

BEYOND
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UNDERSTANDING YOUR FUTURE®

A Bible study aid
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Why Am I Suffering?

When tragedies happen, we ask why.

Whether it happens to us personally, to our loved ones, or to our communities, we have a natural desire to find answers. How could a loving, all powerful God allow terrible things to happen?

God gives us answers. He gives us hope. The Bible is the very Word of God, and it reveals the reasons for pain and suffering. It also gives us the hope of how to get through trials and sorrows. God doesn't want bad things to happen to people. He loves you. He loves people. Like a loving parent, it hurts Him to see His children in pain.

In fact, it's part of God's plan for humanity to get rid of all sadness, sorrow and pain. His plan is for every man, woman and child to live in peace and harmony in His Kingdom. He wants this new world even more than we do. He wants us to grow closer to Him, to obey Him, and to find true peace and comfort in His love and way of life.

The most important thing to realize is that God cares for you.

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

God does care for you.



Often when we're faced with a trial that seems too hard to handle, we feel abandoned. Abandoned by friends, abandoned by family, and sometimes especially abandoned by God. In these dark times our cares and worries overwhelm us with negative and even hopeless thoughts.

God is a God of hope, however. He tells us through the apostle Peter that we should go to Him in prayer and cast our cares on Him, "for He cares for [us]" (1 Peter 5:6-7).

Caring and compassion are two of God's divine attributes that we can sometimes forget about in a trial. King David went through many difficult and tragic events in his life. He was exiled and hunted by his king, experienced the death of his best friend, and even lost his baby son. Even through all his pain he was able to understand God's love and care: "But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in mercy and truth... You, LORD, have helped me and comforted me" (Psalm 86:15-17).

David beautifully expressed our Creator's care and concern for you in another Psalm: "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life

from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies" (Psalm 103:2-4).

The loving nature of care and concern that our Heavenly Father has is also in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Gospels we read that "when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude... He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick" (Matthew 14:14). The apostle James later wrote that "the Lord is very compassionate and merciful" (James 5:11).

It can be hard to imagine that an all-powerful God would be concerned with our trouble. Maybe we feel so small that we think He can't possibly care about us. God Himself spoke through the prophet Jeremiah and assured us that, even though He is omnipotent, He truly does care. "The high and lofty one who lives in eternity, the Holy One, says this: 'I live in the high and holy place with those whose spirits are contrite and humble. I restore the crushed spirit of the humble and revive the courage of those with repentant hearts'" (Isaiah 57:15, New Living Translation).

Even when we sometimes forget that God loves and cares for us, we can have faith that He never forgets us. In our limited human perspective, we can lose track of God's ultimate purpose. In His

great love and mercy, He does not forget us or our future. "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).

God is love (1 John 4:8). His love and care for you is based on His very special plan for you and all mankind. When God created mankind, He made us in His very own image (Genesis 1:26).

God does hear you

Not only does God truly care for us on a deep level, He also hears us when we cry out to Him. We don't always *feel* that He is listening though. Feeling like you've lost your connection to God is so very human. God knows our feelings and gave us encouragement in the Bible.

In Romans 15:4 Paul said that "whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." So the stories and accounts of people throughout the Bible are there *for us*. We can read about the struggles of people like David, Moses and Peter and be encouraged that God worked in their lives, just like He can work in our lives today.

When David wrote about his personal struggles, he always followed a simple but powerful path. He cried out to God in faith, trusting God to hear Him. "Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed" (Psalm 61:1). Even though David was a king, he was also just a regular person. And just like any of us, he was sometimes afraid or even lacking in faith.

Despite his fear and uncertainty, when his faith in God was restored, it always led him to the right conclusion: God hears, and God cares. "And you who seek God, your hearts shall live. For the Lord hears the poor, and does not despise His prisoners" (Psalm 69:32-33). When you're overwhelmed with fear,

doubt and trouble, set your heart toward God and ask Him in prayer for His comfort and His will in your life.

When it seems like God doesn't hear

Even when we take our troubles to God and try to trust in Him, it can feel like our prayers don't actually go anywhere—that we're just talking to no one.

Many men and women of powerful faith have felt that way at some points in their lives.

The apostle Paul was a man who could have concluded that God doesn't listen to people. After all, he begged God to heal him of a chronic physical problem. God didn't heal him of whatever was troubling him.

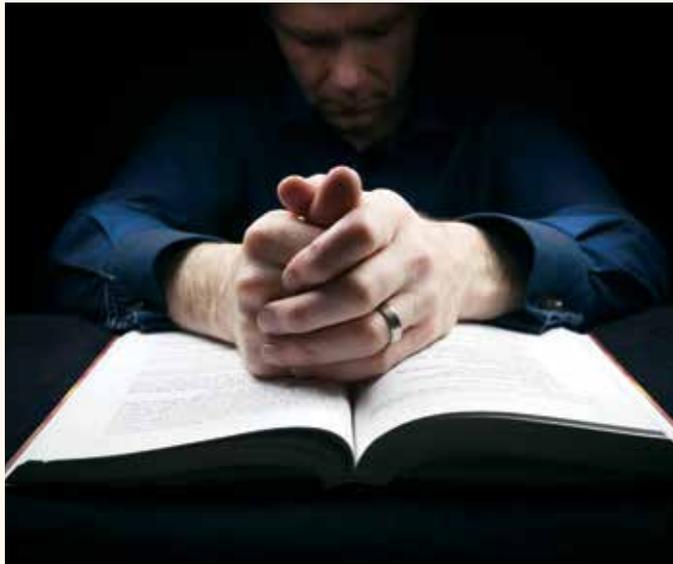
Does this mean God didn't hear Paul? Let's take a look at Paul's experience and see how it can help us have faith that God does hear in times of need.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about his experience: "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" (2 Corinthians 12:7-8, New International Version).

What was this trial that tormented Paul? We don't know for sure, but comments in Paul's writings hint it may have been a problem with his eyes (Galatians 4:13-15; 6:11).

Whatever his trial, the implication is that Paul asked God to take the trial away. He probably did this with fasting and heartfelt prayer (2 Corinthians 11:27). Paul even wanted it for the right reasons—so he could continue to spread the gospel and care for the congregations God raised up.

Can you imagine how discouraged Paul was? It's not hard to imagine he could have thought that God wasn't listening. He could have easily let himself drown in despair, or even get bitter



against God. But Paul had the right perspective on what was really happening. He realized that God *did* hear him. The answer wasn't what Paul asked for, but it was the *right answer* for God's purpose in Paul's life. Paul told the Corinthians that God answered: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). In other words, God told Paul: "I know you're suffering. I hear you, and I promise to care for you. It may not be in the way you'd like right now, but I have bigger and better plans for you. This situation is just a step along the way. Trust Me."

We don't know whether God spoke directly to Paul or whether Paul gradually came to understand God's will. What is clear is that Paul came to a deeper spiritual understanding of his own suffering. Even though he was in a tough situation, it strengthened his faith and commitment.

It's easy to think that Paul's example isn't relevant to us today. After all, he was an apostle. He witnessed and performed great miracles. He was basically a "super-Christian," right? Just like David, Paul was a human being like us. He was weak and powerless without God's help. Anything extraordinary in his life came from God—the same God who works in the lives of those who seek Him today.

Paul's experience teaches us an important lesson. Sometimes when we feel like we have unanswered prayers,

Hearing God's will

Paul was not the only one who learned that living, trusting, abiding faith is more important than physical health and long life. Even Jesus, knowing that He faced a cruel death only hours away, prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus loved life and wanted to live as much as any of us. But He acknowledged a greater purpose for this physical life: "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Jesus Christ, the perfect example of faith, knew God's will was more important than His.

God knows what is best for us in the long run, even if it may conflict with our short-term wants and desires. As Peter tells us, "[Cast] all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Paul says we should be "confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). Because God works within us from a broader perspective to build faith and character, He doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we desire.

God's answer to us is actually "no" or "not yet." God never intended our physical lives to last forever or be the most important thing for us. His focus is on us developing righteous character and a trusting relationship with Him that can last for eternity. He wants to resurrect us to eternal life in a glorious, immortal spirit body not subject to weakness, illness and death (1 Corinthians 15:40-44, 50-54).

In the meantime, Paul understood that God in His love will never allow us to fall into trials greater than we can endure. "But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13, NIV). Sometimes that "way out" is simply the determination to endure the trial, to "stand up under it." **BT**

Why suffering? Where does it come from?

Why would God create a world of chaos and evil?

The truth is that God didn't. This isn't the world that God intended. God's original creation didn't contain these pains. The world God created was peaceful and beautiful. Food was easy to come by. There was no death. People were intended to have a close, personal relationship with God. God gave us free will. God gave us choices.

When our ancestors, Adam and Eve, chose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they chose to disobey God. They rejected His design for the world. In doing so they chose this chaotic world and all the problems we have today. In the world they chose there was the curse of cause and effect, time and chance. Bad decisions now can affect generations to come. Satan became the ruler of this world. We inherited a painful world chosen by our ancestors.

Whether you're in the middle of a trial now or in a period of relative peace in life, it's helpful to understand why suffering exists at all.

Paul Johnson, a famous author, once asked: "If God is infinitely good, and infinitely powerful too, why should evil exist at all?" That question is one we all want answered.

God reveals why He allows suffering to exist in our world today. One inescapable aspect of human life is our free will—our freedom of choice, our free moral agency—that provides the key to understanding why God allows evil and suffering to exist.

The first book of the Bible talks about two trees God created (Genesis 2:9). One represented the way to life and blessings. The other tree held the way to suffering, anguish and death. God gave Adam and Eve a choice of the two trees. He explained the consequences of choosing either tree. He even commanded them not to make the wrong choice (Genesis 2:15-17; compare 3:3).

Just like we so often do, Adam and

Eve made the wrong choice. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6).

Although God warned them not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He didn't keep Adam and Eve from making a wrong choice. God created them both in His own image. He gave them freedom to choose like He does.

consequences are good, and some are bad.

Consequences and time and chance

Every day we hear news of tragic accidents or terrible events that cause suffering. Tornados level schools, earthquakes kill thousands, bombs go off in crowded marketplaces. We ask ourselves why these terrible things happen.

Then sometimes it hits closer to home. It's *our* home that's hit by a tornado; it's *our* loved one in a horrible car



Because God wants us to be like Him, He gave us the ability to choose what we do. Without making right choices, we can't build righteous character, the same character He has.

Because God wants us to be like Him, He gave us the ability to choose what we do. Without making right choices, we can't build righteous character, the same character He has. To build character, we need to make wise choices. We must choose between right and wrong, wisdom and foolishness, carelessness and vigilance.

All actions have consequences. Some

accident. We're left with one inescapable question: How can something like this happen? Where does the suffering each of us and our families go through come from? As much as people try to look within themselves to understand, they have to admit they have no real answers.

The biblical King of Israel, Solomon, faced the same issues and questions a

long time ago and in a very different place. He saw the futility of life when tranquility was shattered by random acts of human nature or even nature itself. He concluded: “One thing happens to all” (Ecclesiastes 9:3), and that evil and madness do exist. Much of what takes place is subject to events beyond our control.

Solomon recorded his thoughts on this topic in a book called Ecclesiastes. In a lot of ways it’s a journal of a person who spent his life searching for the same answers we look for today. He looked around and he saw evil and suffering, righteousness and pleasure. He participated in all of it just to find out what worked best for him. He had enough money to buy and build whatever he desired. He searched for the wisdom of his day, compiled and studied it and was considered by all his peers to be the wisest of all.

Solomon no doubt witnessed actions of violence and unexplainable natural catastrophe that took countless lives. No one had answers, not even the wisest man alive. Why evil? Why suffering?

In all of his observations and meditations he concluded that there is such a time as “time and chance,” and that suffering can result from seemingly random events. He concluded “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. For man also does not know his time; like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them” (Ecclesiastes 9:5-12).

This statement is real, and it gives understanding beyond the headlines and events of this life. Time and chance, events of life beyond our control and completely unrelated to our moment occur, and we are all at times caught in a net and in that moment are like the fish or the birds—life snuffed out and seemingly without meaning.

And yet, there is meaning. There is hope in Solomon’s conclusion about the affairs of all life on this realm called earth. “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep



His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

There is a God, and His judgment is a fact of life. Judgment is part of the hope of this life for without it there is no hope of justice. It is when life is darkest and despair the sharpest that the hope of God’s justice offers a glimmer of light to pierce the gloom. That is what Solomon concluded after a lifetime of reflection.

Satan causes suffering

While Solomon’s conclusion about time and chance in suffering is true, it’s not the only source of suffering in our lives. Sometimes terrible tragedies and situations that cause us suffering come from a very real being who exists only to cause harm to people.

Jesus Christ spoke of one He called “a murderer from the beginning” and “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44, New Revised Standard Version). Jesus identifies the *origin* of evil and suffering. The suffering you and all people go through comes from a being who first lied, deceived, hated and murdered. He is the enemy of mankind, Satan the devil (1 Peter 5:8).

The Bible tells us he was once a glorious angel whose name, Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12), meant “light-bringer.” God said that Lucifer was “the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.” He was “in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering...You

were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you” (Ezekiel 28:12-15).

Something changed deep within Lucifer. God told him: “How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High’” (Isaiah 14:12-14, NIV).

Lucifer convinced himself he was as good as or better than his Maker. He rebelled against God and tried selfishly to put himself above the other angels (Revelation 1:20). Where does violence, anger and hatred come from? God said that Satan became “filled with violence” (Ezekiel 28:16-17). His attitude of selfishness and anger has influenced people throughout time. Because he hates God, he does what he can to make God’s children suffer.

Although the Bible introduced Satan when he deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), he has been around far longer. He was the first criminal, a being whose mind and thinking grew corrupt, twisted and perverse. He introduced evil into the world. Humanity has struggled against evil ever since. **BT**

Jesus Christ is the way through your suffering.

Once you come to understand where suffering comes from and why we so often go through trials, you can start working through your suffering. In God's mercy He showed us the key in

our trials (1 Corinthians 10:13). If you attend a Christian fellowship, you find others going through similar experiences (2 Corinthians 1:3-6). This is strengthening. Yet each of us has his

especially attractive or desirable (Isaiah 53:2). In other words, He was apparently average looking. Just like you, at times His body got just plain tired. He rested at the well of Samaria because He was physically weary and thirsty (John 4:6-7).

Like any other human, He needed time to recuperate from the stress of heavy responsibility, for the weight of the world really was on His shoulders. After periods of hectic activity, He withdrew to areas of solitude to refresh Himself and recuperate (Mark 6:31).

Jesus understands that our world isn't fair and right

A huge amount of our human stresses and pains come from the societies we live in. Governments are often inefficient at best and abusive at the worst. Injustices and acts of aggression were just as much a part of His world as they are ours. Jesus' life was regulated by an oppressive system of at times foolish laws and regulations, just like ours can be, depending on where we live.

Jesus knew the burden of oppressive government and the sting of racism. He lived in Judea under the occupation forces of the mighty Roman Empire, which treated His people harshly. He was personally insulted, accused of being illegitimate and "born of fornication" (John 8:41).

Jesus understands relationship problems

Many of our problems come from strained or broken relationships with members of our family and close friends. Often we feel the most stress and pain from the people we love most. Jesus had to deal with this too. His own brothers didn't believe in Him (John 7:5). His disciples were His best friends, but even they abandoned Him when He was arrested (Mark 14:43-50). The next day many of His disciples were still too frightened to be publicly seen as He was beaten and executed. "But all



The Bible tells us Jesus does "sympathize with our weaknesses." Why does the Creator of the universe care about us at that personal level? Because He was tempted in every way, just as we are (Hebrews 4:15).

the Bible. The key is trusting in Jesus Christ.

How can trust in Jesus bring you through a trial? Why would He help in the first place?

The Bible tells us Jesus does "sympathize with our weaknesses." Why does the Creator of the universe care about us at that personal level? Because He was tempted in every way, just as we are (Hebrews 4:15). What does that mean? It may be hard to understand how God Himself could, for instance, understand a woman's needs. Or empathize with depression and loss. What of the trauma of a divorce?

Paul explains that we are not alone in

own pain, trial and anguish that we may think no one else can really understand.

We may wonder whether God can feel our pain. Can God appreciate the depth of human despair? Peter wrote that Jesus suffered for us, leaving us an example (1 Peter 2:21). In what ways did Jesus lead the way? What confidence can we have that He understands the personal trauma of every one of His people?

Jesus understands human frailty

Jesus understands what it's like to have an imperfect, frail human body. Isaiah was inspired to write that Christ's physical appearance didn't make Him

His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things” (Luke 23:49).

What about other interpersonal relationships? Jesus wasn’t married, so how can He understand marriage problems? How can Jesus understand what it’s like to live with a difficult or even unfaithful mate?

The fact is, He can. He is symbolically married to the Church (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7). How often do we, as individual Christians, let Him down and act unfaithfully toward Him? (Jeremiah 3:6-14). He is not only prepared to take the Church back, He will receive each of us when we repent and pledge ourselves to live faithfully with Him.

Jesus understands illness and pain

The world is full of people going through physical suffering that comes from illness or violence or simple accidents. If you’re in a situation like that, please know that Christ understands the depths of your suffering. In Jesus’ last hours as a human being He was falsely accused, mocked, reviled, sworn at, spat upon and slapped in the face. He suffered a brutal beating before His crucifixion, which in itself was an extremely painful and humiliating way to die. You can read about His suffering in each of the Gospels to get just a small part of an idea of what He went through.

Isaiah prophesied about Jesus’ suffering: “There were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness” (Isaiah 52:14, NIV). Apparently Jesus was barely recognizable as a human after the awful beating He suffered. As God in the flesh, did He want to live physically any less than we do? No, He didn’t want to feel the agony of crucifixion and death. He even asked God the Father if it were possible to not go through this trial (Luke 22:42).



But He endured the pain so He could sympathize with us as our High Priest and so we could be forgiven of our sins (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Jesus understands grief and sorrow

Before His own physical death, Jesus was no stranger to loss and grief. Jesus was overcome with grief and wept when His friend Lazarus died (John 11:35). Even more poignant is how He viewed all of the people He met and served. As God and the Creator of all things, including humanity, Jesus experienced intense sorrow about what humans do to themselves and to each other through sin.

He looked at the city of Jerusalem and wept because of the tragedy the city had seen and would see in the near future. He was experiencing a profound sense of grief over the way His children were suffering and living in pain (Luke 19:41-44).

Begin to work through your suffering today

Know for certain that you have a faithful God and High Priest who walked this physical life ahead of you. He knows what it means to suffer.

Christ meant it when He told us:

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus wants you to approach God the Father with your cares in prayer. Even when you feel like you have unanswered prayers, trust in God’s promises to listen and care for you. Remember Paul’s example. Even though God’s answer isn’t always what we wanted, it is always what’s best for us.

When you’re suffering, approach God boldly and confidently in prayer. Know with every pain you suffer that Jesus is your High Priest. He hears, knows and understands how you feel. When we love and obey Him, God will cause even our biggest mistakes, hardships and pain to work out for good (Romans 8:28).

God the Father and Jesus Christ have a plan for you. Their Kingdom is coming. It’s a beautiful Kingdom where there will be no more pain and suffering (Revelation 21:4). They want you to be a part of their Kingdom (2 Peter 3:9).

Pray to God. Study His Word in the Bible. He wants to be your loving Father now and forever. Seek Him for comfort *today*, in your hour of need. **BT**