

SUFFERING

As humans suffering is a universal experience. The pains and problems vary from person to person, but we all suffer. This fact leads to the common question: why does God allow suffering? Given that it is a constant part of life, we should seek to understand it better.

One of the most common responses is bitterness or resentment for the pain we all go through. We need healing from that. Some suffer outwardly for all to see while others suffer inwardly which no one can see. While suffering can undoubtedly sow the seeds of bitterness and resentment that is not how Christians should respond to it. Instead, to unpack this idea, consider the three main aspects of suffering:

1. Suffering as a Consequence of Sin

The first truth about suffering is that it is alien to God's original plan for us humans. That might sound incredible, but to the Christian worldview, it is vital. Suffering is a product of the fall, a consequence of human sin against God (Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:21).

Suffering is in our lives because we are living in a broken world. Some suffering is due to our sinful and wrong choices, but some is due simply to the world being fallen as a consequence of the sin of Adam. We can't take the cross out of Christianity no more that we can take the pain out of living. So let's try and make sense of it. We should also keep in mind that in the world to come there will a new heaven and earth where suffering will be no more – 'every tear will be wiped away'. Our Lady told Bernadette that she'll suffer in this life but will be happy in the world to come. In her autobiography, St Thérèse of Lisieux wrote: "I have experienced tribulations of all sorts and suffered a great deal. When I was a child, suffering used to make me sad; now I taste its bitterness with joy and peace." Thérèse understood that suffering and sadness are part of life.

2. Suffering as a precursor to conversion

Nothing is so broken as to be unusable by God. Although suffering is alien to His plan for humanity, God allows it now as part of our spiritual development as persons. Nothing forces a person to confront their true self, like suffering. I'm sure there are people we know who found God and peace only in the midst of suffering. It brought them to their senses. It was only when the Prodigal Son experienced suffering humiliation and deprivation that his life changed for the better. Suffering causes us to face those parts of ourselves which we might otherwise ignore. God can use suffering then to develop us into better people. (Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4).

3. Suffering as a Test of Faith

On Sunday I told the people in the homily the following: To test our faith God, sometimes, metaphorically speaking, can tug at the rug under our feet in the form of an unwelcome cross hoping that we entrust ourselves and our destiny more fully into his hands. But for some it has the opposite effect – when their faith is tested they turn their backs on God altogether. In this way, suffering can reveal whether our faith is a mere childish hope or a factual reality. So suffering, even though not good in itself, can be purposeful and draw us closer to God.

Maybe that is part of the healing we need today.