

If God is All-Powerful why is there so much suffering?

First of all it must be named that this question has bedeviled humankind for centuries, and many a theologian or philosopher has performed theoretical gymnastics in trying to address it. So to start let us get at this question as a theologian or philosopher might. The first thing to address is the assumption that an all-powerful God would use that power to allay suffering. Indeed if the all-powerful God was also good and loving, as many believe God is, then the assumption would certainly be a fair one. Surely a good and loving God who had the power to do so would choose to relieve suffering at every opportunity. Since that is not the case – suffering exists – then it would seem we are left with two scenarios. Either God is all-powerful but not good and loving, or God is good and loving but not all-powerful. There is, however, a third scenario. That is that God is all-powerful - and conceivably good and loving - and yet chooses to limit that power in the service of something God perceives to be an even greater good. And that greater good is free-will. As the argument goes God's power is not diminished because it is God's choice, God's use of God's power that enables and allows free will. And free will, which is inherent in all of creation, will inevitably result in the kind of events or choices that lead to suffering. Therefore God remains all powerful, and yet suffering exists.

Now logically this argument holds. But it is not all that satisfying, and especially not in the face of so much suffering.

So it seems to me that another question that is implicit in the larger question is: what is God's relationship to suffering?

Jesus actually addresses this question himself on more than one occasion. Once he was asked who had sinned to cause a man to be born blind, the man himself or his parents. This question is based on the view, that some still hold, that God invokes suffering as a result of sin. Jesus rejects this view out of hand. Another time he was asked about a tower that had fallen and killed innocent people while they were at worship. His questioners were aghast that God would allow such a thing to happen to righteous persons. Again Jesus rejected the notion that there was a relationship between people's relative guilt and innocence and their suffering.

I think it important that we continue to reject such a view. We do not serve a God who chooses to use God's power to punish sin, or indeed, to reward righteousness. If, according to the earlier argument, God's intentional limiting of God's power in service of free will holds true then God is not intervening to punish or reward. God too, as it were, is at the mercy of free will. Indeed the story of Jesus, the very human embodiment of God, is proof that bad things can happen to good people.

And so what is God's relationship to suffering? I would suggest it is that God suffers along with us. That God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. That

God laments with us at the brokenness of this world. That God weeps with us in the face of the suffering of those we love.

In conclusion it is natural to want a seemingly powerful God to act on our behalf in the face of so much suffering. It is not surprising that in my ministry I have addressed questions like this a multitude of times. And I completely understand why we, like Jesus on the cross, may sometimes cry out, my God, my God why have you forsaken me?! And so we too have a choice. We can despair in the face of God's apparent distant from our suffering, or we can turn and discover God's presence and care within our suffering. The latter stance may not take the suffering away, but many would attest to the comfort and peace it brings.

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