



Photo: John Rogers Herbert, 1877

Suffering: God's Refining Fire

According to Jewish tradition, when the Jews were exiled from Israel in the year 583 B.C.E., the Babylonians counted each of the Jewish captives when they left Israel and again when they reached the shores of Babylon. However, no matter how many people were counted before the boat set sail, when the ship reached its destination, there was always exactly one more passenger aboard than the original number.

The Babylonians were baffled and asked the Jews how this was possible. They answered: "As soon as we went into exile, our God joined us. He is found on each and every boat together with His children."

One of the most difficult and universal questions that Christians and Jews grapple with is why God allows suffering to happen. This issue has challenged many people of faith who have experienced or witnessed tragedies. If we believe God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, then why would He let His people suffer? Is there a point? Is there a reason?

As we explore the topic of suffering in this month's Fellowship Study, and attempt to make sense of one of the greatest difficulties in faith, let us remember that while we cannot always understand God's ways, we can always know that He is with us in all circumstances—and that knowledge can help us persevere through all trials.

As King David wrote in the beloved psalms that has brought comfort to God's faithful through the centuries: *"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me"* (Psalm 23:4).



Photo: Anton Mauve, 19th c.

*Even though I walk through the
darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for
you are with me; your rod and
your staff, they comfort me.*

— PSALM 23:4



A Question with No Answer

There are many different reactions to suffering and tragedy, but one response is universal—asking the question “Why?” Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do righteous people suffer? Or, perhaps even harder for us to understand, as King David expressed it: “How long, LORD... will the wicked be jubilant?” (Psalm 94:3).

Jewish tradition teaches that Moses sought to know the unknowable when he said to God, “show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18). Moses was asking God to explain how He runs the world. Moses wanted to understand how a world that looks so unfair could possibly be just.

Here is God’s answer: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But... you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exodus 33:19-20).

God’s words to Moses could also mean: “I will have mercy on the people who I see deserving of mercy.” God’s first point is that we do not know who is truly good and who is truly bad. **But God does.**

Secondly, God said, “I will have compassion—what I know to be true compassion—on those who are deserving.” God’s second point is that we don’t know which circumstances are truly good and which are ultimately bad for each and every individual. **But God does.**

Lastly, God said, “You cannot see my face and live.” God’s final point is that while we are living we simply don’t have the tools and knowledge necessary to understand how life is just. **But God does.**

Sometimes we can’t understand. But that’s OK, because we don’t have to. Just because we don’t understand God, doesn’t mean that we can’t have faith in Him. We can trust that the Creator knows what He is doing. The masterpiece is being painted even if we can’t fully appreciate its beauty just yet.

Remember this, friends: Comfort is not found in knowing all the answers. It is found in knowing that we don’t have to know all the answers. As the psalmist wrote, “My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life” (Psalm 119:50).



Photo: Frederic Edwin Church, 1846

I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

— EXODUS 33:19

The Purpose of Pain

As we have already established, there are no easy answers that explain why God allows pain, suffering, and evil to exist in His world. We cannot expect an answer to our question, “Why?” However, there is a question that we can ask; one that we must ask.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchick, a 20th-century renowned American *Torah* scholar who lived in the shadow of the Holocaust, taught: “We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but rather about the path wherein man shall take when suffering strikes.”

In other words, we do not ask why, we ask what: What can we do to emerge from our suffering as better people? What can we learn from our difficult experiences? What good can come from a bad situation?

Asking these questions reflects our faith that everything God does is for the best even if we cannot understand how. There is a purpose for our pain. When God said to Israel, “*For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,*” it was at a time when the Israelites were going into exile. It was a terrible time. The children of Israel had just witnessed the destruction of their Holy Temple and of their beloved city, Jerusalem. Yet God promised that He had a plan and that it would all turn out well.

In the Jewish tradition, we are taught to bless both the bad and the good that occurs in our lives. This is because ultimately everything is only for the good and comes directly from God—even those circumstances that seem bad. As we read in Lamentations 3:38, “*Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?*”

Paul echoed the Jewish view of the transformative aspect of suffering in the Christian Bible, when he wrote to the church in Rome, “*but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope*” (Romans 5:3-4). And James taught that believers should consider the trials in their lives as “pure joy” because such testing will result in a mature faith. (See James 1:2-4.)

In Ezekiel 22:22, God told His children: “*As silver is melted in a furnace, so you will be melted inside her, and you will know that I the LORD have poured out my wrath on you.*” In Judaism there is a term to describe the experience of the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt: *kur habarzel*—כור הברזל—the iron crucible.

This is a reference to the silversmith’s tool for refining silver. Just as a crucible purifies silver, the suffering in Egypt served to purify the children of Israel. This metaphor is used throughout Scripture to relate to all kinds of suffering. (See Psalm 66:10; Isaiah 1:25; Isaiah 48:10; Jeremiah 9:7; and, in the Christian Bible, 1 Peter 1:7.)

We read in Malachi 3:3, “*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.*” God Himself is the silversmith, and though we may be put through the fire, we are still in His hands. When we are called to walk through the fire, we must remember that God is our purifier. God never leaves our side, and when He is done, we will be refined, repaired, and a beautiful reflection of Him.



“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

— JEREMIAH 29:11

Comfort My People

When we suffer, we are called to have faith. However, when other people suffer, we are called to act in faith. We must act to comfort the suffering, to soothe the pain of those hurting, and to do what we can to alleviate the suffering of God's people. *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God,"* and comfort them we must. In the Christian Bible, in his well-known Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"* (Matthew 5:4).

Just before the Israelites left Egypt, darkness, the ninth plague, struck the land. We read: *"No one could see anyone else or move about for three days"* (Exodus 10:23). The Bible relates that the darkness wasn't merely the absence of light. It had a physical presence of its own. It was tangible and so thick that it kept people stuck in their places.

In Jewish teachings, this darkness is described as being "as thick as a golden dinar." This was the worst kind of darkness in the world because *"No one could see anyone else."* It's the kind of darkness that blinds us to the suffering of the people around us.

A dinar is a type of coin. If you take two coins and hold them out in front of you, you can see the coins, along with everything else around you. If a person was there, you could see them. If the sun was rising, you could see the beautiful vista. But if you hold the coins right in front of each eye, you see nothing else at all. You can't see the sun rising or the people around you. You are blinded and in darkness "as thick as a golden dinar."

There are times in our lives when we are in such a darkness. In our pursuit of material possessions or when we are simply caught up in the routine of our demanding lives, we lose sight of the people around us. In our quest for wealth, we are blinded to the poverty around us. In our striving for a promotion at work, we don't see the loneliness of our spouse or children at home. In trying to get everything done on our to-do list, we fail to do some of the most important things of all.

If we don't see the suffering of others, we cannot comfort them.

We may not be able to answer the question of why there is suffering in the world, but we can answer the question of what we are doing about it. We can be part of the solution. We are called to comfort those in need. In the Christian Bible, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, God comforts us *"in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God"* (2 Corinthians 1:4).

It need not be difficult. Sometimes simply being present with someone who is suffering and letting them know you care is the most powerful comfort of all.

We may not be able to stop all the pain in the world, but we can do *something* to alleviate suffering—starting with our own families and reaching around the globe.



Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

— ISAIAH 40:1

Think About It

1. **Think of the trials and difficulties that you have experienced.** How have those experiences contributed to shaping you into the person that you are today?
2. **Think about your own family, neighborhood, community, and church.** Where are people suffering right now? What can you do today to help relieve that suffering?
3. **How have the trials and difficulties you've experienced equipped you to help comfort others?** What is one thing you can do today to comfort someone who is suffering?
4. **Think of a time when you experienced something you deemed bad that later turned out to be a blessing in your life.** How does this experience encourage you in your current situation?
5. **If you could go back to a time when you experienced suffering, as a child or as an adult, what advice would you give yourself?** What advice would you give to someone who is suffering currently? Which Bible verses or teachings would you share?



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Apply It

1. **Reframe your reality.** In Psalm 112:6-7 we read: *"Surely the righteous will never be shaken... They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD".* We don't need to fear "bad" news because our trust is in God, who has good things planned for us. (Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 8:28)
2. **Speak your faith.** Even just saying "I believe" will give us strength to keep going in faith. (Psalm 71:15; Luke 1:45)
3. **See the suffering of others.** Take time to become aware of those in need in your own community and around the world. (Isaiah 58:6-7; Luke 10:30-33)
4. **Let go.** Sometimes our suffering is compounded by holding on to the need to understand why challenges and tragedies have occurred. Learn to trust God's plan no matter how hard it is to understand. (Psalm 37:5-6; James 1:12)
5. **Choose to grow.** When we go through challenges, we can let them hold us back or we can use them as a catalyst for meaningful change and personal growth. (Isaiah 40:29-31; James 1:2-4)
6. **Comfort God's people.** Use the experiences and trials that you have gone through to comfort others. (Isaiah 51:12; 2 Corinthians 1:4)



Photo: Marcus Obal

