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Q&A: Problem of Pain and Suffering

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The Problem of Pain and Suffering:

Question: If God really cares for me, why does he allow bad things to happen in my life?

Answer: It has been argued that the worst sort of suffering is emotional in nature. According to a very influential thesis, what we say to ourselves is the single most damaging, pain-causing contributor to our pain. So when someone says that "God doesn't care about me," or "He never answers my prayers," or "He should heal the kids whenever they get sick," they create a situation in their own mind where they often begin to believe these comments.

On the contrary, the person who says the opposite of these comments and believes it often experiences less pain in their religious life. You can work through each of the sequences here. For example, if you find yourself saying or thinking the negative statements above, one major strategy is to argue strongly with yourself. Your "comeback options" could include things like:

- 1) "But if God doesn't care about me, how about the time he specifically answered my prayer and....(fill in the answer)."
- 2) "How many times in the Bible did true believers go through real tough situations (like Joseph as a slave in Egypt, or Daniel `ruining' his entire life in captivity in Babylon, or Paul dealing with his physical `thorn in the flesh,' etc)? Didn't God still love each of them? How about the disciples, one by one, as they were martyred??"
- 3) Perhaps the best response to our suffering: "When Jesus, God's own Son, was on the Cross, did God spare him? Did God take him down? Even after Jesus asked if this death might bypass him, did his own Father prevent his death? Then should we expect something better than what Jesus received?"
- 4) Here's another very powerful response: "After losing his children and being very sick, Job realized that he already knew enough about God to trust him in those things that he didn't know. Don't I know more about God than Job did? For example, since Jesus was raised from the dead, and there's a heaven where all of us can be together, doesn't that prove that God should be trusted, even if we can't figure it all out?"

Question: Is it not unfair that since it was only Adam and Eve who sinned, and not all of humanity throughout the ages, that God would condemn all sinners? Even more, Scripture seems to portray the impossibility of not sinning. Is this fair?

Answer: If everything depended on Adam and Eve, this would be very difficult to understand. I conclude for this and other reasons that we also have free will. Why should we complain about Adam's sin when we have all made similar decisions? I share your view that salvation from this sin depends on what we do with Jesus. I want to be humble about this, and I fully realize that my view could be mistaken, but I personally don't take the Calvinistic options here.

Question: Concerning hell, some have said that God's mercy would not allow for such a painful place of torture and retaliation, so perhaps hell may be a symbol for those who do not have a relationship with God and go to heaven, but may somehow survive but be left to experience personal misery and loneliness for eternity. For some, perhaps this is a type of Purgatory. If I'm even close to a correct description of this view, isn't this position fairly far removed from the biblical passages that speak of hell in a much more literal manner? So I question this somewhat spiritualized interpretation of these Bible verses and concepts.

Answer: C. S. Lewis' fantasy book *The Great Divorce* seems to favor the metaphorical view that you mention. Christians differ as to how literally they take the Hell passages in Scripture, not because they think the Bible is unreliable at those points, but largely depending on whether they think the passages are using literal or metaphorical language. Those who take the latter position, like Lewis, think that Bible is trustworthy, but that it is meant to be taken in other than a literal way, perhaps as a sort of word-picture. I personally do not favor the "torture model," i.e. God roasting sinners over a pit. But I do think that the pain of hell is real and eternal. Remember that even God withdrawing his common grace alone from the world could lead to all sorts of suffering, as people are left to their own devices, not to mention the punishment itself. I think that hell will be far worse than some concept of Purgatory (which I reject anyway), or perhaps some (mildly?) corrective state. I also think that hell will be a bodily state, not just something that happens to our spirits alone, and that it will be eternal, without opportunity for retraction. So it is a very serious choice! But I do think it is a free choice. Unfortunately, many make choices that are not in their best interests. Beyond this, how we hammer out the specific aspects of hell, such as the presence of fire, will depend largely on whether or not we think those passages were meant to be taken in an objective, straightforward manner.