

What's the Meaning of Suffering?

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Q: I've been hurting a lot lately, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. It seems like no matter what I do, nothing changes. If God has been trying to teach me a lesson, I think I've learned it by this point.

A: Thank you so much for writing. Before anything else, I need to make one brief note: When a person is in the midst of pain, there are virtually no arguments or formulae or explanations. There is often just the hurt.

Because of this, I know that my words might sound hollow. Nothing I write here is meant to be dismissive; there is no simple answer to the problem of human suffering. In fact, the Catechism states that there is no element of the Christian story that is not, in part, an answer to the problem of pain.

But there are some things that might be able to help us approach pain, and we all need to learn these things, because all of us will experience pain and suffering. Every one of us will lose everything that we have at some point. If we don't know why or where God fits into this, not only could we fall into the trap of allowing our pain to drive a wedge between ourselves and God, but we will miss out on the power in the suffering.

One of the first things we need to understand is that God does not directly will suffering. He did not make evil and cannot will evil. In fact, evil is not even considered a "thing."

This is not a random side point. God only wills the good. Evil is either the absence of a good that God wills or a distortion of a good that God has willed. For example, the physical evil of blindness is not a thing in and of itself, it is the lack of a good thing (sight) and gluttony is the distortion of a good thing (food and eating) that God has willed.

The moment that God created a world outside of himself, He allowed the possibility of evil. Further, the moment that God freely created beings outside of Himself who have free will, He allowed for the possibility that those free beings could choose evil. God never directly wills evil, but He allows evil.

I understand if this doesn't seem to be any better. We still suffer, and evil still happens. What does it matter if God has directly willed it or merely allowed it?

God has the ability to bring good out of evil. You already know this. God was able to use the evil of Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery to bring about the good of saving the people of Israel. God allowed St. Paul to be thrown into jail, but Paul said it offered him the chance to proclaim Jesus (Philippians 1:13).

And it sounds like you know that the Bible has revealed that there are a number of possible reasons why God would allow us to suffer. These reasons are not always present in every suffering. For example, there are times we suffer as a consequence of our decisions. In Bible terms, this is called "reaping what you sow." I have brought suffering upon myself (or another has brought suffering upon me) due to bad decisions.

Another reason for suffering is that it is a potential remedy. There are times when God allows us to experience the Fall now in order to "wake us up" and draw our attention to him. C.S. Lewis put it this way: "We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Pain can also bring us wisdom. Suffering can be a teacher. This is one of those things that is revealed in the Bible, but almost all of us have noticed it in people of great wisdom; they have suffered and have allowed their suffering to bring them to a depth and understanding of themselves and the human experience that would have been impossible without it.

But what if a person has corrected all they know to correct and has learned all they think they can have learned? To them, and to you, St. Paul writes, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake. And in my body I am making up for what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church” (Colossians 1:21).

This reveals that there is another meaning to suffering. God could have saved the world through a single word, but He didn't. God saved the world by taking on a human body, living a real life and experiencing real suffering and death. He rose in that body. In doing so, God didn't take away suffering — He transformed it. God's willingness to embrace suffering out of love has given suffering a meaning and a power that it did not have. Even more, Jesus has called every person who belongs to Him to share in this power. He has invited all who love Him to share in his mission.

What this means is that God is on the side of those who suffer. Even further, the New Testament and the story of the Church reveals that suffering does not reveal a lack of God's love.