

## Why Does God Allow Suffering?

In light of the recent tragedies in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas, it comes as no surprise that one of the questions that's still most often asked about God is this: "How could a good God allow so much suffering in the world?" 20th century scholar and author C.S. Lewis wrote about his own personal struggle to believe in a God that allows suffering. In his well-known book, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes, "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of "just" and "unjust?" . . . . What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? . . . . Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But If I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world *was really unjust*, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. . . . . Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple." With so much suffering in the world, the non-believing world tries to write off any belief in God. Although God may use suffering to call a non-believer to himself, generally speaking, non-believers are in an entirely different relationship to suffering than Christians. The promise that, "All things work together for good," in Romans 8:28, is *only given* to those "who love the Lord."

But *what about Christians* and why do we, so often, find ourselves struggling in times of suffering? We may affirm intellectually that suffering is promised from scripture, but why? Why me and why now? Along with the promise of scripture that Christians will suffer; along with the reality that Christ suffered; one of the primary reasons—not the *only* reason but a primary reason—that scripture gives for our trials and suffering is that God brings suffering into our lives to sanctify us, i.e., to grow us to be more like Christ. The apostle Paul writes, "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not put to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

Clearly though, just the fact that we have suffered does not automatically lead to spiritual maturity. It's important that we grow in our knowledge of God in order that when suffering comes, we seek to *respond* to our suffering and

trials in a way that honors God. Christian Statesman, John Stott writes, “First, suffering is the one and only path to glory. It was so for Christ; it is so for Christians. As Paul [expresses it] we are “co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom. 8:17). That is why we are to rejoice in them both. Secondly, if suffering leads to glory in the end, *it leads to maturity meanwhile*. Suffering can be productive, *if we respond to it positively, and not with anger or bitterness*.” In this new series from John 6:16-21 we’ll get a glimpse of the suffering that Jesus’ disciples went through. I believe there’s much we can learn from their experience. To set this passage in its context, the events that we’ll be looking at take place immediately following the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000.

### —Storm at Sea

“When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.” (John 6:16-17) Three of the gospel writers give us a record of this important event, so we’ll need to look beyond John’s gospel in order to get a more complete look at everything that takes place. Both Matthew and Mark say that “Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side” of the Sea of Galilee. In the meantime, Jesus sends the crowds away and goes up on the mountain to pray. The phrase translated “Jesus had not yet come to them” (vs. 17) is one of John’s commentary phrases. We, the readers, are the ones whom John is telling that “Jesus had not yet come to them.” The disciples have no reason *whatsoever* to expect that Jesus would come to them out on the lake in the darkness. And yet, sadly, they are woefully unprepared for the devastating storm that they’re soon to face.

My prayer is that this new series will be a blessing to many as we seek to learn some important lessons about suffering, primarily, from this passage in John’s gospel. Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.