

CAN GOD STILL BE TRUSTED?

By Brad Hambrick, Th.M., LCCT

And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

Psalm 73:11-14

Nancy lost her son, Peter, in a bizarre accident. Peter attended a Christian concert with his youth group. The group left the arena and headed toward the bus. An elderly grandmother picking up her grandson from the same concert became anxious about driving around so many people. In her frustration she confused the brake and accelerator. Her car jolted into Peter's group. Six days later Peter was pronounced dead.

Rewrite the details in a myriad of ways. Perhaps Peter dies in a traffic accident in which Nancy was at the wheel. Maybe the culprit was a rare medical condition. The question will still ring in Nancy's ear, "Is God trustworthy?" Because God is sovereign, when we suffer, this question lurks. It is the question David was asking in Psalm 73, "God if you are truly in charge why do those who love you often suffer more than those who reject you?" John Stott, in *The Cross of Christ*, rephrases the dilemma well, "For the real sting of suffering is not the misfortune itself, nor even the pain of it or the injustice of it, but the apparent God-forsakenness of it. Pain is enduring, but the seeming indifference of God is not."

There are four questions that must be answered as we prepare to confidently affirm that God can still be trusted in the face of immense suffering. (1) Is God callous to my pain? (2) Does God show restraint in the suffering he calls us to endure? (3) How does our purpose in life allow suffering to have redemptive value? (4) What

are the ramifications if I decide God is not trustworthy?

1. Is God Callous to My Pain?

This is the initial question that many people want answered, even if they cannot quite put it into words. To raise a question about the concern of God, in effect, asks "Does God have my best interest at heart?" or "Is there a greater priority influencing what He does?" This is the benefit of reading an article about suffering; it takes a subject that tends to cloud our ability to think with intense emotion and clarifies the key issues.

To answer the questions: (a) no, God is not callous to our pain; (b) yes, God does have our best interest at heart; and (c) yes, God does have a greater agenda than the alleviation of suffering. There is not a contradiction between the first two answers and the third, yet the tension between them helps us understand how God can be trustworthy in light of our suffering.

A. Psalm 56:8-9 reads, "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?... This I know, that God is for me." These are the words of David at a time when he had been captured by the Philistines and his life was in great danger (I Samuel 21:10-15). His circumstances did not change his assurance that "God is for me."

Scripture has more assurance of God's care than David's testimony. There are also the multiple

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calls from Jesus for those who are broken to come to him, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).” Other passages you would want to consider if you need more assurance on this point are Psalm 34:18, 147:3; Isaiah 61:1; Romans 8:26; and Revelation 21:3-4.

B. So if God cares, does He also have our best interest at heart? Jeremiah 29:11 makes it clear, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” But in order to answer our question accurately, we must agree on how to define “best interest” and “wholeness.” If we differ with God on these definitions, we will question God when He does not deliver what we expect.

God does not commit himself to our definition of “best interest.” Isaiah 55:8-9 says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” How we define “best interest” determines how we suffer. For example, we will allow a doctor to poke and prod—even cut and remove—because we agree with him that health is more in our “best interest” than comfort.

Question three develops a more precise definition of “best interest” in the context of suffering. Until you get there, ponder how to most accurately—biblically—define this term.

2. Does God Show Restraint?

There are many ways in which our emotions amplify the intensity with which we ask this question. Is God an overly ambitious trainer, stretching me beyond my limits? Is God so consumed by the finished product of spiritual maturity that He is willing to drag me through any means necessary to get me there? Does God in His glorious omnipotence not fully appreciate my frailty?

Joni Eareckson Tada, in *When God Weeps* writes, “Our call to suffer comes from a God tender beyond description. If we do not cling to this through life’s worst, we will misread everything and grow to hate Him.” Two parts of this quote stand out.

First, if we do not have a right understanding of God, it distorts the way we interpret all of life. This magnifies the importance of answering the question, “Can God still be trusted?” Because if we answer no, life becomes random, evil becomes unrestrained, and hopelessness becomes the most logical response to suffering.

Second, we will grow to hate our only hope if we see God as ruthless. Like the criminal who grows to view the police as the “bad guys,” we, through our distortion, resentfully turn our back on the one who longs to protect and care for us.

Where does Tada get Scriptural support for her statement? One place is I Corinthians 10:13, which reads, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

The Greek word for “temptation” is *peirasmos*, which has a much broader meaning than enticing opportunity to sin. *Peirasmos* means “trials with a beneficial purpose and effect (Vine, *Expository Dictionary*).” A proper understanding of this term, leads us to the conclusions that God will not allow us to face a trial that is beyond our ability, God is faithful in every trial, and God will provide grace sufficient for us to endure every episode of suffering or temptation.

It is often said, “I know God won’t let me face more than I can endure, but I’m close.” This statement introduces faulty logic. Yes, suffering is immensely difficult, but if God says he will provide grace to endure, then “close” is irrelevant and destructive. It is like saying you have just about reached your spending limit when you have won an endless shopping spree.

Another response is “Well, I know there are a lot of people who would have already turned their back on God if *they* had been through this.” Trials and suffering do challenge us, but suffering is not a competitive sport. It is irrelevant whether or not your trial would be a challenge to anyone else. Your goal, at this point in time, is to demonstrate faith in the midst of this trial. Faith would mean to live as if what God said in I Corinthians 10:13 were true.

virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For *if these qualities are yours and are increasing*, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that

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3. For What Reason Do We Live?

Once we have settled that God is not callous and that He does show restraint, it is less threatening to consider the function of suffering. Being sure of the character of God allows us to more peacefully examine the wisdom behind the purposes of God.

Simply stated, we live to know, enjoy, and worship God. We exist for God’s glory; God does not exist for our comfort. Again, if we are not sure of God’s character, then these statements seem harsh or dangerous. It is on the basis of this truth that John Piper, in *Desiring God*, says, “This is God’s universal purpose for all Christian suffering: more contentment in God and less satisfaction in self and the world... If we do not communicate that he is the goal and the ground of our suffering, then the very meaning of our suffering will be lost. The meaning is this: God is gain. God is gain. God is gain.”

Suffering serves the purpose of refining our character (Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4) and a more Christ-like character is to be the motivating passion of our lives. Take the time to read II Peter 1:5-11 slowly:

For this very reason, *make every effort* to supplement your faith with virtue, and

he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, *be all the more diligent* to make your calling and election sure, for *if you practice these qualities* you will never fall. For *in this way there will be richly provided* for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ [emphasis added].

It is based on a passage like this that John Stott shifts our focus from living for a reward to holiness being its own—most satisfying—reward, “The future prospect which makes suffering endurable, then, is not a reward in the form of a ‘prize,’ but the only reward of priceless value, namely the glory of Christ, his own image perfectly recreated within us.” Joni Eareckson Tada points out that this shift in priorities is one of the most redemptive changes that can occur through suffering, “To believe in God in the midst of suffering is to empty myself; and to empty myself is to increase the capacity for God. The greatest good suffering can do for me is to increase my capacity for God.”

4. What if We Answer No?

What is the result if we declare God untrustworthy? What does that do to our emotions, our approach to life, our hope?

We have already indirectly explored several answers to this question, but it is profitable to look at a couple more. First, it might mean that God is not in control (sovereign) and therefore cannot be trusted. This would make evil a random, mutating, free agent legitimately competing with God for authority. The possibilities are frightening. We would be living as if God's grace and providence did not restrain evil and suffering.

Second, it might mean that we resented God for not meeting our expectations. "I expected life to be easier as a Christian. If I still suffer as a Christian, then I want no part of the deal." God declares that Christians will suffer (II Timothy 1:8; I Peter 2:20). We cannot dictate to God the terms of our salvation.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, does a wonderful job of illustrating the mindset behind this error in language prepared for children. In this segment Aslan, the lion, represents Jesus.

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

God is not safe, but He is good and He is trustworthy. His agenda is to transform us into the likeness of his son, Jesus Christ. That agenda sometimes involves suffering (Philippians 3:10). We can know that every trial we face will be used by God to shape our character if we respond in faithful obedience.

Returning to Nancy

Nothing mentioned in this article will make Nancy's heart stop aching for her son, nor should it. It would be sub-human for her not to mourn. In fact, much of the character refinement mentioned above will occur through the process of grieving as one who hopes and trusts in God (I Thessalonians 4:13).

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through appropriate sorrow.***

"Is—is he man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion."

"Oooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

To grieve well means to celebrate the good gifts of God, now absent, through appropriate sorrow. Jesus wept at the funeral of his good friend Lazarus (John 11:35). This was by no means a violation of God's command to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). After all, Jesus was the sinless Son of God.

Grieving well means we do not allow the sorrow of our hearts to cause us to renounce the answers that have been developed in this article. Rather, resting in the providence of a good, concerned, and gracious God, we express gratitude for His blessing, now departed, through sorrow. This can be done through many means. Below is a sample list:

- Cry. Not tears of anger at God—which would indicate a misconception of God’s character and agenda—but tears of a treasured absent joy.
- Conduct a funeral service that highlights that Peter is now where he was created to be because he accepted Christ as Lord by grace through faith.
- Creating a scrap book with pictures and stories about Peter, so she does not feel compelled to constantly replay memories of Peter to ensure she will not forget.
- After the initial period of grief, choosing Peter’s birthday and/or day of his death as a memorial day. Setting these days for this purpose prevents mourning from becoming a life dominating event.
- Using her experience and testimony to comfort other parents who loose children.
- Reflect on the magnitude of the “forgotten Father” of Calvary. God the Father willingly gave his Son on our behalf.

1. What aspect of God’s character does your experience of suffering or grief cause you to question most? How has God proven this aspect of his character to be true? Establish these memories in your thoughts by placing physical reminders (pictures, trinkets, notes on an index card) in places you see frequently (in your house, the dash of your car, on your work desk). These reminders of God’s faithfulness should be an encouragement.
2. Define “best interest.” How does a biblical definition of this term challenge many of our natural desires? Discuss your definition with a mature Christian friend or counselor. Memorize your definition and be ready to quote it when your emotions get turbulent.
3. God often mediates his love and concern through the church, the Body of Christ. What Christian friends and family are available to provide comfort and encouragement?

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These applications alone will not be all that Nancy needs. These are instruments that point her to a person, her loving Heavenly Father. During times of immense grief or suffering answers will only take us so far, we must ultimately know and trust a person. This is why so much of this article was spent developing the character of God. When our heart breaks or our world falls apart we must run into someone’s arms. If we doubt the character of God, then we will avoid the only arms that can provide lasting hope and solace.

Homework for the Reader

After reading this article answer the following questions on the back of these pages to help you make application of these principles.

4. What demands are you placing on the goodness of God? Fill in the blank: In order for God to be good, I must have _____. Would it be appropriate to repent for allowing this desire to become a demand you place on God?
5. What does it mean to grieve well? What are some ways you can grieve well during your episode of suffering? Allow yourself to be creative as you brainstorm. You may not use all of the ideas, but the process of using your imagination in this manner will push you towards faith and hope.