

Where is God When We Suffer?

By David Feddes

Ted Turner was twenty years old when he stopped believing in God. Turner is famous for his billions of dollars, his vast media empire, and his sports franchises such as the Atlanta Braves baseball team. What perhaps isn't so well known is that during his youth, Ted Turner considered himself a Christian, and at age seventeen he even thought about becoming a missionary. But by the time Ted was twenty, he refused to believe in God any longer.

What happened? Well, when Ted was twenty, his seventeen-year-old sister Mary Jane died, and her death came after five years of suffering from a horrible disease. As Ted watched Mary Jane suffer and finally die, in spite of many prayers to God for healing, he decided that there really was no God. How could such a thing happen if an all-powerful and loving God was in control of the universe? If God could not answer prayers or prevent suffering, figured Ted, then there was no God.

I have something in common with Ted Turner. I've watched the horrible suffering of someone I loved. My wife and I had a baby who suffered in the hospital for more than five months, and it seemed God did nothing to help that little girl. Rebekah went through the painful process of having a respirator inserted down her throat at least nine different times during her illness. She endured several surgeries. She received so many medications and feedings through intravenous needles that after a while the nurses had a very hard time finding a new vein that would work for the next intravenous. Sometimes they would spend more than an hour jabbing a needle into Rebekah's wrists and ankles and scalp before they could get a suitable vein. For nearly half a year she suffered such things, and then she died.

So where was God during all this? Where was God while baby Rebekah was crying and bleeding and gasping for breath? Where was God when Ted Turner's sister wasted away and died? Ted believes that God was nowhere—he doesn't exist. I, on the other hand, still believe in God. I believe that he is perfectly good and that he is all-powerful. I don't know all the answers about my daughter's illness and death, and I certainly don't claim to have an explanation for the pain and tragedy of so many others. But I still believe in God.

Almost everyone, at one time or another, has to face the question, "Where is God when we suffer?" An encounter with pain and grief changes a person's relationship to God. When your mind is reeling and your heart is aching, something happens. You either fall into God's arms, or else you fall away from him. It all depends on whether you know God as he really is.

If you think of God only as the supreme Ruler of the universe who sits in his plush throne room in heaven, maintains a safe distance from your suffering, and refuses to do anything about it, then it will be very hard not to join Ted Turner. You may either stop believing in God altogether, or else hate him for permitting such terrible pain to afflict you and those you love.

However, if you know God as he really is, as he is revealed at the cross of Jesus, you will keep trusting him no matter what, even when you endure pain you can't escape and struggle with questions you can't answer. Whatever else may be true of God, he doesn't just sit in some heavenly control room, oblivious to your suffering. If you know the Christ of the cross, you know that God loves you, that he understands your suffering, and that he will never let you go.

Throughout history philosophers have looked at the pain and tragedy in the world and asked, "Is it logically possible for God to exist in a world that includes such dreadful suffering?" Some argue that a perfectly good God would *want* to prevent suffering, and an all-powerful God

would *be able* to prevent it. Therefore, goes the reasoning, if God existed, suffering would not exist. But since suffering obviously does exist, God does not.

Now, that's an interesting and challenging problem for philosophers, and having earned my degree in philosophy, I've thought about it very carefully. I've seen how Christian philosophers have suggested some reasonable answers to this intellectual puzzle. Some of their answers are quite convincing, but I'm not going to go into them here. Why not? Well, I want to speak to people who are actually suffering, not just those who debate suffering as an abstract question. I've found that abstract answers to an intellectual puzzle aren't very helpful during the actual experience of suffering. It was one thing for me to be a philosophy major analyzing the problem of suffering; it was quite another to be a father, watching my own child die.

Logic really isn't the issue when you come face to face with anguish. When you're going through terrible times, or when someone you love is caught in the grip of Alzheimer's disease, or wasting away from cancer, or killed by a drunk driver, you don't simply need a logical proof that God exists. You want to know, "Where is God when we suffer, and what is he doing?"

The Bible shows us at least four important ways that God is involved in the suffering of his people: First, he *shares* in our suffering. Second, he is *sovereign* over our suffering. Third, he *sustains* us during our suffering. And fourth, he *saves* us from suffering.

God Shares in Our Suffering

Some people seem to have the idea that God is far removed from our pain. To them God is like a general who keeps sending troops to the front line with no concern for how many casualties there are. He doesn't care how much his troops have to suffer as long as they accomplish his objectives. He himself is protected from any pain or danger in his safe, comfortable headquarters.

The author of a brief drama called "The Long Silence" forces us to take another look at how we think about God.

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne.

Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly--not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.

"Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?" snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror ... beatings ... torture ... death!"

In another group a boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched ... for no crime but being black!"

In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. "Why should I suffer?" she murmured, "It wasn't my fault."

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the center of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth--as a man!

“Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

“At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.”

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence. (In John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*).

Whatever we don't understand about God, one thing we can never say is that God has no idea what it's like to suffer. At the cross we discover a God whose suffering goes beyond anything we can imagine. Jesus suffered the horrors of hell. He felt completely abandoned by his Father in heaven. He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Even before Jesus came to earth and took the world's pain upon himself, God shared in the suffering of his people. The Old Testament part of the Bible makes this plain. For example, after describing the oppression that God's people were enduring because of their sin, Judges 10:16 says, “[The Lord] could bear Israel's misery no longer.” Their pain was his pain, and he couldn't stand it any more! Or look at Isaiah 63:9, where it says, “In all their distress, he too was distressed.” Did you catch that? “In all their distress he too was distressed.” When God's people suffer, he suffers with them.

It was true in Old Testament times, it was supremely true at the cross, and it is true throughout the New Testament age to this very day: The Lord suffers with his people. Saul of Tarsus, later to become the apostle Paul, was going around tormenting and killing Christians until one day Jesus appeared to him in blazing light and said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” When Jesus' followers were being persecuted, Jesus himself was being persecuted. He felt their suffering and called it his own.

The fact that the Lord continues to identify with the suffering of his people is also clear in one of Jesus' parables about the last judgment. Jesus will say, “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I needed clothes, I was sick, I was in prison” (Matthew 25:31-46). And when does all this happen to Jesus? Whenever it happens to the least of his people. So where is God when his people suffer? According to the Bible, the Lord is suffering too.

God is Sovereign Over Suffering

But the Bible doesn't just say that God shares in our suffering; it also shows that he is sovereign over our suffering. The word “sovereign” simply means God is always in charge. There is no event, no matter how shocking or painful, that catches God by surprise. God is in control, and he can take even the most tragic circumstances and use them to advance his plans and promote our well-being.

Some people seem to think that most of what's wrong with the world is simply beyond God's control. God is very kind, and it hurts him to see us suffer, they think, but sometimes he

can't do very much about it. God is as frustrated and outraged about the situation as anyone, but he lacks the power to change it.

One noted thinker, Elie Wiesel, responded to this picture of God by saying, "If that's who God is, why doesn't he resign and let someone more competent take his place?"

According to the Bible, whatever the reason for suffering may be, it is not because God is too weak to prevent it. God is sovereign over all things, including suffering. He is in control even in the most horrifying circumstances. The cross proves it.

Jesus did not die because God was helpless to prevent his death. The Bible says Jesus was handed over to be crucified "by God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). When Jesus' enemies tortured and killed him, says Scripture, they were doing what God's "power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:28). God was in control, and Jesus accepted the path of suffering, knowing that God was sovereign. In his sovereignty, God used the most horrible injustice the world has ever known, the crucifixion of his own Son, to bring the world salvation.

Now, if God was in control even at the cross, and if, from something so horrible, he could bring about the salvation of the world, we can be certain that he is also sovereign over our suffering. In light of the cross, we can echo the words of Romans 8:28 with even greater certainty, "We know that in all things [yes, all things, even the most painful and perplexing things] God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). This doesn't mean we should pretend to enjoy our suffering, or think that God is the direct cause of all of it, but we can expect God to use even the worst things to bring about something good. We may not always know or understand what God's purpose is, but we can be sure that he is in control at every moment. God is sovereign even over suffering, and he will use it to serve his purpose in the lives of his people.

God Sustains Us During Our Suffering

Where is God when we suffer? He shares in our suffering; he is sovereign over our suffering; and he sustains us during our suffering. God promises that he will sustain, support, and carry his people through hard times. In the Bible God says, "I have upheld [you] since you were conceived, and have carried [you] since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you, and I will carry you. I will sustain you, and I will rescue you (Isaiah 46:3-4).

You may be familiar with a little story called "Footprints." It's not in the Bible, but the point it makes is true to the Bible.

One night a man had a dream. He was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one set belonged to him, the other to the Lord.

Looking back at the footprints, he noticed that at many times during his life, there was just one set of footprints. He also noticed that this always happened at the lowest, saddest times of his life.

This bothered him greatly, so he spoke to Jesus about it: "Lord, you said that if I gave my life to you, you would walk with me all the way. But I see that at the hardest times in my life, when I needed you most, you left me to walk alone."

The Savior replied, "My precious child, I would never leave you. In those terrible times where you see one set of footprints--it was then that I carried you."

The Bible says, “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27). The Lord says to each of his people, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:5). Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we don’t have to be afraid, because he is with us (Psalm 23:4). Because Jesus himself endured being forsaken by his heavenly Father, because he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” those who trust in Jesus will never be forsaken by God. The Lord is there to support us and carry us, and even when we seem utterly abandoned, God’s loving grace is sufficient to sustain us.

God Saves Us From Suffering

Where is God when we suffer? He shares our suffering; he is sovereign over our suffering; he sustains us through our suffering; and last but not least, he saves us from suffering. Here again the cross of Jesus is the focus of our hope. As the Bible says in Hebrews 12, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him; he knew he would win in the end. His suffering soon gave way to the glory of the resurrection. On Easter Jesus rose to life in his glorious, immortal body, and someday all his people, and indeed the whole creation, will share in his victory over suffering and death. “They will be his people,” says the Bible, “and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 1:3-4). “Everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (Isaiah 51:11).

This great hope of eternal happiness helped me to deal with the pain and confusion when my daughter died. At first I couldn’t help thinking to myself, “From the moment Rebekah was born until she died more than five months later, almost all she did was suffer. What did she do to deserve that?” But then I asked myself another question: “Rebekah is now living in perfect happiness in the glorious presence of Jesus, not just for five months, but for all eternity. What did she do to deserve that?”

When we trust in Jesus’ great salvation, when we fix our minds on him and on the joy of eternal life, our painful questions are overwhelmed by wonder. We may not be able to answer all our questions about suffering, but we can echo the biblical writer who said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). We believe in a God who saves us from suffering, and his salvation is so great and glorious than none of our sufferings now are worth comparing to it.

So where is God when his people suffer? He shares our suffering; he is sovereign over our suffering; he sustains us during our suffering; and ultimately he saves us from our suffering. These four great truths don’t answer all our questions. We may not know the exact reason behind our suffering, and we may not know how long it will continue. Still, whatever we don’t know, we can know enough from the Bible to be sure the God is worthy of our confidence. Even when we don’t understand everything, we understand enough to know that at the cross of Jesus, we are meeting a God we can trust. The God of the cross is a God you can believe in, no matter what.

If we have never sought, we seek thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn marks on thy brow,

We must have thee, O Jesus of the scars.
The heavens frighten us, they are too calm;
 In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
 Lord Jesus, by thy scars we know thy grace.
The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;
 They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
 And not a god has wounds, but thou alone. (Edward Shillito)

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