

Big Questions – Week 1 Questions and Discussion Points

1. Doesn't suffering disprove God?
 - a. Even God isn't immune from suffering as evident in Jesus' life. Peter Kreeft points out that, "The Christian God came to earth to deliberately put Himself on the hook of human suffering. In Jesus Christ, God experienced the greatest depths of pain. In that way, Christianity provides deep resources for actually facing suffering with hope and courage." Isaiah 61:1-3 speaks to how much God identifies with our suffering.
 - b. Suffering is proof that there is good and evil. In that way, it may actually be proof for God. For something such as suffering to be "unjust" means there must be a moral law that determines justice. Where does that come from? Good and evil have to come from some place.
 - c. Of all the believe systems – or "isms" such as naturalism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc., -- Christianity offers the best means of reconciling suffering. It stands alone in offering hope to sufferers.
 - d. Suffering may in fact be essential to our faith – something God cares deeply about. Recall that many of the great leaders in Christianity, including Paul and the Apostles, suffered -- even gruesomely. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Suffering has always made the body of Christ stronger.
 - e. As counter-intuitive as it seems, suffering may actually be a sign of God's favor. Jesus says in John 16:33 that we will experience trouble.
 - f. If we ask the question does suffering disprove God; it's also fair to ask if the lack of suffering proves God. Many of the people who blame God for their suffering weren't always glorifying Him when things were honky-dory.

2. Why would God allow suffering?
 - a. If God prevented all suffering, would we love Him? Love demands a choice for it to be true love. In a world where love is possible, humans must be free to choose and to suffer the consequences, good and bad, of those choices. These choices mean that, while love is possible, it is also abused, and suffering enters the picture. Suffering is an inevitable consequence of free will. It is the price we pay temporarily to enjoy true love and eternal life.
 - b. God, as a condition to our free will and a by-product of our fall from grace, allows natural forces of cause and effect to take place.
 - c. Sometimes God allows suffering for a "greater good." For example, when someone suffers and dies, many can be drawn closer to Christ because of the example of the person's life.
 - d. Sometimes we have to acknowledge that we don't know the reason. A sovereign God has ways that are higher than ours.
 - e. The Bible makes it clear in the example of Job that we're in error to judge someone's suffering as God's punishment for sin. However, God, in his sovereignty, may choose to discipline his children with suffering as a means.
 - f. Suffering can also be attributable to persecution. This can be explained with the reality of allowing evil to exist.

3. Is God really all-powerful?
 - a. While God is all-powerful, Satan still has a temporary power that enables him to do damage. The analogy of D-Day is helpful here. In World War II, the war was won with the successful invasion on D-Day, but the German army was not immediately defeated and still inflicted a lot of casualties.
 - b. Just because you have power, doesn't mean you wield it all the time. For example, the good Sheriff of a town is still bound by the laws of his own town. It's often said the "leader above a nation is not above the law."
 - c. He is all-powerful, but as part of our love covenant with Him, he chooses to channel much of His work THROUGH us, not TO us. Ephesians 3:20 says, "by his mighty power AT WORK WITHIN US, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope."
 - d. Is it wrong to think that God's power has logical limits? For example, God can't exist and not exist at the same time? God can't make all belief systems be true (because they're incompatible and they contradict. He also can't make $2+2=5$; again, that's illogical. But within logical and spiritual limits, God is all powerful.

4. Doesn't God appear to even cause suffering in the Old Testament? He smited the Amalekites, for example; women and children included.
 - a. First, we need to make a distinction between what the Old Testament "records" versus what the Old Testament "approves." (Dr. Norm Giesler) The Old Testaments records many atrocities but does not necessarily approve of them.
 - b. Wherever God has allowed cultures to be destroyed, it was preceded by hundreds of years where the people were given endless chances to repent. The Amalekites; for example, were seeking genocide of Israel. They ruthlessly followed Israel and preyed on the weak, elderly, and disabled, killing those who lagged behind.
 - c. God went to great lengths in the Old Testament to protect His chosen people.
 - d. God is undeniably just. His perfect nature demands that he deal with people who stubbornly persist in their corruption and evil.
 - e. As for Amalekite children, the fate of children has always wrested with the fate of the parents, and that extends to several generations. But this can also be viewed as an act of mercy. Isaiah 7:16 makes it clear that children enter heaven prior to their "age of accountability." The Amalekite children are with Jesus in Heaven.
 - f. It's a harsh reality, but as the author of life God has the right to take it when He wants.
 - g. The Bible talks about "mercy" 261 times. 72% of them are in the Old Testament.
 - h. God is a jealous god, as the scriptures say in Exodus 20:. This means that in the face of incredible violations of justice, he becomes angry and takes action, especially to preserve His chosen people because they are so central to His divine plan.

5. How can we know that Hell exists? Is it just a concept made up by the religious?
 - a. G.K. Chesterton said that "*Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice.*"
 - b. This is the question were Christians are challenged on political correctness. Many professing Christians admit that they don't believe in Hell. Many people believe that if a Christian thinks some go to hell and others don't, that must surely mean that they think non-christians lack dignity and worth. This is a false assumption.

- c. Why we can't know that Hell exists, we can certainly believe it, and we see visible evidence of evil all around us. Charles Spurgeon said {paraphrase} *"You will never see more visible evidence of Heaven than to see with your eyes manifestations of spirits from hell."*
 - d. There are accounts of "beyond and back" experiences where people experienced a more "hell-like" reality than a heaven.
 - e. The Bible speaks of Hell. Psalms 145:17-20 says, *"but all the wicked He will destroy."* Luke 16:24-31 has a fascinating parable about a conversation between a man in Hell and a man in heaven.
 - f. Jesus after His resurrection, in obvious victory, declared His dominion over fallen angels and Satan. 1 Peter 3:18-22
6. How can a God of forgiveness allow anyone to go to Hell permanently?
- a. From Tim Keller in the Reason for God: *"Modern people think that Hell looks like this: God gives us time, but if we haven't made the right choices by the end of our lives, he casts our souls into hell for eternity. As the poor soul falls through space, God says "Too late, you had your chance. Now you will suffer!" This caricature misunderstands the very nature of evil. The Biblical picture is that sin separates us from the presence of God, which is the source of ALL joy, love or good thing of any sort.*
 - b. This question implies that it is easy for God to allow people to go to hell. The scriptures suggest otherwise. Ezekiel 33:11 says, *"Say to them, As surely as I live, says the sovereign God...I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked."* God instead goes to great lengths to ransom as many as possible from hell.
 - c. J.P. Moreland in The Case for Christ: *"If we fail over and over again to live for the purpose we were made, then God will give us what we've asked for all along in our lives. That's hell."*
 - d. So why do we confuse the Hell of the Bible with eternal fire? Flames tend to be used symbolically in the Bible. Heb. 12:29: God is a consuming fire. Nobody think He's actually a Bunsen burner. When Revelations talks about Jesus coming back surrounded by flames with a sword in his mouth. That's obviously symbolic – the flames standing for judgement and the sword in his mouth standing for the word of God. Hell will be total darkness, according to the Bible
 - e. The Bible is clear that people will experience differing degrees of Hell based on the way they lived their lives. Read Matthew 11: 20-24. In another passage, Jesus says that the religious leaders who deny him will be "punished more severely."