

Suffering: in Search of Answers

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Where are the answers?

As a child I always wanted to be a doctor when I grew up and I had a clear reason why – to help other people. Alongside this idea, however, was another desire, to teach the Bible and help people to understand and follow the Christian faith. As I grew up, I had the opportunity to study medicine and began working as a doctor, but I also became increasingly involved in Christian ministry. Eventually I found that I could not personally fulfil both callings in one life, so after a period of prayerful consideration I left my medical career to work for a church.

Telling people that I left medicine to work for a church generates interesting responses, ranging from stunned silence to praise, but most people ask something like “Was that a big sacrifice for you?” or “Did you not enjoy medicine?” or “Do you miss medicine?”. The facts are: I *did* enjoy medicine – in fact I loved it; I miss some aspects (primarily relating and communicating with patients and relatives), but not others (especially the politics); and that it was not really a big sacrifice – although it was a decision I took considerable time over, I believe God guided me and that the work I have done since has been just as significant as any I could have done as a doctor.

Why am I writing about my career choices when the theme of this article is the problem of evil and suffering? Partly because I want this to be a personal article, expressing my own heart, and partly because the decision to focus on Bible teaching rather than medicine relates to my convictions about the root cause of and solution to the problem. Put simply, I made a decision at a point in my life that it was more important for me to communicate the Christian message than to cure people of physical disease.

I am not claiming for one second that this is what every Christian should do, but fundamentally my decision would be crazy if the minimisation of physical suffering and prolongation of life was the supreme good in this world. Rather than thinking abstractly about the problem of evil and suffering, I am starting with the practical end of the question, what can we do to solve the problem? What is the ultimate answer? Where can we find hope of a world with less suffering or, better still, free of suffering? I am convinced that while medicine can manage the problem to a truly amazing degree, only God can ultimately solve it. So, rather than begin by outlining the alternative ways of approaching the problem of suffering, I want to give you an insight into how I, as a Christian, think about it.

The Christian perspective

A Christian perspective on any issue must begin where Christianity began, with Jesus. As a first century Jew, Jesus lived within an understanding of the world (what we might call a worldview) that derived from the story of the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians generally call the Old Testament). That story goes something like this:

1. **God is the utterly good and powerful creator of all.** The universe He originally created was good, free from evil and suffering. The Bible does not say explicitly how evil began, nor does it

begin with a defence of God's existence, but it does state clearly that God's original creation was perfect.

2. **God created human beings to know and love Him but gave them freedom to choose to reject Him.** God decided to make human beings as moral creatures responsible to Him.
3. **Suffering is a result of alienation of God's creation from God.** This alienation arises from the rejection of God's good rule by human beings and other spiritual powers, supremely the devil. Much suffering is directly caused by human beings – violence against others, poor or corrupt government, and bad choices on the part of individuals – but some is simply the result of living in a fallen world in which the natural order is out of sync with God's original intention. God is still sovereign, but He permits evil to be done, resulting in suffering.
4. **God still desires a people who will live under His rule, embodying its reality on earth.** He expects high standards of justice and compassion within this community, as seen in the Old Testament Law given to Israel and the teaching of Jesus for His followers, and reserves His strongest condemnation for leaders of His people who do not live by this standard. God has revealed His will to His people, and it has been recorded in the Scriptures. Within this vision, health is best defined as *shalom*, the peace of God which describes a life lived within God's will and blessing. *Shalom* means the integration of emotions, thoughts, desires and actions in line with God's will. To love God with one's whole being, resulting in selfless love for others is the goal of life.
5. **God has promised ultimately to do justice and to restore His creation to a perfect state.** His people will be resurrected and will live eternally with Him. This restoration of all things must entail judgement upon wrongdoers as well as vindication for those who have been wronged. At times God has intervened in history to prevent evil or judge those guilty of evil, but these are unusual occurrences, foretastes of His ultimate judgement of humankind. This means that God is sometimes the cause of suffering, although His ultimate purpose is to free His people from suffering. It also means that suffering is not the greatest ill that can befall an individual. To remain alienated from God in the final analysis and face His judgement is worse. The greatest good, therefore, is to trust in God and follow His path.

That Jesus accepted this story as the foundation for His life is clear from the records we have of His teaching in the Gospels of the New Testament. He upheld the Old Testament, describing it as God's Word and claiming that His own life was its fulfilment.

This story of our existence does not, of course, remove the twin problems of suffering: the pain of those who experience it and the intellectual (or philosophical) questions it raises. The Bible does not brush over these problems. Indeed, the Old Testament Scriptures contain abundant testimony to both – the books of Job and Psalms are full of cries of the deepest anguish and replete with tough questions. What the biblical worldview does do, however, is shape the questions that are asked. Convinced of God's existence, they address their questions to God rather than suggesting that there might be no God to question.

The two big questions asked in numerous places by the writers of the poetry and wisdom books of the Old Testament are:

- a) **Why do good people suffer?** The suffering of evil people was not a problem for them, but the fact that righteous people (Job being a prime example) suffered while the wicked lived in luxury was.

- b) Why is God not intervening right now?** Being convinced that God knew about their suffering and was able to intervene caused them to ask, “How long O Lord?” Why was God not coming to their rescue right now?

Perhaps what is most remarkable in the biblical account is that God accepts these questions. There is no sense that He condemns those who question, although His answers are often not what they might have hoped for. Here is a God who does not feel threatened by questions and is not disinterested in suffering. It is a God who does not seek to shut down the capacity of people to reason, but who does want them to know and acknowledge who He is. When Job finally hears God respond to his situation, God’s answer boils down to this: His ways are too much for Job to understand. There are no neat answers to the question ‘Why?’ God’s ways are greater than our ways.

Christians have sometimes been guilty of speaking as if every question has a neat answer – every ‘i’ can be dotted and every ‘t’ crossed. In reality, although within the biblical worldview there are many answers, many truths that are knowable which together lay a firm foundation for life, not every question needs to have an answer and some cannot have one, at least in this life. American pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson writes about the claim of French philosopher Gabriel Marcel that “life is not so much a problem to be solved as a mystery to be explored”:¹

That is certainly the biblical stance: life is not something we manage to hammer together and keep in repair by our wits; it is an unfathomable gift. We are immersed in mysteries: incredible love, confounding evil, the creation, the cross, grace, God.

The secularized mind is terrorized by mysteries. [...] But a solved life is a reduced life.

Bearing this in mind, how *do* Christians think through the problems of unjust suffering and of the delay in God’s intervention?

Why do good people suffer unjustly?

In the world inhabited by Jesus many people took a very simple view of suffering. People who suffer are experiencing the judgement of God, or of the gods. This is often presented as the standard belief system of people living in the world before the eighteenth century Enlightenment – what we, somewhat arrogantly, might call ‘premodern’ people. Yet it is not the perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus denied it outright. He insisted that the suffering of individuals is not always their own responsibility and encouraged those who speculated about the reasons for the suffering of others to get themselves right with God before they had to answer to Him (Luke 13:1-5).

Jesus did not deny that some suffering results from God’s judgement, but He did not permit the belief that all suffering is justified. The Christian worldview acknowledges that innocent people do suffer unfairly. In fact, Jesus’ own life is the ultimate example of this truth. He entered into suffering in many forms, supremely on the cross and, as He did so, He cried out in the words of a psalm, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, after Psalm 22:1). His choice of the words from a psalm was deliberate – as well as expressing His own suffering powerfully He was saying that all the

¹ Peterson, E.H. *Curing Souls: The Forgotten Art*, 1983. Available: <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/19218.htm> [accessed 12 May 2026]

questions of those earlier writers find their ultimate 'answer' in Him. His death was the ultimate expression of unjust suffering, a magnified re-enactment of every previous cry of pain. It was also the key to the glorious and just future God had promised, but I will return to that later in this article.

Before moving on from the question about why good people suffer, we should notice that this question involves a value judgement. By asking why good people suffer unjustly I am claiming that I can judge, at least with some accuracy, who is good and who is bad, what is just and what is unjust. This comes so instinctively to us that we might not often think about it, but the fact that we can recognise that some things are 'unjust' or 'unfair' reflects a belief in a moral universe in which a concept of justice or fairness exists. From a Christian perspective this makes sense – justice derives from a just God – but what basis would I have for such a judgement if there is no God and no ultimate justice? In that case, suffering cannot really be unjust, no matter how painful it feels. The instinctive feeling that some things are just unfair is a pointer to a standard beyond our own judgement. It is the basis of the moral argument for God.

Why does God delay?

The other major Old Testament question was why God delays His intervention to save and vindicate His faithful people and to execute judgement on the wicked. The same question arises in the New Testament book called 2 Peter. Peter, writing to Christians who were hoping for Jesus' return, insists that God is not slow in keeping His promise but that He is patient, wanting people to have an opportunity to turn to Him and become part of His plan to restore the universe (2 Peter 3:9). The sense is that God is allowing the world continue as it is, alienated from Him, until the moment is right for Him to intervene. It seems that He has planned this in such a way that maximises the number of people who will return to Him and share in the suffering-free future He has planned. The delay is purposeful. At the same time, however, Christians believe that the ultimate restoration of all things is assured already because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Through Him all things are being reconciled to God (Colossians 1:19-20). In the final cosmic showdown between evil and God described in vivid imagery in the book of Revelation, the Lamb who was slain is the indisputable victor.

Understanding God's purposeful delay of final judgement does not quite solve the problem, of course, because the Bible also describes God intervening in smaller ways throughout history, sometimes preventing suffering that might otherwise have happened to His people. This is not the deistic version of God, who wound up the universe like a clock and then stepped off the scene to allow it to take its course. If God intervened on those occasions for those people, why does He not do it here and now for me? At this point we need to step back again and reflect. I see some actions in the world that are clearly evil – acts of terrorism, abuse of children, murder and rape – and I wonder why a good God did not stop them.

I have two problems here. Firstly, I do not have a clue how God would stop them or what that would entail. I simply do not know enough about the workings of the universe or the workings of God to figure that out. Like Job and the writers of the psalms, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me" (Psalm 139:6). My mind is just too small. It might seem logical to me that God could stop these things, but I am not God and I do not have all the details. I do not know what consequences would follow. I cannot compute how events are interconnected. I have not the foggiest idea what repercussions there would be from any given alteration of the course of history, whether they would ultimately be good or bad. I

do not have a crystal ball, and I cannot predict the future. Put simply, I am not qualified to judge God's actions.

The second problem with demanding that God intervene now is that I am thinking as if I were a detached and impartial observer – the moral equivalent of a UN peacekeeper – watching others commit war-crimes and urging the superpower to intervene. If I want God to intervene in someone else's situation, what right would I have to tell Him not to intervene in *my* situation? And would I really welcome that? As I look at my own life and actions, how would they measure up against God's standard of justice? I have caused pain to others through my words and actions. I have failed to alleviate suffering at times when I could have. I am part of the problem of evil and suffering.

In asking God to do justice, I am inviting Him to judge me, and that is a scary thought. Basically, the whole accusation that God is unfair in allowing bad things to happen to good people is flawed for two reasons: because it always assumes that I am one of the good guys, when I'm really not according to God's standards, and because, having admitted that I am bad, I should feel equally annoyed that God has allowed good things to happen to me. I cannot have it both ways. Either I want God's justice or I do not and what right would I have to insist that God's justice spare me?

The potential of suffering

Reasoning this way about the intellectual questions raised by evil and suffering does not remove the very real pain we experience in life through our own suffering and the suffering of others we love. Mental, emotional and physical pain is part of our universal human experience. From the Christian perspective it will be so as long as we live in a fallen world and until God intervenes in the future to restore all things. Christians are not immune to the suffering that is common to mankind.

In fact, being a Christian can increase suffering in at least two ways. Firstly, many Christians suffer rejection, opposition persecution and martyrdom for their faith. This was so for the first century Christians to whom Peter was writing and remains true for many across the world today. Secondly, a new level of internal suffering arises from the struggle to do God's will against our own desires and temptation from Satan. Being committed to following an authority higher than oneself makes life more complicated. No one should become a Christian in order to experience a life free from suffering. The Christian call to join in with God's story is not a call to self-preservation or escapism, but a call to purposeful living for God in the world. Yet, there is another important principle in the Christian view of suffering which must be mentioned: suffering can be transformative.

I have experienced intense suffering in my life, primarily emotional and mental rather than physical, the details of which I do not want to reveal publicly. I do not claim that my suffering has been especially great – in fact, I think my burden of suffering has been relatively light – but I *have* suffered. I have also observed the suffering of others and have tried to help them through it both by bringing relief (especially when I worked as a doctor in palliative care) and by walking with them through the darkness (especially in Christian ministry). As I have done this, I have seen in others and in myself the transformative potential of suffering. What I mean by 'transformative' is that suffering can lead to the growth of character, can make the sufferer a better person, both by building their capacity to face life's challenges and by making them more compassionate towards others. I am sure that non-Christians have experienced something similar, so I cannot claim that this is a uniquely Christian reality, but I do believe it operates slightly differently for a Christian for reasons I will try to explain.

What is distinctively Christian – and I can testify to this personally – is that suffering can lead us closer to God and deeper into relationship with Him. My suffering deepened my faith and caused me to appreciate more the person of Jesus Christ. I am not saying that I am glad that I suffered – I am not a sadist – but I am saying that I would not be the person I am today if it were not for the suffering I have experienced and I am sure I would be worse person. Again, this makes sense within a Christian worldview and the New Testament has a great deal to say about it. Suffering can be discipline through which our heavenly Father corrects us (Hebrews 12:4-12). It can save us from pride and promote dependence on God's grace (as Paul explains from his own experience in 2 Corinthians 12:1-12). It can spur us on to endurance and greater hope (Romans 5:1-5). It can remind us of the temporary nature of life and the need to live intentionally for what matters most (Romans 8:18). None of this makes suffering good in itself, but it does mean that God can bring good out of it.

The Bible declares boldly that God works all things together for the ultimate good of His people (Romans 8:28). Nothing can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:37-39). Meanwhile, God does not leave us to struggle through the pain alone. The Holy Spirit helps Christians as they face suffering, assuring them of God's love (Romans 5:5) and helping them to do what God wants (Romans 8:27). The community of faith, the Church, also encourages and supports its members – when one member suffers, every member suffers with him or her (1 Corinthians 12:26). This potential of suffering may not make sense to those who live outside the Christian worldview, but it is an important part of the story from a Christian perspective.

Considering the alternatives

Up to this point I have tried to explain what the problem of suffering looks like from within a biblical, or Christian, worldview, but, of course, this is not the only option for how we understand our world. Suffering is a universal experience and every great religious and philosophical tradition has wrestled with it. In what follows I will discuss briefly (and I hope fairly) the perspective on suffering within the four main alternatives that sit alongside Christianity as the predominant belief systems of our world – three major world religions and atheistic naturalism.

Hinduism, the ancient religion of India, understands suffering to be a result of *karma*, an impersonal principle that means that we reap in this life what we sowed in previous lives. If I suffer it is because of wrongs I did in a past life. From this perspective there is no unjust suffering – it is all deserved. There is also very little motivation to reduce the suffering of others, except perhaps my desire to accumulate good karma for myself in the hope of a better next life or eventual release from the cycle of rebirth.

Buddhism, which grew out of Hinduism through the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama around 500 years BCE, describes suffering as an illusion arising from desire or craving. We desire things and this generates suffering. Even good desires are unhelpful because they perpetuate the illusion of our existence. The ultimate good is to be released from this cycle through the elimination of desire – what is known as enlightenment. Unlike Hinduism, which believes that suffering is never unjust, within Buddhism suffering is not ultimately real. Our existence is illusory. There is great motivation not to cause suffering to others (the fundamental Buddhist ethical principle of *ahimsa*), but there is little motivation to actively reduce the suffering of others. In fact, Buddhism requires the individual to focus so entirely on attaining personal release from desire and suffering that the eightfold path to

enlightenment can only really be followed completely by monks whose daily needs are provided by the donations of lay people.

Islam, the world's second largest faith, shares the Judeo-Christian belief in one creator God, but has a different understanding of how God governs the universe. Unlike the Christian view that there are some things God permits but does not actively cause, Islamic theology tends towards the deterministic view that everything that happens is what God intended. God is also believed to be transcendent (above and beyond our understanding) to a degree that to question His ways would be wrong, leaving one likely to face His judgement. God's transcendence also means that the Christian belief that God became human in Jesus Christ is abhorrent to Muslims. The God of Islam does not suffer or identify with human beings in that way – indeed He does not even enter into a binding covenant relationship with His people. Within this perspective, there is no assurance of a better future and no redemption from past sins. Believers must simply cast themselves on God's mercy and hope He might include them in paradise.

Atheistic naturalism, meanwhile, understands suffering to be a result of the struggle for survival of the fittest. It is a basic fact about how the world has always operated and not, as in the Christian view, something unnatural that came into the world at a later point. Although many – probably most – atheists are moral people and believe in reducing suffering, their worldview does not provide a convincing reason why this should be deemed good. Early forms of atheism, inspired by Enlightenment optimism about the goodness of human nature and the potential of human reason, dreamt of utopian futures in which suffering would be eradicated, but the idea of progress has been thrown into serious doubt by the intractable problems of suffering and death and evidence of basic corruption within human nature as demonstrated in the repeated conflicts of the twentieth century. Atheism, thus, logically leaves us with no meaning in our past and no hope for the future. In this worldview the fact that we worry so much about right and wrong, good and evil, death and afterlife is just an unhelpful by-product of whatever survival mechanisms brought us to this point in our evolution. We should probably stop worrying and just get on with life.

Comparison with these alternative worldviews reveals that Christianity uniquely holds together five principles:

1. **Suffering is real** – Buddhism denies this.
2. **Suffering can be unjust** – Hinduism denies this.
3. **Suffering is ultimately unnatural** (it was not originally part of the universe and there is hope for a future where it is eliminated) – atheistic naturalism denies this.

Our human experience seems to instinctively tell us that these three principles are true: suffering is real, it is unnatural and it can be unjust. Certainly these feelings often arise when we observe the suffering of the most vulnerable people or experience the death of a loved one. The fourth Christian principle is:

4. **God suffers** and entered into our suffering in the person of Jesus Christ – Islam denies this.

This fourth point is really a question about the relative merits of Islam and Christianity, which is beyond the scope of this article, but I will discuss the implications of the Christian belief that God suffered in Christ later. There is a fifth distinctive point about a Christian view of suffering:

5. **We have a duty not only to avoid causing suffering to others, but to work for the relief of suffering.** Although this also seems to be something most people instinctively believe and we have a natural tendency towards altruism, none of the major alternatives offer a plausible explanation why it should be so. I will return to the Christian motivation to relieve suffering later.

The fact that the Christian perspective coheres so well with our experience of life does not, of course, prove that God exists or that Christianity is true, but it does mean it is a logical, and I would argue the *most* logical, explanation for the human experience of suffering. It offers a story in which suffering remains problematic in our experience, but is not ultimately meaningless.

A powerful and good God?

So far I have outlined how Christians think about suffering, or at least how the Bible relates to it, and I have suggested that this is a more coherent explanation than the major alternatives. My case is not, however, simply that Christianity is a better story, a more plausible explanation or a nicer idea than its alternatives. My claim is that it is the true story of our world. Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, however, this claim has come under sustained attack. It has become commonplace to suggest that the logical conclusion of the problem of evil is that God does not exist.

You might notice that the two Old Testament questions about suffering apply to different dimensions of God's person.

- The question why bad things happen to good people relates to the *character* of God. Is God really good? If He allows bad people to get away with such evil, can He really be good?
- The question why God does not intervene, on the other hand, is about the *nature* of God. Is God really powerful? If He does not do anything about my suffering right now, is He simply incapable of changing things?

The classic statement of the problem evil and suffering pose to Christian faith, a statement attributed to the pre-Christian Greek philosopher Epicurus by a fourth century Christian writer Lactantius (*De Ira Dei*, 13.19), incorporates both of these questions:

God either wants to eliminate bad things and cannot, or can but does not want to, or neither wishes to nor can, or both wants to and can.

If he wants to and cannot, then he is weak and this does not apply to god. If he can but does not want to, then he is spiteful which is equally foreign to god's nature. If he neither wants to nor can, he is both weak and spiteful, and so not a god. If he wants to and can, which is the only thing fitting for a god, where then do bad things come from? Or why does he not eliminate them?

Eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote about this statement:²

² Hume, D. *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Part X.

Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

We can put the question simply: 'How can a good God allow evil and suffering?'

Hume did not ask this question because of a desire to understand God better, as the Old Testament writers did. For him the problem outlined by Epicurus brought into question the very existence of God. It is debatable whether Hume himself ever reached a settled atheistic position, but he certainly laid philosophical foundations for subsequent atheists. It is noteworthy that this tendency to question the existence of God in the face of suffering only really became commonplace in the modern Western world. As in the Old Testament, in pre-Enlightenment Europe and in other contemporary contexts it simply is not the question people usually ask. As Spanish theologian Jon Sobrino writes: "The simple people sometimes speak these words – but not often".³ Most people in most contexts throughout most of history have simply not seen the problem of evil and suffering as a reason to reject belief in God. There is a certain irony that it is in the context where, in terms of the overall burden of suffering in our society, people suffer least that they are most likely to believe that suffering excludes the possibility of God.

From a biblical perspective, doubting God's existence is like a flea doubting the existence of the dog. It arises, Christians might argue, from the tendency of modern people to trust in human reason as the ultimate arbiter of what is possible. This in itself is a statement of faith in a principle that cannot be empirically proven, meaning that atheistic naturalism has a lot more in common with religions than many atheists like to admit. Whatever conclusion about God we reach about the implications of the problem of evil and pain it will involve a step of faith, including other kinds of evidence. The problem of pain itself does not lead to a definitive conclusion.

Epicurus's statement is only a puzzle if God is both good *and* powerful. If God is not really good – He gets it wrong sometimes, or He enjoys a little bit of suffering – or if God is not really powerful – He, like us, watches in despair as people suffer, wishing He could do something about it – there is no logical problem with evil. Yet the biblical vision is of a good and powerful God. This is clear throughout Scripture, but comes into sharpest focus when we consider the person of Jesus. The Christian understanding, strongly attested in the earliest Christian writings, that this man was none other than God living among us causes Christians to look to His life as the place where God's character and nature are most clearly revealed.

In Jesus we learn how power and goodness can coexist in the face of evil. Although the credibility of the Gospel accounts in the New Testament may be questioned by sceptics, there is no serious debate about the fact that Jesus existed and was known as an exceptionally good person. In fact, the New Testament claims that Jesus was consistently good to such a degree that His life convicts us of our own badness. His goodness trumps our own imagined goodness and leaves us with a serious problem – we are not observers of the problem of evil and suffering, we are part of it and we are responsible, at least in part, for it.

³ Sobrino, J. *Where is God: Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004, p.140.

Yet the New Testament says that this man, Jesus, was extraordinarily powerful, able to command nature, illness and demonic powers. Even those who reject the possibility that He really was a miracle-worker, are struck by the power of His amazing words and His integrity of character. All the evidence we have tells us that He always used His power selflessly and for the good of others. Most remarkably of all, He laid power aside by submitting to the injustice of the cross. The cross is the ultimate evidence that God is not disinterested in or remote from human suffering. As author and theologian Dorothy L. Sayers once wrote:⁴

Whatever game [God] is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death.

Although I would reject any thought that God is playing any kind of game, Sayers' rhetoric is powerful and her point is clear. The Christian worldview has no room for a God who is uninvolved, uncaring or unmoved by suffering. The difference between the Christian view of suffering and that of other belief systems becomes crystal clear when we consider the fact that Christians actually boast about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The cross – a first century by-word for shame and ignominy – became the most recognisable symbol of Christian faith. Muslims do not boast about Muhammad's sufferings, but about his triumphs in spreading the message of Islam. Buddhists do not boast about the Buddha's suffering, but his escape from suffering. Hindus are ashamed of suffering, seeing it as evidence of past wrongs. Atheists are committed to eliminating suffering through the application of science. Yet the Christian message centres unashamedly on a leader who suffered every dimension of pain: physical, emotional (in His rejection by others) and mental.

This is where it is necessary to explain that Christians do not simply understand Jesus' death to be evidence of God's compassion (in the word's root meaning of suffering along with another). We believe it to be the means to our redemption, the key to God's future restoration of everything. In His own words, Jesus chose to "give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). His death would rescue and free us from sin and death. New Testament writers explain that Jesus was bearing our sins (1 Peter 3:24), taking God's punishment in our place (Romans 3:25) and offering one sacrifice for sins for all time (Hebrews 10:12). Through His death, Christians believe, it has been made possible for unjust people to be 'justified' (Romans 3:26), that is to be forgiven for their violations of God's will and restored into relationship with God. In other words, Jesus' death deals with the part in the problem of evil of those who trust in Him. It makes possible hope for our own inglorious pasts.

It also makes possible hope for a glorious future. The story of Jesus does not end with the cross. In the resurrection of Jesus the ultimate nature of God's power and the true transformative potential of suffering is revealed. Here is God's power to make a new beginning, to turn death back upon itself, to restore what seems irredeemable and to guarantee a future free from suffering. The resurrection of Jesus is a foretaste of a future resurrection and eternal life with God for all who trust in Him. The cross and resurrection together give Christians hope for the past and for the future. As theologian Jürgen Moltmann explains:⁵

⁴ Sayers, D.L. *Creed or Chaos?* New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949, p.4.

⁵ Moltmann, J. *In the End, the Beginning*. Grand Rapids: Fortress, 2004, p.246.

No human future can repair the crimes of the past. But in order to live with that past of ruins and victims, without having to repress them or relive them, we need this transcendent hope for the resurrection of the dead and the rebuilding of the ruins. Because of the resurrection of the destroyed Christ, Christians have hope for the future, in the nucleus of hope for resurrection. Without hope for the past, there is no hope for the future.

So what?

In this article I have tried to give some sense of how I, as a human being who is convinced of the Christian message, view evil and suffering. I started by raising the question whether I had been foolish to abandon a medical career in which I could have brought physical healing and relieved suffering for many, for a life teaching the Bible and sharing the Christian message. I need to state clearly again that I think Christians have a collective responsibility to do both, but I am convinced that ultimate hope, healing and help for those who suffer is found only in the good news about Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

The general assumption of the modern Western world is that the answer is found in better government, better healthcare, improving education, reduction of violence and the advance of science. In short, we can solve the world's problems ourselves through our own ingenuity. At least, we can improve quality and duration of life through these means – few believe we can eliminate death altogether. Christians recognise that these are all good things and have contributed enormously to their development, but the Christian message insists that only God can ultimately solve the problems and that the greatest human need is to be included in God's plan of ultimate restoration through faith in Jesus Christ.

This might sound like escapism – 'pie in the sky when you die' or, in Karl Marx's famous phrase, the "opium of the people" dulling the pain and allow oppressors to stay in power – but history shows that when the Christian message is truly believed and followed it leads not to less engagement in transforming the present world, but more. Christian faith, rather than leading to disengagement from the world, normally stimulates people to care for others in ways that are sacrificial and that risk greater suffering for the one who offers the care. The evidence is overwhelming:

- The pagan priests of the Roman Empire appealed to their adherents to get out and do more good because the Christians were gaining such a good reputation and gaining so many converts through their good deeds. The way in which the earliest Christians embodied other-worldly hope as they engaged in compassionate service is well documented and was, according to sociologist Rodney Stark, a major factor in the dramatic growth of Christianity in its first three centuries.⁶
- The hospitality and healing offered by religious orders of monks and nuns in the Middle Ages, which sat at odds with the social order. Sadly their radical lifestyle often placed them in tension with the structures of a Church increasingly compromised by its links with the State and its corruption of power. The monasteries were, however, the welfare-providers of medieval European societies.

⁶ Stark, R. *The Rise of Christianity*. New York: HarperOne, 1997.

- The immense influence of Christians, with their belief in an ordered universe, in the emergence of modern science. Although the story is often told of a Church that opposed advances in knowledge, the reality is that many of the pioneers of scientific knowledge throughout the early and late modern periods were convinced Christians. Their faith motivated them to pursue progress in knowledge, often motivated by a desire to reduce suffering and improve quality of life.⁷
- The amazing legacy of nineteenth century Christians in Britain who transformed many aspects of society: William Wilberforce and his associates campaigning against slavery; Hannah More labouring to realise universal education; the Cadburys transforming living conditions for working people; Elizabeth Fry reforming prisons; Florence Nightingale revolutionising nursing; Lord Shaftesbury reforming working conditions; Dr Barnardo developing care for children in need; William Booth initiating the work of the Salvation Army. There were many other unsung heroes on a smaller scale.
- Today, the significant contribution Christian organisations make to relief and development and the large numbers of Christians who choose to work in professions in which they invest themselves in the lives of others, from teaching to medicine and social work to nursing.

Returning to where I began, my own motivation to become a doctor in order to help others was driven by Christian faith, which taught me that loving others was my duty in response to the love that God had shown me in Christ Jesus. The same motivation compels me to teach the Bible and train Christian workers. The accusation can legitimately be made that Christians and the institutional Church have not always consistently lived out this reality, but whatever claims to be 'Christian' must always be tested against the standard set by the one Christians claim to follow, Jesus Christ. His life is the ultimate example of radical faith in God leading to compassionate concern for others. He had a message to proclaim and He brought healing and restoration. He described His acts of justice and compassion as signs pointing to the true nature of God's Kingdom – the way the world would be if God was always completely and directly in control. He commanded those who follow Him to go into the world in the same way that He did, with a message of hope and a commitment to help.

Christians do not believe that the world we now see reflects God's perfect plan, but we are confident that God will ultimately put that right. For now we want to share hope and bring help to as many people as we can, pointing them to Jesus, who alone can bring total healing.

⁷ The contribution of Christians to science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is well documented, but for a corrective to the notion that Christianity opposed and hindered the earlier origins of science see Hannam, J. *God's Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science*. London: Icon, 2009.