

# **The Problem of Pain**

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# The Problem of Pain

Since I am neither a physiologist, psychologist, physician, theologian nor philosopher, I wish to speak, not as an expert, but as someone who has suffered pain, more than some, though of course much less than others. I propose simply to put before you ideas and beliefs that have helped me personally not only to grapple intellectually with the problem but also, in a practical sense, to put up with the pain itself.

## What my problem is—and what it is not

The existence of pain is not incompatible with faith in a good and all-powerful Creator. I was already a believer—on what grounds I do not propose to discuss now—before I encountered the problem of pain.<sup>1</sup> Pain therefore does not present itself to me as an obstacle in the way of coming to faith. The question for me is rather whether the problem of pain is so compelling as to oblige me to abandon faith in God.

You may well decide, therefore, that I come to the problem with a mind biased on the side of faith. And of course I do. But that I count to be an advantage and not a weakness, and certainly not an unfairness. A sheep is fortunate if it has reasons for trusting the shepherd before the shepherd is obliged to perform some painful operation to cure it of a disease from which it would eventually die if, unable to trust the shepherd, it were to run away.

Nonetheless, certain elements in the question of pain have troubled me severely, and I do not claim that I have solved all the problems that they raise. Of course, I realise that I could get rid of the whole problem of pain at one stroke by giving up belief in a Creator, and accepting instead that the universe has come into existence as the result of mindless impersonal forces working without any plan or purpose on equally mindless matter. In that case, the existence of pain would not need to be explained; it would be exactly what we might expect. (Admittedly, we should then have another problem to solve—how does such a mindless accident produce so much good and beauty? But the problem of pain would be gone.)

Some people take this road, and I understand why. But when, as sometimes they do, they claim that compassion for the suffering of their fellow men forces them to take it, I cannot understand their logic. Abandoning belief in a Creator certainly gets rid of the intellectual ‘problem of pain’, but it does not get rid of pain itself. In fact, it makes pain less tolerable. So long as we maintain belief in a Creator, we have grounds for faith and hope that, however little we can see it now, our pain is not an absolute evil; it will prove one day to have served some good purpose, and ultimately there will be more than adequate compensation. Abandon faith in a Creator, accept that pain is the inevitable result of the operation of mindless forces, then our suffering becomes hopeless and purposeless. But when it comes to enduring suffering, hope and a sense of purpose are two of man’s toughest allies. Remove all hope and sense of purpose and meaning, and you increase the pain of the suffering, for reason then has

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<sup>1</sup> See ‘My Testimony and Christian Experience’ at [www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com).

to submit to that most torturous tyranny: the irrationality and pointlessness of pain. I cannot see how compassion for the suffering of mankind would compel one to abandon faith in a Creator. Compassion ought rather to lead us to grasp at every possible ground for faith and hope.

As a believer in God, therefore, I look around to see if there are reasons for thinking that God's allowing of pain, and indeed his use of pain, are not necessarily incompatible with almighty power and perfect love. I first of all ask myself in what circumstances people, whether or not there is a Creator, are prepared to regard pain as not necessarily an unqualified evil.

### **Pain is not always and absolute evil**

First of all, pain can serve as an important warning, such as when the pain that comes with the accidental cutting of a finger prompts the immediate, involuntary withdrawal of that finger from danger. Such pain is obviously good. Lepers who have lost the ability to feel pain are liable to rip the flesh off their hands by exerting too much pressure on, say, a screw, with their bare fingers, because they cannot feel what is happening. We do not think them fortunate for not feeling pain; rather it is the absence of pain which we lament.

Next I observe that many people happily accept a certain amount of pain for the sake of nothing more serious than the enjoyment of playing a game. A rugby player knows in advance the bruising they will suffer, but their enjoyment outweighs the incidental, though not inconsiderable, pain. More significantly still, without the risk of pain and even, in some cases, of death, some pursuits like mountaineering would lose a great deal of their attraction.

Nor is it only that the risk of pain adds zest to an occupation: people commonly judge their courage by their willingness to face pain, their toughness by their ability to endure it. And they estimate the value of an achievement partly by the cost, in terms of the pain involved, in securing it. Witness the exploration of the North and South Poles. Indeed, we commonly feel that the endurance of pain in the achievement of some worthy goal adds a certain nobility to a person's character.

Again, pain is often deliberately accepted if it is the only way of recovering health. Surgery, for example. And so with a drug addict: if they are to win their way to freedom, they must endure the pain involved in facing life without drugs. Indeed, not to be prepared to face such remedial pain is often regarded as being more worthy of criticism than sympathy, like the cowardice of a child who refuses to be taken to the dentist.

Pain then is not always felt to be an absolute evil. In most of the instances so far cited, of course, the pain is faced voluntarily, and lies below the tolerance levels of the individuals concerned. It does not destroy the sufferer nor the goal he or she aims to achieve either through or in spite of the pain, and is followed by a reward that compensates for the pain suffered. It is different when the pain has to be faced and suffered against one's will, or the pain is either completely destructive or altogether out of proportion to the good achieved.

Even here we recognise differences. Pain suffered involuntarily is more easily borne when brought on by one's own fault than it is when inflicted through someone else's carelessness or malice. On the other hand, if in the course of evading some duty or of doing some

dishonourable business I suffer an accident, shame and a bad conscience will make the pain harder to bear than the amount of pain incurred in the course of some honourable occupation.

Again, the pain involved in a person's superhuman effort to save a business in difficulties will be easier to bear if he or she can be sure of success at the end. Uncertainty as to whether the pain will be followed by success or failure will increase the pain and turn it into torture. When a person starts a business, they willingly take the risk whether it will succeed or not, and enjoy the same kind of challenge as a mountaineer. But when the business is facing bankruptcy, when the odds against saving it are overwhelmingly high and the consequences of failure are shame and disaster, he or she will no more enjoy the agony of the almost hopeless effort to save it than a mountaineer would enjoy the hopeless task of trying to carry a critically wounded colleague down a mountain in a race against time.

And finally we may notice that the pain of, for instance, learning to play the piano is faced unwillingly by many children. At their age and lacking the necessary foresight, they cannot properly estimate the value of the end to be achieved by this suffering. That child is fortunate if they trusts its parents' love and wisdom and allow themselves to be forced to suffer the pain of practising without rebelling. Many adults regret, not that they were forced to endure this suffering as children, but that they weren't.

### **Pain in the larger context**

I come now to the problem of pain in the larger context and ask myself whether there are any conceivable reasons why an almighty, all-loving Creator might allow his creatures to suffer pain.

One reason could obviously be that when he created our world and us upon it, he had in mind a purpose that, by its very nature, could be achieved only at the risk of pain. If we were to protest that the Creator had no right to take such a risk, we might well fall under Paul's rebuke: 'Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"' (Rom 9:20). But there are a lot of people whom we could hardly expect with any consistency to support the principle underlying our protest: women who willingly face the pains and risks of child-birth, Olympic athletes, explorers, medical researchers who voluntarily subject themselves to risky experiments and a whole host of others.

The real questions we might ask about God's risk-taking are rather:

1. Was the purpose big and glorious enough that, when achieved, those who suffered in the course of achieving it would feel their suffering was justified?
2. What was the nature of the risk and in what direction did it lie? Could those at least who wished to co-operate with the Creator in achieving the goal be sure that, whatever pain was involved, they would in fact achieve the goal? Or was there not only pain involved for each individual, but also uncertainty, in spite of the best will in the world, whether the goal could be achieved?
3. And if the purpose could not be achieved without risking utter disaster at any stage, was adequate provision made for rescue so that mistakes and accidents need not necessarily lead to irretrievable disaster?

According to the New Testament, the purpose God had in view when he created the world and us upon it was that eventually he might have 'sons' (see Eph 1:4-5). The term 'son' in this context is not a synonym for 'creature'. Creatures are made, sons begotten. The processes involved are different. Creatures can be produced, and were in fact produced, without their prior consent; but a creature cannot be turned into a son without its prior consent (see John 1:12). To get sons, therefore, God had first to create a physical world on which humans might live as God's creatures and develop to the point where the offer might be made to them of becoming God's sons. The very nature of this sonship demanded that the creature be given free choice whether he would accept the offer or not. To force him into the relationship would destroy the nature of the relationship. Moreover, for the offer of becoming a son of God to be in any way meaningful and therefore open to genuine choice, the creature must be given the faculty of moral judgement and able to apprehend the moral nature of God. And that in itself again demanded free will for man: there can be no true morality without free choice. Man must therefore be given the ability — though not the permission — to reject not only the offer of spiritual sonship, but at the earlier stage God's moral standards and demands. And the world on which man was placed must be far enough from God, so to speak, that man would not be so overwhelmed by God's presence as to make free choice impossible.

If this then was God's purpose, the risk of things going wrong and thus of the occurrence of pain was high. There might, of course, have been the possibility of some pain even if things had not gone wrong. We are not perhaps obliged to believe that at the creation when God saw that all was good, it necessarily implies that all was safe-for-man. Man was, so we are told, placed at first in a garden. But he was also under commission to subdue the earth. Whether in the course of fulfilling that commission the process of learning how to cross the seas would have been completely painless and risk-free for man—on that we can only speculate. But would Adam never have burned his fingers learning to light a fire? And if he did, who shall say that the discovery of fire, and how to use and control it, was not worth the pain involved?

Any such pain that there may have been was, however, soon complicated by man's rebellion and fall and its consequent misery. But since I believe in the doctrine of the fall, I may also be allowed to draw from it the comfort which, rightly understood, it gives me in the face of pain. Some people take the story of the fall as though it were merely a pictorial account of what sooner or later happens to every one: the breaking of a moral command and the dawn of a bad conscience and a sense of alienation from authority, be it parents, teachers or God. But there is no comfort in that interpretation; it merely reminds me that I have sinned. The true doctrine of the fall teaches me how I came to sin with all its unpleasant results: I was born a sinner, as a result of the sin of our first parents. Therefore, the responsibility for the sin and its consequent misery is not totally mine; and in that knowledge there is some relief. Pain is not compounded by the guilt of total responsibility.

Also, the New Testament teaches that my rescue from this unhappy state does not depend on my moral and spiritual efforts (see Rom 5:12-21). If I was constituted a sinner by what someone else, namely Adam, did, I can be constituted righteous by what someone else did, namely, Christ (5:19). Here popular religion, I know, is very cruel and might well make it difficult for some people to believe in a God of love. It takes a man who finds himself born into this world without his consent, and born with seriously defective moral and spiritual

powers. It tells him he needs to be rescued—which of course is obvious. But it then tells him that in the end his rescue from the actual and potential danger of those defective powers depends upon himself and the use of those powers. It then tantalizes him by holding out before him a heaven which, however hard he tries, he can never be sure of attaining. But I have no brief to defend popular religion. My contention is that the New Testament's plan for our rescue is fair, realistic and adequate.

Moreover, that plan does not leave the attainment of the final goal excruciatingly uncertain. If God's purpose was to provide himself with sons, then the believer in Christ finds that goal achieved immediately upon belief, here in this life—'Beloved, we are God's children now' (1 John 3:2); and though our sonship is not yet mature and 'what we will be has not yet appeared', John adds with the utmost confidence that we know that when he appears we shall be like him'. Whatever pain, then, a believer may suffer in the meanwhile, the fact that by God's gift and not by his own works, the goal is certain of attainment—in a sense is already attained—removes from his pain the anguish of the possibility that present pain might one day issue in ultimate disaster.

The believer is assured that whatever pain they may suffer as a general result of the fall, or even as a result of personal sins, need not remain a simply negative thing. God can, and will, turn it to the maturing of their sonship (see Heb 12), so that they arrive at their destiny of glory not only in spite of pain, but partly also by its help (see Rom 8:28–39). At this level, then, pain in being remedial becomes a healthy, if not a pleasant, thing.

Not only so. Pain-bearing can for the believer become a very noble thing. The pain of physical illness can serve to promote in others the virtues of compassion and self-sacrificial service. If we admire the nobility of character formed in the missionary doctor who gives his life to the care of lepers, our gratitude for it should go chiefly to the lepers. Their suffering was the occasion for his development. Similarly the pain of putting up with this unjust treatment of others can sometimes effect their repentance, faith, and salvation (see 1 Pet 2:1–3:12).

And talking of faith brings us to a matter where pain of some sort would seem to be indispensable: the perfecting of faith. If faith is indeed the link that holds the son of God in relation with his Father, its perfection is a concern of the utmost importance. Faith must clearly be purged of every unworthy element, every vestige of false love, every ulterior motive. It is difficult to see how that could be done without the testing of faith by some form of real pain (see 1 Pet 1:6–7).

It remains true, of course, that if God's purpose could be achieved only by the creature's free consent, it must be possible for the creature to reject both the purpose itself and all attempts to rescue him or her. In that case, many seem to argue that for those who reject his purpose, God ought to have provided some alternative: painless paradise. This suggestion would seem to be based on a presupposition that is false, if not nonsensical. If God by definition comprehends all good, there can be no alternative good for those who reject him. The cry of wisdom is: 'all who hate me love death' (see Prov 8:36). In the nature of things, it must be so.

## Two final considerations

My position, then, is not that I have found final and complete answers to all the problems raised by the existence of pain, but rather that I find good and solid reasons for trust. If I can see some good purpose in it, some reason for it, then it is worthwhile enduring the suffering. And if I cannot see the purpose in some of it, I still have reasons for trusting that all shall be well in spite of the fact that I cannot see how.

Here I find two further considerations to help my trust, one in the book of Job, the other in Paul's Letter to the Romans.

What tortured Job was the sense that his suffering was not fair: he was as good a man as any other and far better than some. Why then were his sufferings so out of proportion compared with the sufferings of others? The answer God gives to all Job's complaints is his measureless superiority to Job in his power and wisdom as Creator. Many people have found the answer unsatisfying: they feel it leaves the real question unanswered. By definition, they say, the Creator (if there is one) will be superior to Job in power and wisdom. But the real question was: how could a Creator, possessed of both infinite power and infinite wisdom, allow Job to endure such undeserved and disproportionate sufferings? The question is not answered, they feel, by the mere statement that the Creator is superior to Job in power and creational skills.

I feel that there is here a consideration of the utmost relevance. If, like Job, I complain to the Creator that his allowing me to suffer is unfair, my claim, to be valid, must rely on the validity of my moral sense of justice. But where did I get that faculty of moral judgement from if not from the Creator? If then the Creator who made and gave to me the faculty of moral judgement is himself immoral, how can I know that my faculty of moral judgement is itself reliable? It were better for me then that God should be regarded as being right even in allowing me to suffer, and for me to own that my moral judgement is limited in its present perceptions because of the limitation of my knowledge, than for me to assert either that God is wrong and I am right—in which case I am at the mercy of some immoral, infinitely powerful but irresponsible tyrant—or that God does not exist, and that therefore my faculty of moral judgement is ultimately baseless anyway.

That is cold comfort admittedly, though when pain is at its worst, it is a breakwater against despair. But, of course, there are greater reasons for trust in God, adequate to carry us through all that dark territory where we must walk by faith and not by sight. They are to be found, says Paul, not in philosophical argument, but in that demonstration that has put the love of God to us creatures for ever beyond doubt: 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.' (Rom 8:32).



## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.