

TheForum – Straight answers to straight questions

Why does a loving God allow suffering? John 11:17-44 Handout

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[0:00] My name's Mark, I'm Sister Minnist, I say, from an Anglican church meets here Sunday mornings. It's one of my personal convictions that the Bible does have real, genuine answers to the questions that we're asking.

And that's one of the reasons for putting on the forum, so we can ask our questions today about suffering, later on in the term, about other religions, about the existence of hell, and discuss together around tables the Christian response to that.

Now, do the Bible's answers, do they make sense? Do they fit in with our life experience? Can we trust what the Bible says? And that's what the forum's about. Format-wise, let me just tell you how it's going to work. We've split our time into three parts.

It's one hour, three parts, each part with a bit of talking from me, from the Bible, looking at what Jesus says about a topic, and then discussion around tables. And let me say that we want our time to be as relaxed, as informal as possible.

As I say, there'll be no singing, no praying together corporately, it's just we're discussing this together. You can be as loud as you like in your table, be as quiet as you like. We do have some table leaders there to kick off discussion, keep some level of order, but as I say, don't hold back. If you've got a question, ask it.

[1:22] If you disagree with something, say so. We're here to discuss it. It's a forum. We want people to be free to share what's on their minds. Well, let's turn to the question in hand. You should all have a handout on your tables.

Why does a loving God allow suffering? And I'd like us to take the blue John's Gospels, this is a part of the Bible, one of the Gospels, one of the four Gospels, John's Gospel, and turn to chapter 11 on page 33.

I want to be clear right up front, as you're finding that page 33, I want to be clear right up front that I don't intend to give my own personal musings on suffering today. I intend to take us straight to the Bible and straight to what Jesus says.

He is the expert on suffering, not me. So we're going to see what he says in chapter 11 when he comes face to face with death and suffering himself. As I say, it's John chapter 11, verses 17 to 44. Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.

[2:47] So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him. But Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha said to him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Do you believe this? She said to him, Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world. When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, The teacher is here and is calling for you.

And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.

[4 : 01] When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, Where have you laid him?

They said to him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. So the Jews said, So how he loved him, see how he loved him.

But some of them said, Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying? Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb.

[5 : 05] It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, Take away the stone. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days.

Jesus said to her, Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone, and Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out!

The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, Unbind him, and let him go.

First thing I'd like us to consider from these verses is the comfort that Jesus brings in the face of suffering.

[6 : 21] Because whenever we suffer, I think it's fair to say we all suffer to some degree or another, or if we haven't yet, at one point in our lives, we will do. Whenever we're suffering, it's easy to think that God doesn't care, that he's distant, that he's removed.

So we say things like, where was God when the terrorist struck? Why didn't he do something about the tsunami before it hit? God can seem distant, he can seem removed, he can seem indifferent to our suffering.

So I wonder what you made of Jesus' response to the suffering here in this funeral scene, in verse 33 to 35. Let me read it to you again.

Verse 33, page 34. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit, and greatly troubled.

And he said, where have you laid him? They said to him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. So the Jews said, see how he loved him. Jesus wept.

[7 : 28] Just two words. And yet these two words speak volumes. Because here is Jesus, God in human form, as Christians believe, deeply moved at the suffering he sees around him.

He's greatly troubled, so much so he's even crying, weeping, and they say, see how much he loves him. And so whatever we say, whatever the answer is, to why God allows suffering, the Christian response is that, well it can't be that God doesn't care.

It can't be that he's not bothered. It can't be that he doesn't love us. Because here we see Jesus sharing in our grief, weeping for the suffering in the world.

I know some religions, spiritualities, speak of God in cold, impersonal terms. Others have a God who is removed, is immune to suffering.

But not in Christianity. Because in the person of Jesus Christ, God himself comes to earth, and shares, enters into, our suffering.

[8 : 54] If you know anything of Jesus' life, you'll know that, he was ostracised by his family, betrayed by one of his own friends, rejected by his own people, he was slandered, he was mocked, beaten up, publicly humiliated, and executed, in one of the cruelest ways known to man.

You see, when Jesus is weeping here, he knows what we're going through. He understands what it means to suffer. He suffered everything we have, and more. In fact, at the heart of the Christian message, is the cross, a symbol of execution, when Jesus Christ suffered death.

And the Bible says, don't have time to go into it now, the Bible says that he was suffering death, for you, and for me, and for the sins of the whole world. So the first thing Jesus wants us to see, from this passage is, you know, it's not for the Christian, that God is off at one side, you know, impassively, impassively observing, his creatures in pain, and suffering.

No, God gets his hands dirty. He enters into this world, he shares in us suffering. In the person of Jesus, he even allows himself to die. It's remarkable. But Jesus would suffer the agonies of hell, so one day, we could go to heaven.

It was John Stott, the famous Anglican minister, who said, I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God, who was not immune to it?

[10:47] Of course, another response, we might take to the problem of suffering, is to conclude that there is no God. And that's why there's all this suffering in the world. Now, I'm giving the Christian response this afternoon, not the atheists, but I did find this quote from Richard Dawkins, particularly striking.

Richard Dawkins, as you know, is a famous atheist. This is from his book, *The River Out of Eden*. It's a fairly long quote, but just listen out for his conclusion on suffering, if there is no God.

If the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, then meaningless tragedies are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless good fortune.

Such a universe would be neither evil nor good in intention. In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt.

Other people are going to get lucky. And you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice.

The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect, if there is at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

[12:10] Now, I'm sure not all atheists would put it like this. Dawkins is, after all, quite forthright in his manner and his views. But you can see his point. If there's no God, if there's no God, there's no such thing as good and evil.

We're all just here by chance. Everything's random. Suffering just is. Actually, in a world of natural selection and survival of the fittest, isn't suffering, violence and death what you should expect?

We shouldn't complain about suffering. We shouldn't question suffering. We should feel nothing, he says, but blind, pitiless indifference to it. Which is pretty depressing, right?

But even as you hear that, you're probably thinking, no, no way, it's impossible. How can we feel blind, pitiless indifference to the loved one we've just lost, to the pain and suffering we feel? We don't feel like that.

We mourn, we weep. And the Bible says we feel this way because God himself feels this way. The one, his image we're made in, the one who we see mourning and weeping, just as Jesus does, here in verse 33.

[13:21] Let's pause there. Let's turn to discussions. You'll see on the sheet, they're just some suggested questions, but if you have any burning things that have come up from that, do share it.

As I say, there is a table leader who will just kick off discussion, but we're going to have 10 minutes just discussing that. Looks like there's some great discussions going on. We'll probably discuss this for the rest of the day, but we're going to move on to part two.

Part two you can see on the handouts there. Because as comforting as it is to know that Jesus cares about our suffering, it still begs the question, well, why allow it in the first place?

What possible meaning could be there? It's fine that he cares, but we still want to know, why? Is there any meaning behind it? Why does God allow suffering? Now, I know this is a massive question.

There's no way I can summarise all that the Bible has to say on it in six, seven minutes. But I chose this passage because it does give us a lot of these three insights into suffering.

[14:29] And another thing that it shows us is that suffering and death were not part of God's original creation. We can see this implicitly from Jesus' reaction again in verse 33, which we looked at before.

When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews would come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And those words, deeply moved, literally mean snorting with anger.

Jesus here, he's showing compassion, weeping, but at the same time he is showing outrage. He's indignant. He is angry at the suffering and death that he now sees intruding on God's good world. You see, back in Genesis 1 and 2, the first two chapters of the Bible, we are explicitly told that when God creates a world, this world, he created a good world, very good in fact.

Back then, there's no suffering, there's no pain, there's no natural disasters, no death. It's life as it's meant to be. People know God face to face, they're walking with him in the garden, they do what he's saying, they walk in his ways, everything was perfect.

[16:05] But it all goes horribly wrong once Adam and Eve turn their backs on God. Now, whether you take the Garden of Eden literally, metaphorically, the point is this, that at one point mankind, they doubt God's goodness.

They don't think God can be trusted. And so they disobey God's words and rebel against him. And it's at that point when death and suffering enter the world, just as God said it would if they turn their backs on him.

In Genesis 4, there's jealousy and murder. In Genesis 6, there's the worst natural disaster of all time. In Genesis 11, sin, suffering, and death have spread over the entire world. In other words, the Bible teaches the uncomfortable truth, the Christian response is the uncomfortable truth.

Death and suffering come from mankind's rebellion against God. And in one sense, we can still see that being played out today.

So God tells us to be generous, but instead, we choose to be greedy, and more than a billion people around the world are hungry. God tells us not to lie, but instead, we choose to twist the truth, and so the innocent are falsely accused, the guilty go free, justice is perverted.

[17:39] God tells us to care for his creation, but instead, we came all for ourselves. It's global warming, or not, as we find out now.

Melting ice caps, deforestation, exploitation of the world. Now, you may be thinking, well, you know, that's fair enough to a point.

I can see how I can bring suffering on myself, how I can bring it on others, they can bring it on me. But talking about this fallen world, something Adam and Eve did back then, and that's why they're natural disasters, it still doesn't explain why suffering seems so disproportionate.

You know, why is it that some people are born into poverty in Sudan, which others are born into wealth? Why is it one child at school falls down with meningitis, and another's fine?

Why does this tsunami ravage one area of the world, but the next is fine? Why is it so random? Why is it seemingly so unfair? Well, this very question is put to Jesus in chapter 13 of Luke's Gospel.

[18:50] When a tower collapses, a number of people are killed, and asked why this meaningless tragedy takes place, Jesus says this. They are quite strong words, but remember that Jesus is the one who weeps and cares for us and loves us.

These are his words. Those 18 on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Strong words.

But do you see what Jesus is saying? He's saying that these people who were killed in the tragedy, they were no more guilty before God than anyone else.

It wasn't because of their own personal sin that this tragedy took place. But Jesus says that this is a reminder to us all that we're all living on borrowed time, that a judgment day is coming when we will meet God as our judge.

[20:08] And so Jesus says actually we need to repent, that is, turn back to God and to do so before it is too late. It was C.S. Lewis, the famous Christian author, who said, God whispers to us in our pleasures, but shouts to us in our pain.

It is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. So the Christian response is that one of the reasons, one of the reasons for why God allows suffering is to wake us up to the fallen world we live in, to wake us up to the reality of life and death and eternity and to call us back to him.

I asked a few people in our congregation how they would answer this question, why does a loving God allow suffering? And I asked those who have suffered in far worse ways than I have.

And what struck me was how they spoke, each in their own way. They actually spoke of how the pain and suffering in time, over time, brought them closer to God.

Either it had humbled them or it had made them more dependent on God or it had made them long for heaven more and live for him more.

[21 : 47] It made them appreciate even more Jesus' death for them and his suffering for them. Even though they couldn't put their finger on exactly why they were suffering in that present time, each could say that over time and after many tears, it had actually brought them closer to God.

Let's turn again to a discussion I'm sure there'll be plenty we'll want to share after that.

Okay, let's move on to our third and our final part because, well, it's great to know God cares about our suffering. It's humbling to see perhaps our own role, mankind's role collectively in suffering. But we're still left asking, well, is God going to do anything about it? Can God do anything about it? what hope is there in the face of suffering?

Well, listen to Jesus' words to Martha in verse 25, page 34. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

[23 : 20] Whoever believes in me though he die, yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Here is Jesus promising then an end to all suffering, all our suffering.

Resurrection here is not simply life again in this world. Resurrection is new life in a perfect new world. The last two chapters of the Bible describe what this resurrection life will be like.

God dwelling face to face with his people again. God wiping every tear from their eyes. No more death. No more mourning. No more crying.

No more pain. It's a world without war, violence, harsh words, a world without natural disasters, a world without illness, sickness, disease.

It's where all that is wrong with this world is put right forever. So when Jesus says here, I'm the resurrection and the life, he's not just talking about fixing our momentary problems in time.

[24 : 41] He's talking about fixing all things for all time. Poverty made history, justice done, and end to suffering.

This is the hope that Jesus offers in the face of suffering. I don't know if you saw the news last week about Sam Riddle, the 11-year-old boy who was tragically killed on a pavement in Bristol after Hanaf Saf drove into him.

The media started quizzing Sam's parents on how they were dealing with it. Listen to what they said. The last three months have been an incredibly painful and difficult time.

We miss our lovely Sam so much. Some asked the big questions of life, and we had lots of opportunity to talk with him about heaven. Knowing that he is there now, and that we will see him again one day, gives us great hope, and we continue to cling to our faith in a loving God to help us make sense of this awful tragedy.

love. For some of us though, all this talk of a perfect new world might just sound far-fetched and fanciful.

[26 : 04] It would be great to see our loved ones again, but perhaps you think it's more sort of just wishful thinking, more science fiction than real life. love. Which is why Jesus, when he makes his promises, he always backs up his promises.

He doesn't just throw them out there. For Mary and Martha, well we heard at the end of the reading, Jesus brings Lazarus back from the dead. Proof that he does indeed have power over death and suffering.

and for you and me Jesus well he says he dies for our sins and rises three days later to new resurrection life never to die again he backs up that he can offer this eternal life bones of Jesus Christ have never been found 400 people saw Jesus risen from the dead lives were dramatically changed Jesus offer of eternal life here this promise this hope it's not make-believe it's a genuine promise backed up by his own resurrection if the resurrection is true it's all true and suffering will one day end but you say well why doesn't God end it all now if he can why not bring in this perfect world today well let's think about this for a moment for Jesus to end all suffering well he'd have to get rid of all the causes of suffering rapists murderers terrorists pedophiles they'd have to go adulterers liars corn artists swindlers them too then there'll be the greedy the proud the selfish the self-righteous you and me as we saw in part two a judgment day is coming

Jesus won't let this rebellion of mankind go on forever he will judge it and only Jesus Christ can rescue us from it that's why he died that's why he suffered in the suffering of Jesus in his death actually there's this offer of eternal life and salvation for the world if we don't believe in Jesus you know we won't be part of that new world and so on one level you could say it's actually very loving of Jesus to hold back this perfect new world not to bring it in today because where would that leave you and me the Bible repeatedly speaks of God's patience towards us longing for none of us to be

lost but longing for all of us to turn back to him to be forgiven to enjoy this perfect new world with him and the question is I suppose will you

I hope you don't mind me getting personal just here at the end because Jesus promised here in verse 25 it's to everyone he says whoever believes in me whoever it doesn't matter who you are it doesn't matter what you've done Jesus said whoever believes in me though one day he'll physically die yet shall he live eternally it's just an incredible offer there's nothing else quite like it humanists are still trying to make poverty history but failing scientific progress hasn't even come close to defeating death the utopian dreams of sci-fi writers they are just that dreams but here is hope you really can believe in because of the resurrection I am the resurrection and the life says Jesus whoever believes in me though he die yet shall he live I wonder what do you make of that claim let's turn to our discussions for one last time let me break into discussions one final time real shame to break into discussions to keep chatting about things but I'll draw it to a close now we said an hour so the aim this afternoon has been to look at the Christian response to suffering the comfort, the meaning the hope Jesus Christ offers comfort as Jesus weeps with us and suffering meaning as Jesus explains where suffering comes from hope as Jesus promises to one day end all suffering [31 : 04] I realise that our time has flown by I realise that we've only begun to scratch the surface of this issue of suffering if you do have any other questions or you felt this you didn't have an opportunity to ask a question do continue to chat to table leaders I myself will be here please feel free to come speak to me through a lot of you we'll get a table over there and carry on chatting we'll turn the tea do you stay around for tea for coffee let me say something about those those blues john's gospels feel free to take those away with you if you don't have a bible if you don't have a gospel they're free they're for you there are also a couple of books on the table they're not free but this one's a fiver and this one's nine pounds and they're great these are two books which basically are doing what we're doing at the forum if you could ask god one question what would it be and they give some answers to that and the reason for god dr tim keller he's a pastor in a church in new york he did a questionnaire of the guys he he did a questionnaire on what were your sort of number one questions again if you could ask one question came up with the top seven and he's writing a book again responding to that so let me commend those two books to you if you'd like to go into more depth than we've been able to do today our next forum is on Sunday the 8th of November where I'll be looking at how can there just be one true religion so do pop it in your diary it'd be great to see you there thanks very much for coming thanks for sharing your your views your opinions look forward to seeing you next time