollution of the atmosphere by western countries.

We cannot blame God for suffering caused in this way. He has given mankind free-will and if we use this to make decisions which bring harm upon ourselves then God will tolerate this until the time comes when He will intervene to send His Son to make the earth very good once again.

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”
Acts 17:30-31

The Example of the Lord Jesus Christ

In the Gospels we read on many occasions of the compassion of Jesus for other people. The Bible uses a strange word for this which suggests that this feeling came from deep inside him, almost as if he felt compassion so strongly that it affected him physically. This language is only used of Jesus in the New Testament, or by him in a parable, as if this feeling for other people and the desire to help them was stronger in the Lord Jesus Christ than in anyone else. We meet these ideas in these two passages:

"When he saw the crowds, **he had compassion for them**, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."
Matthew 9:36

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one **who in every respect has been tempted as we are**, yet without sin."
Hebrews 4:15

The Lord understands our problems and feels for us because he was tempted as we are. This understanding of our weaknesses and problems is shown in his compassion; he really wanted to help people who suffered and had a need of his healing power or who were hungry without food to eat.

We know that Jesus was given the Holy Spirit power without measure, he could do anything, including taking control of all the kingdoms of the world if he had wished so to do. Yet he resisted the temptation to use his power to do this and it also seems that some of the sick and needy people who came to him for help did not receive a miraculous healing.

"That evening at sunset they brought to him **all who were sick or oppressed by demons**.
And **the whole** city was gathered together at the door.
And he healed **many** who were sick with various diseases, and cast out **many** demons.
And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.
And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.
And Simon and those who were with him searched for him,
and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you."
And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is what I came for."
Mark 1:32-38

Mark tells us very clearly that *everyone* who was sick in the city went to Jesus but it seems that he did not have time to heal *all of them* that day. The next day he made a decision not to go back and heal the remaining people but to go to the next town to preach the Gospel message. Jesus understood that he could not use his miraculous powers to take away the suffering of all the people around him fully and permanently. The only solution to the problem lay in the fulfilment of the Gospel message, that God had sent his Son to take away the sins of the world and through the forgiveness of sins would come the permanent solution to the problem of suffering.

Furthermore, forgiveness of sins came through the perfect life and the death of Jesus Christ and we are told that this sinless man *suffered* in achieving this for us.

"For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect **through suffering**."
Hebrews 2:10

"Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he **suffered**."
Hebrews 5:8

From this consideration of Jesus we have learnt a number of important points about the problem of suffering.

1. The Lord Jesus Christ understands the problems of people and feels deeply for those who are suffering. Like his Father he cares for his disciples.
2. Even though he healed many people with his Holy Spirit power, Jesus was unable permanently to take away the problems of suffering in this way. We do not have the power that Jesus had and whatever we do to help people, we too are unable to solve the problem of suffering completely.

3. Jesus understood that sin was the fundamental cause of suffering, not necessarily the sin of the person who suffers (John 9:1-3), but the way in which sin had entered the world and dominated mankind ever since.

"Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned."
Romans 5:12

He also understood that the only way in which suffering could be completely removed from the world was through his life and death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.

4. The suffering of Jesus helped in the development of his character, through it he learned to be obedient to God.

This last point helps us to see how we should consider suffering in our lives. Problems come upon all men and women whether they are disciples of Jesus or not.

"Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all."
Ecclesiastes 9:11

The important point is how we understand the difficult things that happen to us. The Bible asks us to accept suffering as a form of discipline from God.

"And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?" My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them.

Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?

For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Hebrews 12:5-11

God does care for those who belong to Him through the Lord Jesus Christ. They are His children and He is a loving Father to them. Just as human fathers train their children and discipline them because they love them, so God trains His children. If we accept the difficult things that happen to us in life as a form of spiritual training by a Father who loves us as His own children, then we shall be able to understand that every experience in life can help us as we journey towards the Kingdom of God.

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."
Romans 8:28

The Example of Job

In the Old Testament we are told of the life and sufferings of a man called Job. He was a man who seemed to have everything in life.

- He was God fearing in all that he did (Job 1:1)
- He had many children (1:2)
- He was very rich (1:3)
- He was highly respected by everyone (29:7-11)
- His life was full of good works (29:12-16)

Yet in spite of all this, he suffered in a terrible way. His children were killed, his wealth vanished (1:13-19) and finally his own health failed and he became ill in a distressing way (2:6-8). Job's initial response to all of this was:

"Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" Job 2:10

Although it was men who had stolen his herds and a great wind which had blown down his house and killed his children, Job understood that all of this suffering had come from God. He recognised that he could not just expect good things from God as a right; it was not for him to decide what God should do.

The time came however when 'his suffering was very great' and he wished that God would take away his life (6:9), the only solution to his suffering which he could see was the grave. Job was like so many men, when he suffered in effect he said to God 'why is this happening to me?'

"If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you?
Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be."
Job 7:20-21

Suffering, and the discipline it brings, are an important way God works in our lives. We are not punished for specific sins – there is nothing in the book of Job which suggests that Job had sinned in any significant way even though his friends all told him that this must be so. The chastening of God was to prevent the development of spiritual pride in Job, to make him understand that, although he was a God fearing man in his life, he had nothing to offer God but a humble acceptance of His will.

Towards the end of the book a man named Elihu recognised that Job needed someone who would plead his cause before God.

Elihu said concerning Job:

"If there be for him an angel, **a mediator**, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him,
and he is merciful to him, and says, 'Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom;
let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigour';
then man prays to God, and he accepts him; he sees his face with a shout of joy, and he restores to man his righteousness.
He sings before men and says: 'I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me.
He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.'
Job 33:23-28

However much we suffer, if there is a mediator who will plead our cause before God, then this will bring a feeling of peace and acceptance of our lot into our lives. We shall understand that, whatever the problems that face us now, the grave will not be the end but salvation will come in the Kingdom of God. This is the role of the Lord Jesus Christ; he is our mediator, he is at the right hand of Almighty God to plead for us. Faith in this will help us to face whatever suffering lies before us in life, as the Apostle Paul wrote:

"Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,

nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:34-39

Finally, when God had revealed His greatness and power to Job, the man humbled himself completely before God with these words:

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Job 42:5-6

Job's faith was tested by God through suffering. Through it he developed a more complete understanding of God. It was when he had lost everything, family, wealth, health that he came to understand that God was his only refuge, the only one who could truly help him. In the things that he suffered he became a great type of the Lord Jesus Christ who was 'made perfect through suffering'.

Poverty

When the Lord God led Israel out of Egypt and gave them His laws at Mount Sinai, He gave them commandments about how they should live together as a nation. Some of these laws were designed to ensure that people who became very poor would not be completely ruined by their poverty.

"If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.

Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you." Leviticus 25:35-36

Their neighbours were not allowed to profit from their misfortune for God said:

"Over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly." Leviticus 25:46

This did not mean that lazy people could do nothing and just rely on the generosity of their neighbours; God had commanded Adam to work for food and this principle is true throughout the whole of the Bible, Paul wrote to the ecclesia at Thessalonica:

"For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If any one is not willing to work, let him not eat." 2Thessalonians 3:10

However, God knew that there would always be poor people and He declared that their brothers and sisters were responsible for helping them.

"For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'" Deuteronomy 15:11

The Lord Jesus Christ understood this principle perfectly. We read in the Gospels that he 'stretched out his hand' and helped people in various ways. This was a fulfilment of the principle shown in Deuteronomy 15.

Yet we have seen that Jesus did not solve all the problems of life in Israel during his ministry. Indeed there are suggestions that things were worse at the end of his ministry than at the beginning because people had hardened their hearts to his message; the rich got richer and the poor became poorer. The total removal of poverty will only happen when Jesus Christ returns to this earth and establishes the Kingdom of God in which God's laws will be followed by all nations.

"For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper.

He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.”

Psalm 72:12-13

This teaching should set the pattern for the way in which rich disciples help their poor brothers and sisters today. They *cannot* remove poverty completely but, if necessary, they can help in a way that ensures that no-one is ruined by poverty.

The responsibility for this lies first of all with the immediate family of the disciple who has a problem. This is what God taught Israel, that first of all a relation was responsible for helping the poor (Leviticus 25:25). If this is not possible then the disciples who belong to the same ecclesia as the poor brother or sister should do what they can to help. Finally, if more assistance is needed then brothers and sisters from elsewhere should be asked for help, but only with the approval of their own ecclesia.

CBM Welfare Fund

Many students of this course will know that the Christadelphian Bible Mission has a welfare fund and it is important to understand how it works.

- The fund was established to help brothers and sisters who are in need. It does not offer help to unbaptized students taking Bible correspondence courses. The reason for this is that some people do Bible courses and even become baptized for the wrong reasons – they look for financial benefit by doing this. This is not new; the apostles met the same problem in their preaching (Acts 8).
- Welfare help is only given in real emergencies where there is no other aid available. It is generally for emergency medical treatment or for famine. It is not given as regular payments to help improve people’s standard of living.
- Decisions on welfare help are best made by the senior brothers in the country concerned as they know best the circumstances behind the problem.

The Bible’s Answer

The only real answer to the problem of suffering and poverty is the return of Jesus Christ and the setting up of God’s Kingdom. When Jesus comes, he will give immortal life to his true disciples who will live and reign with him for ever. Whatever problems we face in this life they are insignificant compared to those things we look forward to, the things God has promised to those who love Him and keep His commandments.

**“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
He will dwell with them, and they will be his people,
and God himself will be with them as their God.
He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more,
neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore,
for the former things have passed away.”**

Questions

1. What is the greatest proof that God does care for the world?
2. What did Jesus have to do to save the world from suffering and sin?
3. How should a disciple see suffering in his life?
4. Why did God chasten Job?
5. When will poverty and suffering be taken away completely?
6. What lessons can we learn from Luke 21:1-4?