

When Bad Things Happen

Thoughtful Answers
to Hard Questions

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“How could a good God have let those things happen to me?” asked Tina. Her experiences growing up with an abusive father stretched into the present, affecting her adult relationships. She had been taught in church that Jesus loves her *and* rules the world, but she couldn’t bring those truths together when she thought about her difficult childhood.

So she said to me, “Look, I’ve known for years that God is in charge of his world, but that leaves me with lots of questions. Why did he give me an abusive father?”

Tina is not the only person to ask, “Why does God let bad things happen to me?” Perhaps you are struggling with this question right now. Because so many people ask this question, you might think there would be one, simple, clear verse in the Bible that would give us *the* answer. Maybe a verse that said, “Because you didn’t have enough faith” or “Because God gave people free will.” Your friends might have offered you these pat, easy answers, but the answers God gives in the Bible are not easy or

pat—they are much more profound and ultimately more satisfying.

God Understands Suffering

The first thing you need to know, even before you consider how God answers your questions about suffering, is that God understands suffering. When your life falls apart—your husband dies, your wife cheats on you, you lose your job, your children reject you, your parents disown you, you become ill, or any other hard thing happens—you want someone in the universe to hear how difficult your struggle is and affirm that you are not crazy or wrong to feel so much anguish.

God does see and hear your suffering. His eyes and ears are peculiarly tuned into it (Genesis 16:7–14; Exodus 2:23–25). We see this most clearly when we consider Jesus. While he lived among us he experienced undeserved deprivation, ridicule, cruelty, and then suffered unimaginable physical and emotional pain as he died on the cross for us.

Because God knows suffering firsthand, we can't say to him, "You don't know what this feels like!"

The Bible tells us that Jesus is a man of sorrows, who is well acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53). He knows more about suffering than anyone else ever has or ever will. And he cares enough to do something about it, though it's often not what you might first expect or want. He comes near to us, and in his presence we are revived to withstand what we're enduring.

Suffering Is an Invitation to Know God

We know from Jesus' life and death that God understands suffering. But why did he allow suffering into the world? Why didn't the all-knowing, all-powerful, good God keep Tina's father from hurting her? If you think about it, you know that's a question that never ends. Why did he allow her dad to be hurt in his own childhood or his parents in theirs? You can legitimately ask that question of every person who has ever lived, going back through history until you arrive at Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. God made them perfect and gave them a perfect relationship in the Garden of Eden, their perfect home. But Satan came into the garden as a snake and tempted them

to disobey God. At the moment they disobeyed, sin entered into the world.

Why didn't God intervene when Eve tempted Adam with the forbidden fruit? Why did God allow the snake to deceive Eve? Or even, since we're asking, why allow the serpent to enter the garden? Why, if God is good, wise, just, and strong, didn't he simply destroy Satan? These are not easy questions, and this side of heaven we won't be able to answer them completely. But it is good to wrestle with them, because as we do we will find we are learning to know and love God more deeply.

Let's begin by considering how we get to know one another. One good way is to look at what someone has created. For example, in almost all of my young son's drawings he includes himself and a friend—even if it's his stuffed dog—along with some kind of sports equipment. His drawings give you an idea of how strongly he values relationships and activity. When I look at my son's pictures, I understand him better—what he creates reflects who he is. The same is true of what God created. God made creation to display himself—to