

If God is Love, Why Is There So Much Pain and Suffering?

Don Schweitzer
St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon, Canada.

On the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, Christians believe that God is love and that God's love is stronger than sin and death. This belief arises from the core of Christian faith, that though Jesus was crucified, God raised him to new life, thus revealing the power of God's love. In Jesus Christ, particularly in his death and resurrection, Christians see that God is love, and that God's love is able to overcome sin and death. The question then arises, if this is so, why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?

Three different answers.

This question is as old as Christian faith. It has found several answers in the history of Christian thought. One answer is that suffering and pain serve good purposes. Suffering is education or character forming. People learn from it. God works through our suffering to help us become the people we are meant to be. A similar answer is that suffering and pain are necessary for us to take life seriously. Without suffering and pain, we would not appreciate the gift of life and its goodness. A third answer is that God is love, but God can only do so much. If people are to have genuine freedom, then there must be suffering and pain. Or, God is working to overcome suffering and pain, but God cannot prevent it completely.

There is some truth in each of these answers. Suffering and pain can be educational. When we burn our hand on the stove, we learn to be more careful in the kitchen. When we experience humiliation through someone else's joke, we may learn to be more careful with what we say about others ourselves. Suffering can be educational and character forming. It can also bring us to appreciate life more fully. A time of illness may lead us to be more thankful for good health. The pain of a quarrel with a friend may help us realize how much their friendship means to us. Food often tastes better and is more deeply appreciated after we have been hungry for a while. It is true that the goodness of God's many gifts stands out more clearly after we have suffered their lack.

Yet while there is a degree of truth to each of these answers, at bottom they are all inadequate. We can sum them up as saying that God can work through pain and suffering for good. Though this is true, it does not explain why there is so much pain and suffering in the world. Neither of these answers has taken the full measure of the pain and suffering the world. While we can learn from suffering, we do not need to suffer in order to learn. While some suffering can be character forming, there is far too much suffering that destroys people's characters and leaves them scarred for the rest of their lives by the trauma they have undergone. The ideas that suffering and pain can be educational, character forming, or help us take life seriously and appreciate it more deeply are true in

that there can be meaning in suffering and pain. God is present with us, even in deepest sorrow and suffering. Even in some of our most excruciating pain, we are still able to choose, in some way, to bear witness to the light rather than to curse the darkness. As God is with us, even in our greatest suffering there is always some good that can come out of it. One can almost always point to some good that comes out of evil and suffering. But this is no answer as to why if God is love there is so much pain and suffering in the world. There is a saving possibility even in the worst suffering. But this does not justify the destruction of life, the pain and heartbreak that suffering often brings. We do not need suffering and pain to appreciate the goodness of God's gifts.

The basic problem with these two answers is that each denies the radical nature of evil and suffering. For both, suffering and pain are always a means to a supposedly great good and thus are really good in themselves. This overlooks the destructive nature of the sin and evil that afflict God's people and creation. There is too much suffering and pain that cannot be justified by any good that comes out of it. Nothing can justify the suffering of slaves yesterday or today, or the unfathomable suffering of the Holocaust. Though the ideas that God allows or causes suffering and pain to educate us, to improve our character, or so that we will take life more seriously, contain some wisdom, they fail at heart to take the suffering and pain of the world seriously.

This means that they also fail to take God seriously. The God who raised Jesus from the dead stands opposed to suffering and pain in a fundamental way. God is fundamentally the God of life, who seeks the salvation of all creation. This means that God seeks the overcoming of suffering and pain, in all their many forms. To justify suffering and pain by saying that God works through it for good takes a tiny truth and tries to stretch it into the whole. When this happens, the element of truth in these answers becomes false. In attempting to justify God in the face of the pain and suffering of the world in this way, these two answers end up confusing evil and good. The evils of suffering and pain are painted over as a source of good, and the loving God is pictured as causing or permitting suffering and pain.

What of the third answer, that God can only do so much? This does not really fit with the Biblical message about God. For instance, in the Psalms, again and again a suffering person cries out to God for help. The assumption underlying this is always that God is able to help, that God is able to overcome the causes of suffering. Nowhere in the Psalms do we read words to the effect that the person suffering knows that God is doing God's best and is unable to do more. The Psalm writers frequently express their faith and trust in God in spite of their suffering. They frequently tell of how God is a source of comfort even in the midst of their sorrow. But God is a comfort, even in such trying times, because God is the source of their hope that eventually they will be delivered from what afflicts them. In the Psalms faith in God is always a source of hope because of God's faithfulness, God's love and God's ability to deliver people from their distress and pain.

There is an element of truth hidden in the idea that God can only do so much. When a friend of mine who had been a minister in the church for many

years became ill with terminal cancer, he did not ask “why me?” People expected him to do so. This is a common reaction to deadly experiences of suffering and pain. But he did not ask this. As a minister, over the years he had officiated at the funerals of many friends who had died of cancer, other illnesses or accidents before him. As a result, he did not ask “why me?” Instead, when he became terminally ill, his comment was “why not me?” He saw himself as no different from his friends and the many people he had ministered to over the year, and so he did not see why he should expect anything different from what they had experienced.

While Christians believe in the power of God’s love, we should also know that we are mortal, that suffering and death will come to us all in some way. Christians have to be realistic about life. Faith in Christ does not take us out of history, with all its suffering and pain. Rather, it is precisely in history, in day-to-day life, that we are called to live out our faith.

Yet to say that there is so much suffering and pain because God is not able to overcome it, because God is already doing the best God can do is a denial of some important aspects of the gospel. The Christian message is that in raising Jesus from the dead, God’s love has shown itself to be stronger than sin and death and thus a source of hope to all who suffer. The Christian message is always one of ultimate hope. To say that there is pain and suffering in life because God can do no better is to surrender this and to lose touch with the Biblical witness to God as the Creator and Redeemer of all that is. Christians are called to bear witness to God’s love, to have faith and hope in God in the face of sin, evil, suffering and death. To say that God can do no better is in some ways to deny the nature of God revealed in Scripture.

Faith in God always has an ‘in spite of’ quality. One believes that one is accepted by God, in spite of one’s being a sinner. One believes that Christ is risen, even though Christ is not physically present. A God who is not the source of hope for healing and a better world is not the God of Jesus Christ. A God who cannot be called upon in prayer cannot be the source of the courage to love and resist evil in the face of suffering and death. A God who is not greater than the principalities and powers of this world cannot inspire and sustain political resistance to injustice and oppression.

The element of truth in this answer is that while we find in God’s love a source of comfort and hope, still we know that sin and death will remain a part of life until the reign of God comes in all its fullness. It is not that God can do no better. Christians do hope that the time will come when suffering and pain will be no more and all will enjoy life in all of its fullness. But if God’s love is a source of hope for the overcoming of sin and death, why is there so much suffering and pain in the world?

We have come back to where we began. We have seen that there is some wisdom in each of these answers to the question of why there is so much pain and suffering if God is love. We have also seen that each answer is fundamentally inadequate. The problem is that each is attempting to give an explanation when what is needed is understanding. These are two different kinds of knowledge that, while interrelated, should not be confused.

Explanation and Understanding

When we can explain how to do a puzzle or a magic trick, we have mastered it. We know how it works and how to do it. When we can explain how the movement of air in the wind lifts a kite, we are able to use this movement of air, the power of the wind, to fly kites. What we can explain, we can use. Explanation involves what can be called technical knowledge. This is knowledge of how something works. We can explain how a gasoline engine works when we know how all its various parts and processes work together to produce power, noise and exhaust. When we can explain something, we have mastered it.

However, there are many things in life that we know or are acquainted with that we cannot explain. If we have to master or be able to control something in order to explain it, then we can only explain things that are in some ways lesser than ourselves. But there are many things in life that are infinitely greater than ourselves. First and foremost of these is the love of God. God's love can never be fully explained so that one can control or use it. One can receive God's love, but one cannot manipulate it. We cannot explain God's love, but it itself is the explanation, or gives the reason for our own existence. Though we cannot explain God's love, still we can receive and know it. This kind of knowledge, sometimes called receptive knowledge, is understanding.

We can understand what we cannot explain. We experience and know realities that are greater than ourselves, that our minds can never fully comprehend. The philosopher Kant spoke of two things that caused him to feel a sense of awe and mystery: the starry heavens above him and the moral law within him. He could not explain these, but he could understand them, in the sense that he experienced their beauty and was moved by them. They were realities that he was acquainted with, though he could never hope to control them. He knew them, but they were greater than he.

Understanding is thus a deeper kind of knowledge than explanation. When we understand something, we are moved by it. Understanding is a knowledge that changes us. For instance, to know God is to love God, to be moved by God. Knowledge begins with understanding. Understanding in turn gives rise to attempts at explanation. That which we first know through understanding we then seek explain to some extent, for explanation helps us to participate in something. We need to be able to explain how soccer is played in order to fully participate in a soccer game. But deeper than explanation is understanding. A person may be able to explain the rules of soccer and the strategies and skills by which it is played, but still not understand why anyone would play it. A person who plays soccer, who loves the game, knows why it is played. Even if they cannot explain all the rules, strategies and skills, still they understand the game in the sense of being moved to play it. A person who can explain all the rules still may not understand why anyone would play soccer. They have not experienced the joy and thrill of the game, which is the basis of understanding it. Understanding and love often go together.

While understanding and love are two different forms of knowledge, they are related. Explanation helps us participate in what we understand. We will elaborate on this later. For now we simply note that while these two kinds of knowledge are related and enrich each other, they should not be confused or collapsed into one another. Understanding is a deeper form of knowledge. There are things we can know in the sense of understanding that we can never hope to explain.

Explanations give logical descriptions of how things work and why things are the way they are. Understanding gives a different kind of knowledge. We could call it appreciation, recognition or respect. We can appreciate or respect what we cannot explain. Understanding is also always partial. What we know by understanding is always greater than we can master or explain, and so while we know it in one sense, we never know all of it. It is only through understanding in the sense of appreciation that we can now realities that are greater than ourselves.

The questions raised by the pain and suffering of the world in relation to the good news of God's love are not problems to be solved by logical explanations. They are instead part of a mystery that is to be understood and lived with in the light of faith.

Job and his friends: explanation and understanding.

To illustrate this we turn in the Bible to the book of Job. Early on in this book Job, the main character, suffers greatly and is in terrible pain. Three friends come to see him. They seek to explain his suffering to him. They are certain that there is a reason why Job suffers. They think it is because he has sinned, and that God is punishing him for this by causing him to suffer. But Job insists that he has not sinned. He has done nothing to deserve the suffering he is experiencing. In fact, he is sure that God will vindicate him against these accusations of his friends, and he calls God to come forth and speak.

Each of the three answers to the question 'If God is love, why is there so much suffering and pain?' that we discussed at the start seek to explain the existence of pain and suffering in the same way as Job's friends did. That is, each of the answers discussed earlier seeks to give a reason for it; a logical explanation as to how the pain and suffering that people endure can be seen as consistent with God's love. The first answer argues that suffering and pain are an instrument of God's love for a higher purpose. The second answer suggests the same. The third answer argues that while suffering and pain are bad, God is not able to prevent it. In effect, this is saying that God is loving but not powerful enough to prevent pain and suffering. The question 'if God is love, why is there so much pain and suffering?' presupposes that there is a contradiction between God's love and pain and suffering. These three answers seek to explain how this is not so. However, as argued above, all these answers are inadequate. The fundamental reason for this is that God's love cannot be made consistent with the pain and suffering in the world.

Job's friends were confident that there was no conflict between God's goodness and Job's suffering. They believed they could explain how the two

were consistent with each other. Reading through their long speeches, one finds some wisdom in what each has to say. But on a deeper level their words are false, and they are condemned by God for not having spoken what is right (Job 42:7). Their explanations have not brought God near to Job in his suffering and pain when God seemed absent. Instead, by trying to give a logical explanation for why God allowed or caused Job to suffer, they spoke learned words that were “without knowledge” (Job 38:2). Their explanations lacked an understanding of the basic realities of Job’s life. In thinking they could fit Job’s suffering and God together into a logical relation of cause and effect they lost touch with the transcendence of God, with how God is beyond the power of human reason to master and grasp.

Human reason can receive the good news of God’s love in trust and hope. But reason can never master God. God comes to humanity, but God always remains beyond the power of human reason to fully comprehend. An experience of God’s love can give rise to an understanding of God. But this love can never be explained so as to be managed and controlled. In attempting to explain how God’s love is compatible with the depths of human suffering that Job experienced and that others endure today, Job’s friends committed idolatry. They replaced the God who made heaven and earth, who raised Jesus from the dead, with a god made in their own image, a god who fit the limits of their own explanations.

We can understand God’s love and the bitter realities of human suffering and pain, but ultimately we cannot explain them. Every attempt to fit the two together in a logically consistent relationship reduces one or the other. The message of the book of Job is a protest against this kind of idolatry, that reduces God to our own image, and a protest against this kind of refusal to take the harsh reality of suffering and pain seriously.

Suffering and Pain are not willed by God.

From the story of the Exodus and the healing miracles of Jesus, we see that sin and suffering should not be. They are what God does not will, and what God’s love works constantly to overcome. The continued existence of sin and suffering are signs that God’s reign has not yet come. On the basis of God’s promises and Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, Christians look forward to a future that is still to come, when sin and suffering will be no more. On a provisional basis, Christians know that both are still part of life, that one must often bear suffering and pain with patience and courage as best one can. People who live with temporary or chronic illness need to be able to come to terms with their condition. Christians know that in their pain and suffering, that Christ is with them, that God is very near. They also know, in faith, that even in our worst moments, that still there is a purpose for our lives, that even in great suffering and pain, our lives still have meaning. This may help on to accept suffering that cannot be eased or cured.

But as the giver and source of life, God is not the cause of disease, suffering and pain. The Bible teaches that the world is not yet as it should be. Though it is

fundamentally good, yet there is much that happens that is against God's will' suffering and pain included. God is the giver of life, not the cause of pain. Jesus is the one who healed people of their diseases, who brought hope to the despairing. He came that we might have life in all of its fullness.

Through experiences of faith, Christians know God and God's love, in the sense of understanding. They also know the realities of suffering and pain. Christians should never try to reconcile these two realities into a logically tight explanation. Any such explanation that supplies an ultimate reasons for suffering and pain in relation to God's love only serves to justify what God's love seeks to overcome. In light of a central theme of Scripture, that God as the source of life and as a god of love seeks the ultimate overcoming of suffering and pain, this can only be seen as at best misguided, at worst a sin. Because faith in God and the suffering and pain of the world can never be ultimately reconciled, faith in Jesus Christ will always be a troubled faith. It will be troubled by suffering and unable to accept it as meant to be. As faith in Jesus Christ is troubled in this way, it should turn the energy arising from its troubled state towards seeking the relief of pain, the overcoming of suffering, the increase of justice and peace.

There will always be forms of suffering and pain that have to be accepted in a provisional way and lived with as best one can. This is part of the fallen nature of creation. One believes in God's love in spite of these forms of suffering that are part of human mortality: the frailty that may come with old age, forms of chronic illness, or the loss and disability that may result from accidents. Even while the search goes on for a cure to a chronic disease, people must still find ways of coping and living with it. One can find in God's love a source of help for coming to terms with such suffering and pain. But at heart, Christian faith, trusting in God's love, living from the hope that springs from Jesus' resurrection, looks to the time when suffering and pain will be no more.

Explanation and understanding revisited.

Earlier we distinguished between explanation and understanding, describing them as two kinds of knowledge and noting some differences between them. Now, without collapsing the two into one, we must examine how they relate to one another.

As faith in Christ turns itself to working for peace, for justice, for the overcoming of suffering and pain, it will have need of the kind of explanatory thinking that we earlier distinguished from understanding. These are two forms of knowledge that can never finally be separated, but which also should not be collapsed into one another. Understanding is a more original, receptive knowledge. Explanation is a technical kind of thinking oriented towards knowing how things work so as to be able to use them. God is known through the receptive knowledge of understanding. But in order to answer God's call to play a part in God's work of redemption, Christians also need the technical knowledge of explanation.

Let us take as an example widespread, deadly hunger. Christians understand this as a reality that clashes with God's love. In order to work to lessen or

overcome this, they need an explanatory knowledge of how this widespread hunger has come to be. Was it a crop failure so that there is no food? Or is it that food is available but the people who are hunger lack the means to buy it? Explanatory or technical thinking is needed to answer these questions. Studies of situations of widespread hunger in the modern world have shown that these are frequently ‘complex emergencies’ in which the plight of those suffering hunger is often caused, indirectly or directly, by the political, cultural and economic actions and agendas of others. At one time, widespread hunger or famine was seen to be a natural disaster, or act of God, resulting from bad weather or crop failures of one kind or another. But in the modern world, food is always available somewhere. Widespread hunger is no longer an act of God. It is now the result of human actions, human decisions that result in food not getting to people who need it.

In order to overcome suffering from widespread hunger, love or the desire to help is not enough. An analysis of the complex political, economic and cultural factors that have gone together to create a space for hunger is also needed. Thus in addition to understanding that sees the suffering and death that results from widespread hunger as against God’s will, from which arises the will to help, there is also need for explanation, for analysis of the immediate and long term causes of widespread hunger, and what can be done to remedy them.

Thus understanding gives rise to and needs to be supplemented by explanation. While one can understand but not explain suffering and pain on an ultimate level, one needs an explanation of the immediate causes and effects of suffering and pain in order to work to lessen or overcome them. One knows God through understanding, not explanation. But as one is called by God to have faith and love others, one needs explanatory thinking to develop concrete strategies and courses of action for the living out of one’s call. The fault of Job’s friends was the way they invoked explanatory thinking as though it could give a final and complete answer regarding the causes of Job’s suffering. They invoked explanatory thinking to give an understanding of what is ultimately beyond human comprehension. They offered explanations so as to help Job, thinking that their explanations could provide strategies by which his suffering could be ended. But by trying to explain what can only be understood as beyond final comprehension, they reduced or trivialized the realities of God and Job’s suffering. Their explanations were hurtful rather than helpful because they lacked an understanding of the radical nature of the evil Job suffered and the transcendence of God.

Explanations always arise out of a more ultimate understanding. When the two are confused, idolatry results. But when the two are held together as distinct and yet interrelated, as enriching one another, an understanding of God’s love and the realities of pain and suffering can give rise to a search for explanations that can help overcome these. These explanations can in turn deepen our understanding of God’s love. One may begin by understanding God’s love as revealed in Jesus Christ and present in the world through the actions of Christians. But in seeking to explain the causes and remedies for a particular instance of widespread hunger, one may discover that God’s love is active in non-Christians

working for social justice in this situation. This in turn may deepen one's understanding of God's love, so that one now sees it as present where formerly one did not recognize it.

Conclusion.

We end then, not with an explanation of why there is so much pain and suffering in the world if God is love. Instead, like Job, we end with an understanding of God's present and transcendence in the face of suffering and pain. God's love is active and present, and in the resurrection of Jesus God's love has shown itself to be more powerful than sin and evil. Yet pain and suffering are also present and real. From God's love comes hope, assurance and the courage to love. Yet we find no final explanations here. Evil and sin in the end are ultimately unexplainable. There is no reason for them. They are not rational in the sense of meant to be. They are instead an enigma, something contrary to God's will yet nonetheless present and all too real.

From this understanding comes a search for explanations of the immediate causes of pain and suffering, and ways to overcome and alleviate them. Christian faith joins forces with explanatory thinking here, which seeks to overcome suffering through better forms of social organization, better medicines, better schools, and better understanding between peoples. Yet Christian faith should refuse to ever give a final explanation for suffering and pain. It recognizes that some pain and suffering must be borne as best can be. Yet it always looks in hope for the time when sin and death will be no more.