Where is God in a Suffering World?

A Biblical View of Suffering

Headlines in May 2008 brought dreadful news of disaster in Burma. Cyclone Nargis with its 190k per hour wind, was one of the most horrific natural disasters to ever visit South-East Asia.

A few days later the official death toll stood at 84,537 with 53,836 people still missing and 19,359 injured. Later estimates put the human toll much higher, with possibly close to 300,000 people being killed and some 5.5 million people affected in the Irrawaddy Delta and regions surrounding the city of Rangoon. Heavy rains, flooding and damaged roads made it difficult to reach survivors, many of whom saw their homes and rice farms wash away. As the media brought us daily reports of the disaster, we were witnesses to immense suffering on a very large scale. Many around the world were moved with compassion and wanted to be part of the relief effort. Many no doubt asked why. If there was a God, why would he allow such suffering to come to a people already among the world’s poorest and most abused?

As an introduction to my reflections on what the Bible reveals to us of human suffering I would like to examine this particular situation a little more closely and perhaps draw out some principles that could help us make more sense of a scenario such as this. In doing this we cannot lose sight of the fact we are not just looking at collective suffering (if there is such a thing) but individual suffering – individuals who are rooted in families, communities and social structures just as we are. Individuals who also look for love and belonging, meaning and significance, relationships, even though for them a primary focus may well be simple survival.

Let us think for a moment about the actual causes of their suffering and the degree of it. It is not as simple as it would immediately appear; for compounding this “natural disaster” and the suffering caused, were a number of factors very much related to the human condition.
The most obvious one was the fact that Burma’s military government consistently blocked relief planes from entering the country with aid supplies. As aid agencies struggled to help an estimated 2.4 million people affected by the vicious storm, the junta refused visas to many of their workers. There were rumours swirling among foreign aid workers that the junta was hoarding good foreign relief supplies for itself, and doling out low-quality rice, biscuits and other items to survivors. It was reported that US Navy shipments of relief supplies and aid -- non-perishable food, drinking water, shelter, mosquito nets, medical kits and clothes, totalling 2 million pounds sat off the coast of Burma for weeks, as the regime refused to let it come in country.

Then as we discovered more about the country through the many news items and more in depth articles, we understand that flimsy housing, malnutrition and extreme poverty magnified some of the suffering resulting from the cyclone. Like most natural disasters in underdeveloped countries, the damage wrought by the event is many times worse than it would be in countries where there is sound infrastructure and more priority given to human safety. Fragile health also left may more vulnerable to the effects of such a disaster. Burma’s health system is ranked second worst in the world, next to Sierra Leone. The government spends 30-50% of its budget on the military, yet only 2.2% is spent on health.

Questions were raised as to whether adequate warnings were given to coastal residents and it is reported that the official website of the Burmese meteorological department was actually offline prior to cyclone Nargis’ landfall.

Finally it is well documented that the Bay of Bengal where most deadly cyclones originate is an area that has been vastly overpopulated, and it is believed that this contributes to the formation of cyclones.

So what can we extrapolate from all this? Already I’m sure you will have concluded that this so called “natural disaster” in terms of the consequences of the cyclone, is not quite so “natural” as it first appears. I chose this particular event as a case study because there is far more tendency to blame natural disasters and the suffering they bring, on God. The recent Tsunami or the earthquake in China would have also been good examples. Does this case study demonstrate to any extent what the Bible has to say about suffering? I think it does. Does it give us enough insights to answer all the questions we have about suffering? I think not. We will come back to this but first I would now like to present a brief overview of what I (and others) have observed from the Scriptures. It will not answer all our questions. Rather I hope it may give us some new perspectives.

A fallen world – paradise lost

The world is not now functioning according to the Designer’s original plan. It is clear from Genesis 1 & 2 that God created everything good. There was no pain or evil. All was in perfect harmony including relationships with God and each other. By giving us the freedom to choose good or evil God allowed the possibility of sin and suffering.
We know what happened. Man and woman rebelled and chose their own desire over God’s will and plan for them. At that very point sin and suffering entered into what until then had been a perfect world. Paradise lost. The result is that:

- Humankind is now in fundamental rebellion to their Creator. Pride deceives us into thinking we are self sufficient and have no need of God’s counsel and wisdom. We are disobedient to God’s wise precepts and instructions.
- Sin has invaded every aspect of personality. Thus in our natural state we are centred on self and our own good rather than on the good of others.
- In addition to our selfishness; fear and insecurity has flawed our judgment and our relationships.
- We are emotionally and spiritually fragile as well as being susceptible to physical disease.
- The natural creation is out of tune in ways we don’t completely understand, but clearly it also is affected by sin, mismanagement, exploitation and the greed of human beings.

All of these realities both cause, and magnify much of our suffering. Can you see how these theological perspectives impact on the case study we have just considered? Reflect on the correlations.

For example: environmental issues such as overpopulation and overuse of land; poverty and lack of amenities caused by mismanagement; exploitation and neglect of people due to sinful greed and lack of love; fear, insecurity and pride preventing acceptance of aid and support of other nations.

From the Bible’s perspective that is the BAD news. What of the GOOD news?

The first thing we should note is that right from the outset God instituted a rescue plan. As described in Genesis 3:15, immediately after the fall (a term we use to describe that devastating event and its consequences) God promised a Saviour who would crush Satan and save a Godly line of people i.e. the seed or children of the woman, who would be preserved throughout history. Another line – the seed of Satan – would always be in rebellion against God and his people.

In the fullness of time as the writer of Hebrews puts it, God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to free us from the curse that was on us. He did this by redeeming us through his suffering and death. In other words, by paying the price we could not pay to bring us back into relationship with God. That did not mean that evil and sin were no longer in the world or that those who believed in him would not sin again, but rather that we can receive forgiveness as a free gift and choose to obey God rather than live in rebellion to him.

The Bible promises that there will come a day when sin and Satan will be banished from our world and the whole of creation will be restored to its perfect state- but that time is not yet. So yes we still live in a suffering world where there is evil and sin. We see the evidence of it all around us, and
“good” people, even Christian people are not immune. However we are given insights from God’s word that are a great comfort and encouragement to us – a people who are out of the garden but on the road to glory.

1. God understands our pain, not just because he is God but because he became a man. He is our ideal helper and comforter in pain and suffering. We have a Saviour who went before us as a pioneer in suffering. (Hebrews 12:1-3) We have the Holy Spirit as a comforter and strengthener in the midst of our suffering. (Romans 8) We have the Father of all comfort who not only comforts us but helps us to comfort others in their suffering (2 Corinthians 1)

2. God is transforming and will ultimately redeem our suffering and this whole suffering world for his glory. It will one day be set free as a result of our liberation. Think about those wonderful words in Romans 8:19-21 “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

3. He can use our suffering to bring good to us and glory to him. It is often when suffering becomes very personal, affecting either ourselves or our loved ones that we grapple with it most intensely. In my pastoral care experience I have found that Christians respond in many different ways. Some take the Pollyanna approach and play the glad game (In spite of it all I can be glad that it is not worse). For them this is a helpful way of coping but it has its limits. Others try to be philosophical - many others are worse off than me, I should not complain. Again this can be helpful but is sometimes accompanied by a lot of guilt if things become too much for them. Some older people can be amazingly stoical about their suffering to the point they will not ask or accept the comfort and support they really need. Then many people are simply bewildered or angry- though they may find it hard to express their anger.

When we look closely at some of the well known characters of the Bible we can see some of these very human responses to suffering, such as the laments of the Psalmists, the Old Testament prophets, the survivors of the exodus, as well as Paul and others in the New Testament. The Bible gives a good deal of attention to the reality of suffering. One of the larger books of the Bible, the book of Job, is given solely to this question. The books of Jeremiah and Habakkuk have much to say about it. About one third of the Psalms, the prayers of the Old Testament, are cries that arise out of doubt, disappointment, or pain.

**So what insights do we gain from the Bible about personal suffering?**

1. The focus has changed. The questions we find in the Old Testament such as, Why is this happening to us? "Does God care? Has he forgotten to be merciful?" are not present in the New Testament. There we find joy, confidence and hope that even the greatest suffering cannot overwhelm. One writer put it like this. “Something has made a
dramatic difference. In the New Testament, God has a face. He has made himself known in the person of Jesus Christ”.

2. We also learn that Christians are no more immune to suffering than were the Old Testament saints. God may not remove our suffering, but he can transform it into something that will bring benefit to us and glory to him - if that is what we desire, and if we will trust him to do so. A wonderful demonstration of this is Paul’s writing. The great theme of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians is how God can reveal his power and grace through our human frailties and weaknesses, and our suffering.

3. We should expect suffering. Jesus told his disciples to take the cross and follow him. The apostle Peter wrote, “Dear friends do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice when you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” The early Christians expected to suffer for Christ and the gospel.

4. Sometimes God uses suffering to bring about specific good in our lives and the lives of others. Christians through the ages have discovered that their suffering and trials have ultimately brought blessing through personal growth and understanding that may never have been gained in the easier times of life. God loves us enough to persist in moulding our character, often through trials, and even when we would rather remain in our immaturity. Our suffering may also lead to the blessing of others. We have all read stories, biographies and testimonies that attest to that, or have experienced it ourselves. Our own experiences can make us more sensitive to others and able to better comfort them. It can lead us to take initiatives and enter into endeavours that will benefit many others in similar situations.

People sometimes come to faith in Christ as the result of some personal suffering or tragedy. CS Lewis once said “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world”.

5. God identifies with us in our suffering. The compassion of God that is powerfully revealed to us in through the life of Jesus, particularly through his cross, can transform our attitude to suffering. American philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost a son in a climbing accident, says in his book Lament For a Son: “God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering world is to suffer...The one who does not see God’s suffering does not see his love’.

James Jones, in his very helpful book, Why Do People Suffer? tells the story of a school that collapsed, killing all the teachers and most of the children. A little boy, badly maimed, was rescued from the rubble and rushed to hospital. For hours a team of doctors and nurses fought to save his life while his mother waited anxiously outside the operating theatre. After seven hours of painstaking surgery the little boy died.
Instead of leaving it to the nurse to tell the mother, the surgeon went himself. As he broke the
dreadful news the mother became hysterical in her grief and attacked the surgeon, pummelling his
chest with her fists. But instead of pushing her away, the doctor held her to himself tightly until the
woman's sobbing subsided and she rested cradled in his arms.

And then in the heavy silence the surgeon began to weep. Tears streamed down his face and grief
racked his body. For he had come to the hospital the moment he heard that his one and only son
had been killed in the same school.

God knows all about human suffering, he has been there, he is able to comfort and sustain us in
suffering, and can even to use it for our best good and his glory. He did not create a suffering
world. We did. But he instituted a rescue plan and will one day renew his creation, transform our
broken world, just as he now transforms broken people who live in a broken world, into the
likeness of his son the Lord Jesus.

Margaret G Hutchison

NCFA NSW Conference - Hope in a Suffering World
November 2008