

Romans 5:3-5 God's purpose in human suffering

Introduction

The problem of human suffering is just that a problem. It cannot be dismissed as a non-issue as militant atheist like Richard Dawkins would claim, albeit perfectly consistently with their philosophical presuppositions. C.S. Lewis, as is well-known very reluctantly gave up his atheistic beliefs because he could not honestly deny that there is good and evil in the world. These are moral categories that only make sense if there is an ultimate standard of right and wrong in place for us to follow. The only way there could be such a basis for human judgements was if there is a God who has set out standards of right and wrong in the first place. Almost every human being instinctively knows that there are certain things that are definitely wrong and other things that in themselves are intrinsically good and without anyone necessarily explaining why this is the case. Paul has already addressed the issue of the human conscience having been enlightened by God so as to allow the vast majority of humanity to have some basic moral standards and to recognise that there is a God to whom we must give an account of our lives. Romans 2:14-15 states: *Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law.* ¹⁵ *They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.* We are all familiar with the old tired line of reasoning brought by atheists and others against our convictions. Point 1: If God is wholly good He must want all evil banished from His creation. Point 2: If God is all-powerful He has the ability to remove all evil and suffering from the world. Therefore, because there is evil and suffering in the world, either God is not wholly good or lacks the power –or both; when we stand back for a moment it is obvious that the objector has a pre-agenda of defining that is good and what is evil. However, a consistent non-theist cannot define goodness and evil in absolute terms because they deny the existence of God in the first place –so they are assuming what they want to prove at the very start of their argument, which is faulty logic! In any case the simplistic nature of such an argument cannot do justice to the complexity of the modern world. Neither does it help us one bit in dealing with the reality of evil and suffering in our daily experience. What does Paul have to say in this debate because he brings it right in to this section on the fruit of justification in Romans 5:1-1:1 *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,* ² *through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.* ³ *Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;* ⁴ *perseverance, character; and character, hope.* ⁵ *And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us* (Romans 5:1-5). The apostle does believe that all that happens in the world is part of a bigger picture even if we do not personally have all the answers. He recognises that Christians have trials like everyone else. If you read through the list of what he endured for his faith no-one could claim he had an easy life. II Corinthians 11:23-28 gives a summary list of the hardships Paul endured: *I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.* ²⁴ *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,* ²⁶ *I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.* ²⁷ *I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.* ²⁸ *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* Therefore his words on

this topic are from someone who has experienced great suffering and hardship and has earned the right to be heard. What is surprising here is the strength of his conviction here, which he assumes is shared by his readers Romans 5:3b *because we know that suffering produces...* In a world where people then and now had endless questions to ask on this subject the apostle is convinced that in Jesus and in the Gospel we have something to contribute on this subject. It may not be a full explanation –no-one but God can speak at that level, but the Bible gives us hints or pointers that allow us to catch a glimpse of some of the possible reasons why the world is as it is and God’s purpose in permitting such a world to exist as we know it.

1. God’s potential purposes in the suffering of His people

In Paul’s day there were two main philosophies followed by educated people who did not adhere to his monotheistic convictions. The first was Epicurianism and was the conviction formulated by Epicurus (342-270BC). He taught that life has good or bad experiences we cannot avoid so let’s enjoy the good as much as we can to maximize our pleasure so that on balance we experience an acceptable quality of life. The second philosophy was Stoicism, a Greek philosophical tradition that promoted ‘the stiff upper-lip’ mentality to life. What will be will be –good and bad- so put up with it! You cannot do much to change it so simply accept it and get on with your life. Life isn’t fair, it couldn’t be otherwise –whatever you experience is simply your lot in life. In a world where these were the belief systems that dominated the public way of thinking about this subject, the early Christian missionaries led by Paul and others taught a different understanding of the purpose of suffering in life. What principles does the Bible give us as a framework for understanding this most difficult of subjects? There are four main pointers raised in Scripture. They are not exhaustive answers rather hints at what might be contributory factors towards an explanation:

(a) **Suffering is part of the discipline of His children** (Hebrews 12:5-11) *And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He chastens everyone He accepts as His son.’ ⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as His children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸If you are not disciplined – and everyone undergoes discipline – then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in His holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.* On occasions parents have to discipline their children. The sanctions imposed by them are usually not welcomed by the children, but the purpose behind it is to enable the child to make better behavioural choices in the future. The principle at stake is that unless someone gets into the habit of making good choices when they are young then their lives can go seriously ‘off the rails’ and result in them failing to make the best of the opportunities life affords to them. If the parents didn’t love their child they could let them stay out with whomever until late at night; allow them access to whatever they wanted on TV or the internet; let them get away with not doing homework or regularly being late for school and much more. Parents are not sadists they want the best for their children. In the same way our heavenly Father wants the best for us, to make us more like Jesus. Hebrews 2:10 states: *In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, **should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what He suffered.*** When we pass through painful or hard times in whatever aspect of our lives, it is worth asking the question what does God want me to learn through this situation? How can I glorify Jesus more through this circumstance which He has allowed to cross my pathway? If there is

actual sin in our lives then obviously confessing and dealing with it is the course of action to take. However, on many occasions the child of God is unaware of any specific sin and can thereby struggle to know how to respond to the adverse situation thrust upon them.

(b) **Suffering is permitted for the glory of God** (John 9:1-3) *As He went along, He saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked Him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' ³ 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.* When we see someone else going through adverse times we must never react like these disciples of Jesus and assume past sin by the man or his parents was to blame. Some religions that believe in reincarnation hold the view that a person who has a hard time in this life was guilty of something bad in a previous life and therefore was being punished in the present. Jesus firmly and clearly dispels any such notion. It is plain wrong! On this occasion Jesus says there is an opportunity for God to be glorified by his healing and restoration. Although suffering in itself is not a blessing good can come through apparently tragic circumstances. Over the years I have heard a number of testimonies of people who have said that had they not gone through some particular time of trial they would not have given their lives to God or not lived in a particular way that brought great good to many people. No-one has the right to tell another person that this is a possible explanation of their suffering. Yet some people have this clear conviction that their suffering is for a higher purpose and that good will come from it. Examples from Church history include the 350 martyrs of the English Reformation whose sacrifice of their lives in public and with such courage brought more people to Christ than any amount of their words that were also very powerful. Bishop Hugh Latimer at his trial on 14 April 1554 made a notable statement: After the sentence had been pronounced, Latimer added, 'I thank God most heartily that He hath prolonged my life to this end, that I may in this case glorify God by that kind of death'; to which the prolocutor replied, 'If you go to heaven in this faith, then I will never come hither, as I am thus persuaded [to the contrary]... He was executed alongside Bishop Nicholas Ridley at a site marked by a cross in Broad Street, Oxford. His famous words to his colleague resonated throughout England: Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out. [quotations found in many sources]. These men had grasped what Jesus was teaching here.

(c) **Suffering is experienced in the context of spiritual warfare** (Job) The book is a long one with the biographical details of Job and his family given in the opening and closing chapters. The story told concerns a truly devout man who lives a wonderful life for God yet experiences bankruptcy in his business; his children die in a violent storm and to cap it all his health begins to fail and his wife is less than helpful in the level of support she provides to him in this crisis. However, we must not be too critical of her as we don't know what words might come out of our mouths in the event of suffering such a tragedy in our own personal circumstances. Throughout the whole scenario as it unfolds Job is completely unaware of why he has endured so much hardship. His friends came to visit and sought to declare with alarming confidence that despite the evidence to back it up Job must secretly have been a wicked man to experience such hard times. Who needs friends like that! The temptation to find a solution to people's problems or a comprehensive explanation of everything that happens can at times be overpowering, but the story of Job reminds us that like his friends we too can sometimes completely misunderstand what is going on in someone's life. The readers of this book of the Bible know why Job went through what he did from the earliest part of the story. Therefore, it is easy for us to contextualise each part of the story and to groan at the mistakes of his friends and their unhelpful advice. However, the story of Job provides a major caution to us not to jump to quick or superficial interpretations of things that happen in someone's life. We know that Job suffered because of a spiritual conflict between God and Satan. Satan had made an accusation that Job was so committed to his faith in God only because he had become extremely wealthy and healthy and had everything going so well in his family. Life could not have been better. The challenge was made: If Job lost his wealth

and his family surely he would give up his faith and turn his back on God. Job 1:8-11 makes this point: *Then the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.'* ⁹ *'Does Job fear God for nothing?'* Satan replied. ¹⁰ *'Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. ¹¹ But now stretch out Your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face.'* ¹² *The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.'* The tragedies unfolded one after another. How did he respond before God? Job 1:20-22 provides the answer: *At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship ²¹ and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.'* ²² *In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.* Stage two begins with Satan's accusation to God that Job has only maintained his faith in the face of such adversity because he himself has come through physically unscathed. If he was touched and his health was adversely affected then it would be a different story. Once more Job maintains his trust in God and did not sin. He said: *Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?'* *In all this, Job did not sin in what he said (Job 2:10b).*

There are times when the troubles and heartaches experienced by God's children take place that this spiritual warfare is the correct understanding of events that otherwise make no sense at all. We like simple cause and effect situations, but are troubled when the opposite appears to be the case. However, we need to allow for the possibility sometimes that simple human explanations are inadequate. Paul wrote to the Church at Ephesus these words: *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand...And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. ¹⁹ Pray also for me... (Ephesians 6:10-13, 18-19a).* It is no accident that when churches seek to take major steps of faith in mission at home or overseas or engage in anything that will potentially bring great glory to God that all kinds of difficulties and problems erupt that can be so difficult to address. Time and time again this is so predictable, but the explanation is very clear that behind what appears to be purely human circumstances and interactions that the evil one is manipulating people to speak and act in ways so unexpected of them which can cause such harm and hinder God's work. Paul's words in II Corinthians 2:9-11 are important here. The church at Corinth had experienced some relational difficulties which needed to be resolved. Note the purpose Paul gives for effecting this reconciliation. *Another reason I wrote to you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.* May God help us to be aware of the spiritual battle in which we are involved.

(d) **Suffering is permitted to assist in the shaping of our character** (Romans 5:3-5) *Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (Romans 5:3-5).* The fourth purpose of God in suffering is to use our trials in life that may have a purely human explanation in their origins to refine and strengthen our characters to help us grow in Christ-likeness. This is the particular context and emphasis in Romans 5:3-5. Billy Graham illustrated this point with a story from the time of the Great Depression in America eighty years ago. A friend of his had lost a job, a fortune, a wife and a home. But he

was a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ and had hung on to his faith tenaciously even though he could see no purpose in all the things that had happened in his life. One day in the midst of his time of trial he was wandering through the city where he lived and having time on his hands stopped to watch masons working on stonework on the walls of a large church building. One was chiselling a triangular piece of stone. ‘What are you doing with that’, he asked out of sheer curiosity? The workman stopped and pointed to a tiny opening near the top of a newly completed spire. ‘See that little opening up there near the top of the spire?’ he said, ‘Well, I’m shaping this down here so that it will fit in up there.’ Graham’s friend said that tears filled his eyes as he walked away, for it seemed to him that God had spoken to say that He was shaping him for heaven through his earthly ordeal. [J.M. Boice, *Romans*, Vol. 2, p. 531]. The events we experience in life unquestionably shape our lives. I have been amazed and at times deeply humbled as a pastor visiting some people who have experienced some of the toughest challenges life can bring and heard them speak about their trials in a most remarkable and genuine way. Many of you will also have had that experience as well. It is a big challenge for us all –not if difficulties cross our pathway, but when we face them how do we seek to learn from them in order to become more like our Lord Jesus in our own character and conduct?

2. **God’s providential outcomes from the suffering of His people** (Romans 5:3-5)

(a) **The spiritual fruit of perseverance** (Romans 5:3) *Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;* the word here translated *suffering* is not a minor complaint or inconvenience, it is used of real and sustained hardship endured over a period of time. It could be translated *patient endurance*. It was used at the time of soldiers in the heat of a battle taking all kinds of blows but keeping on standing fighting to the end. One rendering: ‘*perseverance in doing what is right*’ emphasises the focus on the principle not on what other people might choose to say or do. C.K. Barrett translated this part of the verse in this way: ‘those who with patient endurance look beyond their own well-doing’. In other words looking at things in the present in the light of eternity [L.L. Morris, *Romans*, p.116] I thank God for the number of times I have seen this quality in the lives of people in this congregation who despite real trials in life have stood firm and / or grown in their faith despite the circumstances they have had to endure. Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:13 so unspectacular but also so pertinent and powerful. He wrote: *Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.* It is not about hype and show, but enduring and maintaining a quality Christian life personally, in our public attendance at worship services and in commitment to various ministries throughout the week through the ups and downs of life. When the foundations are well laid we can endure and stand firm in the storms of life.

(b) **The spiritual fruit of character** (Romans 5:4a) *perseverance, character...* there is no simple equivalent English word to translate the word Paul has chosen here. It means being tested or approved. In terms of human experience someone who has proven themselves in a given career or life situation and has demonstrated their ability to fulfil the calling or carry out the tasks to which they have been appointed. Someone who when the pressure is on has come through the trial and not been deflected from what they ought to have been doing. for some Christians there is the hardship of being the only believer in their home or family or workplace where others may be less than sympathetic to their faith; it can be a quality exhibited in someone who has overcome great disappointments or setbacks in their journey of faith, but has not quit. Paul’s challenge to the Christians in Philippi is appropriate to recall here: *Therefore, my dear friends... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.* (Philippians 2:12-

13). The imagery here is from the world of athletics of the competitor in the gym or other place of training putting in the hours of training in order to maximise their abilities on the appointed day of competition. For the Christian the 'day' in question is when we stand before the Lord to account for our lives here on earth- to be the best we can be in character and conduct for Him. Paul uses the same word in a negative form in I Corinthians 9:25-27: ²⁵ *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever.* ²⁶ *Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.* ²⁷ *No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself **will not be disqualified** for the prize.* Is this your focus and mine as well?

(c) **The spiritual fruit of hope** (Romans 5:4b-5) *and character hope; And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.* 'Hope' in contemporary speech might be merely wishful thinking, but in the New Testament it is something we are certain of though we have yet to see it. We are confident that God keeps His promises. The author of Hebrews 11:1-2 expressed it this way: *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.* ² *This is what the ancients were commended for.* Has the fruit of God-inspired hope flourished in your life and mine? If it has then we will see beyond present discouragements to the final victory of God. Paul made this point so clearly in I Corinthians 15:58-59: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

3. The outworking of God's purposes in Church History

Jonathan Chao, an acknowledged expert on the Church in China, wrote an article on suffering illustrated from Church history there over the last fifty years. He mentioned in his article an American student who visited him in Hong Kong and asked him a question posed by a friend at home: 'If God loves the Chinese church so much, why did He allow so much suffering to come upon it?' After a number of visits into China meeting with church leaders the same young person returned to Dr Chao near the end of their stay, prior to their return to America with another question: 'Mr Chao I am going back to America and ask my friend this question: If God loves the American Church so much, why hasn't He allowed us to suffer like the Church in China?' [J.M. Boice, *Romans*, Vol.2, pp. 533-534] We have had some difficult and indeed painful experiences to pass through in recent months as a church family, but the question to ask is what is God teaching us through it? I believe it is challenging us afresh about the importance of prayer and our dependence on God. It has certainly brought us closer together at the deacons' court as we have sought the Lord together. It has challenged us about what is most important in serving the Lord and the priority of mission, ahead of the comfort of doing nothing to make Jesus known. Paul's challenge to us is this: will we be deflected from the calling He has given us by discouragements and pressures from within or without or will we persevere keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus? I hope and pray that the latter will be our choice, for Jesus' sake, Amen.