

Where Is God When We Suffer?

Where Is God When We Suffer? All of us have been taught that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing Being who can do anything He wants. We also learn that God is an infinitely loving and compassionate God who does not want to see us unhappy. As a result, we combine these notions of love and power about God in order to perceive a God who works tirelessly for our advantage. Unfortunately, what we mean by our advantage is oftentimes on our own terms and not necessarily on God's terms.

In my life, there have been numerous times when undergoing personal difficulties, I have put to God the questions: If you were so loving, why did you let this happen to me? If you want what's best for me, why didn't you stop this from happening to me? In these moments of questioning, I feel myself drifted further and further away from my belief in a God that is always on my side. I doubt even more that there can be any God who wouldn't stop this pain if He had the ability to. What use was God's deep compassion and care for me if He did not exercise the power He had to prevent suffering in my life? These sentiments in me often led to feelings of disappointment, hurt, anger and even bitterness. This was not the God I expected to believe in.

As I pray and reflect on my image of God, however, I have come to realize that I had many false expectations about God. I often viewed things through my own eyes, but never through God's eyes. If God were to show that He loved me, He would have to conform to all my ideas and perceptions of what happiness is—owning a certain thing, having a certain relationship with someone, getting an A on a particular test, and so on. Happiness is being able to do and have the things that I want, and especially not having to go through the pains of fear and rejections in life.

Greek philosophy asserts that we are naturally attracted to what is good. Therefore, the things that we want are usually good for us. The problem that most of us face, however, is the limitations in our ability to see the greater picture so that we often mistake what is temporarily good for what is absolutely good. We make the temporary good become the thing to live by and to die by. Temporary goods include such things as money, health, relationships, a job, etc., and we evaluate our happiness based on these things.

Our dependence on the temporary goods blinds us from seeing what is most important—our relationship with God and the love that God has for us. Our dependence on the temporary goods creates false expectations about God and unreasonable parameters about how God is to show His love for us. As I reflect on the Scriptures, I see clearly the many unreasonable expectations that I had of God. In Is 43: 1-2, God says: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you.

These verses clearly tell us that God never promised a pain-free life: that we would not have to face broken relationships, to be rejected by those from whom we seek acceptance, to fail in attempts that we spend much time and energy to accomplish, or undergo events that we call "bad luck." Our expectation of God, on the other hand, is often of someone who would give us a life of smooth sailing. And if a storm were about to come, somehow we would miraculously be unaffected by it. Because of these unrealistic expectations, God continually disappoints and frustrates us. What we fail to realize and truly appreciate is God's promise that He would be with us by our side through the most terrible times so that when we hold on to God, we would not face utter destruction. Our faith in God's deep compassion will reassure us that in the end, we will survive. Psalm 23 says, "Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage." Having passed through the dark journey, God will then lead us to the "verdant pastures" where we will repose by the fresh streams of cool water.

Having to undergo pain and suffering is a part of life that none of us can escape. God Himself is not an unrealistic God. God knows that obstacles are rampant in our lives and does not attempt to mislead us about who He is by making false promises. But we can be reassured that God is not just sitting from afar watching us with disinterest. Rather, He is intimately connected to our lives and our actions. He is at work in us and with us to give us strength and courage to conquer the difficulties that come our way.

As I reflect back on my life, I have