

# WAY TO SHILOH

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## **Tragic Accidents- A case against God?**

This is for all those who think it is foolish to trust in, and pray to, a God in a world where tragedies happen and evil occurs, and that, in such, God will let them down.

I start with a personal note & then relay some thoughts from another writer. There are those who say in their hearts "I can't trust in God, what if He's not there like you say He is, and lets me down." Well my answer is this, "Trust", there is nothing else in this poor world sure enough to hope in, and many a soul will testify to its safety. A man must grasp the rope to see if it will hold. If he is drowning and he sees his need, and no other way exists for rescue, this must be his action, especially if he has seen others go the same way to their safety. I've been a Christian for twenty years now out of thirty-two, and He hasn't let me down in all the problems of life, not for a minute or a second in all that time. I've only felt His guiding hand, His loving mercy, sometimes his chastising and correction, but always His faithfulness. That's concrete, I've let Him down many times and pushed Him away but He's merciful and long suffering, slow to anger and abounding in mercies and loving kindness, ever faithful to His children and you can trust Him.

The fact that terrible things happen daily, even that death is present in the world at all, should cause us to think what can be so dreadfully wrong with the world that the God of the Bible (who is the only credible, perfect and just God) could allow this to be.

When we turn to the Bible, we do not find evil and suffering brushed aside as illusory or irrelevant. Instead, we are told of many ways in which they serve God's transcendent purposes. We can only mention some of these here, and then only briefly, but even this will be enough to show that we can go far beyond atheism's bleak acceptance that evil and suffering 'just happen'.



In the first place the Bible cites many instances of God using natural disasters, including earthquakes, floods, famine, drought and pestilence to express his righteous anger against those who blatantly reject his right to rule and to execute summary judgement on them, and the same means are at his disposal today. There are also cases of God striking individual people dead as a direct and immediate punishment for sin, and these too are to be seen as ways in which God 'works

out everything for his own ends- even the wicked for a day of disaster'. By the same token, adversity points towards the reality of universal and final judgement. At one point, the Bible records two tragic news items, one reporting that Jews worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem had been mown down by Roman soldiers, and the other that a tower inside the city had collapsed, killing eighteen people. On hearing the news, many people assumed that God had struck the victims down for gross wickedness, but this was not the case. Although there are obviously examples of a particular sin leading directly to specific suffering, the Bible shows that, generally speaking, we are not entitled to trace suffering back to a given sin. It records an incident when some people wanted to know whether a man had been born blind as a direct result of his own sin (which they apparently thought could have been committed in the womb!) or that of his parents. They were roundly told that neither was the case, but that his apparently helpless condition was 'so that the work of God might be displayed in his life', a verdict confirmed in the most remarkable way soon afterwards, when he was completely cured.

In the two tragedies we are considering, those who died were not 'worse sinners' or 'more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem'. The lesson to be learned from the news reports was very different: 'Unless you repent, you too will all perish.' Those discussing these tragic events were not to waste time speculating on what wickedness might have triggered them. Instead, they were to consider their own spiritual condition, and ask whether their relationship with God was such that they need not fear what the Bible calls 'the coming wrath'. Modern global news media bring us similar reports every day, and these generate strong emotions, yet the Bible shows that they should also cause us to reflect on our own mortality and on our need to be ready to meet 'him to whom we must give account'. In fact, such disasters are early intimations of far worse to come at the final judgement.

Nor does God confine his warnings to events which make the headlines. C. S. Lewis famously pointed out that all personal suffering may serve the same purpose: '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.' For many people, life is utterly self-centred. If God features in their thinking at all, it is merely as an emergency service to be called in when the going gets tough, or when they have a particular need. Such people need to be reminded that, for all his achievements, man is not at the centre of the universe, nor is he in ultimate control of any part of it. God often uses suffering of one kind or another to help people get their thinking straight, find a proper sense of perspective and rearrange their priorities.

Lessons learned in the fires of affliction and suffering have often fitted the sufferers to help others.

### **The Real World**

Evil and suffering are not subjects which can be filed away, pulled out for discussion when the fancy takes us, then tucked away again until we decide to take another look at them. They are an inescapable part of human experience, and need to be wrestled with at that level. They touch every one of us, sometimes gently, and at other times with crushing and frightening force, either personally, within our own family circles, or indirectly as they arise among friends and acquaintances, or in the wider world.

The atheist's response is to see them as evidence for the non-existence of God, but any honest reading of history provides literally countless examples of those who have suffered greatly (and at times, by human reasoning, unjustly) yet whose faith in God has not disintegrated but deepened as a result. It has been said that a person with an experience is never at the mercy of one with an argument. This dictum needs to be handled with care, as it can be used to justify all kinds of eccentric ideas and outrageous behaviour. Yet when the interpretation of events consistently ties in with biblical teaching, it is a powerful endorsement of revealed truth.

In the Old Testament, nobody gives a clearer testimony than Job, whose name has become a byword for personal trauma. He was enormously wealthy, was rated 'the greatest man among the

people of the East', his moral and spiritual foundations were rock solid: he was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil'. Yet none of these things could shield him from suffering. In one day, all his livestock was stolen or slaughtered and all ten of his children died when a violent storm struck the house in which they were holding a gathering. It is difficult to imagine anyone suffering more in a single day, but Job's troubles were far from over. His own health began to deteriorate. He was covered with boils, his skin began to peel off, he suffered from anorexia and halitosis, his eyes grew weak, his teeth began to rot, he was hit by a 'triple whammy' of fever, insomnia and depression, and to cap it all he had to cope with friends whose advice only made matters worse and a nagging wife who at one point told him to 'Curse God and die!' The way in which Job worked his way through all of this makes for gripping narrative, and the high point comes when Job expresses his faith in God in one of the best-known statements in the Old Testament: 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.'

In the latter part of the seventeenth century, a body of Scottish believers strongly resisted the efforts of successive kings to foist an episcopal system of church government on their country and opposed the idea of the Divine Right of Kings. These so-called Covenanters (they had signed solemn declarations setting out their convictions) were viciously persecuted, and when Charles II's dragoons captured Richard Cameron and his friends as they met for prayer and Bible study at Airdsmoss, they cut off his head and hands. Later they put them in a sack and took them to Cameron's father, Alan, who was being held in an Edinburgh gaol. When they asked the prisoner, 'Do you know them?' he kissed the blood-stained remains and said, 'I know them, I know them. They are my sons, my own dear son's. It is the Lord, Good is the will of the Lord, who cannot wrong me nor mine, but has made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days.' He was a man who knew the forgiveness of God and his own unworthiness.

In the course of the last twenty years, five of my friends have been murdered, all of them strong believers actively involved in sharing their faith with others. The last of these was Mike Pollard, a sixty-two year old schoolteacher who over a period of twenty-five years risked fines, imprisonment or worse, ferrying Bibles, medical supplies and other help to believers living behind Eastern Europe's infamous Iron Curtain. Ironically, it was when the Cold War was over that Mike was killed. On a mercy mission to Hungary in 1997, he and his wife Jo had parked their camper van for the night in a lay-by on the outskirts of Nyiregyhaza when they were woken by three young men masquerading as police and demanding a 'fine' for illegal parking. An hour later, the Pollards were disturbed again, and when Mike tried to drive off he was smashed to death with an iron bar. Jo was also left for dead, and emergency medical services eventually found her with a broken nose and jaw, a badly damaged breastbone and severe strangulation marks around her throat. The killers were found within twenty-four hours and eventually sent to prison. At their trial, Jo told the court that she bore them no ill-will. Visiting two of them in prison some time later (the third declined to meet her), Jo assured them of her forgiveness. Two years later, she told the Telegraph Magazine, 'Terrible as it all was, there was so much of God in what happened subsequently that I never felt alone. It strengthened my faith a tremendous amount. I miss Michael dreadfully, but I don't think God makes mistakes. Though it would be much nicer to have Mike around, I accept what has happened. I have complete and utter peace.'

These cases represent millions of believers who would testify that their experience of suffering, and often injustice, has left them with even stronger faith in the sovereignty, goodness and faithfulness of God. To put it another way, they would claim that their faith in God had transformed their whole attitude to evil and its consequences. Are all of these people freaks or fakes? Are they all lying? Are they all bamboozled or brainwashed? Does their united testimony have more weight than the atheist's illogical and untested hypothesis?

I have seen Christians with hardships and difficulties and I have seen non-Christians with the same but I have seen that in those things the two act very differently.

## The Last Word

The fact is that God has entered intimately into the reality of human suffering, taking radical action to punish evil and eventually destroy it. The current total of people who have ever lived has been put at about sixty billion. Yet one person dominates all the others in such a way as to make him truly unique- a man in sixty billion. Even some of the world's most articulate sceptics have endorsed this: H. G. Wells called him 'easily the dominant figure in history', and concluded that no historian could portray the progress of humanity honestly without giving him the 'foremost place'. His name is Jesus, who lived and died about 2,000yrs ago (the Bible also claims that he was the Christ and that he rose from the dead.) He presents an enormous problem for the atheist.

We have seen that God is not a distant uncaring despot, unable to understand human suffering and unwilling to do anything about it. The Bible teaches that Jesus is divine and that he willingly took upon himself the physical and far greater spiritual death which God rightly imposes on those who reject him. Pulling all of this together, we are faced with the amazing fact that when Jesus died on the cross, God himself was suffering in the place of others, and paying the penalty for their sin.

Far from insulating himself against suffering, God is the supreme sufferer in the universe. In the person of Jesus Christ, he has come to us in our desperate and self-imposed plight. He has entered into the deepest suffering of the human race, and in the death of his own Son has provided the means by which the punishment for human rebellion can be turned aside and he can graciously forgive evil and bring the evildoers concerned into a living eternal relationship with himself.

*By John Blanchard*

