

# My God, Why? *The Question That Never Goes Away*

| BY RICHARD RICE

Adapted from *Sensible Suffering* by Richard Rice, forthcoming from Intervarsity Press. Copyright © 2013 by Richard Rice. Used by permission of Intervarsity Press, PO Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515. [www.ivress.com](http://www.ivress.com).

## A Call to Think Seriously About Suffering

**O**ne evening soon after I started teaching college, there was a knock at our front door. It was a student in one of my religion classes. She was visibly upset. "Your mother's been in an accident, and she needs you," she blurted out. "Where is she?" I asked. "It happened just down the street," she replied.

Mother was visiting us from across the country at the time. She had accepted an invitation to go to a prayer meeting several miles away with two friends. On the way home, Mom was sitting in the backseat on the passenger side. Her ride dropped off the lady in the front seat first, and since they were only five minutes or so from our house, Mom stayed where she was—a decision that probably saved her life. They made a left turn onto our street, and before they cleared the intersection, a speeding car from down the road crashed into them. The right side of the car took the full force of the collision.

My wife and I rushed to the scene. Mother was already in the ambulance, conscious but in severe pain, and we headed for the nearest hospital. We searched for reassuring things to say. "Everything will be all right. We'll get you the best doctor we can. You know Jesus loves you." "I know he does," she said. As things turned out, her right hip was broken. But she had an excellent surgeon, and made a full recovery.

Everyone has stories like this to tell. And our family has others as well. Sooner or later, we or someone close to us meets with illness, accident, or worse. Suffering is universal, and no one is immune.

## Contrasting Approaches to Suffering

There are hundreds of books on suffering. A bookstore of any size has stacks of them. Some are "survival" stories or "grief memoirs," moving accounts by or about people who have gone through a tragedy or lost someone dear to them. Others are "how-to" books, with lists of things we need to do in order to "cope," "move on," or "reach closure," when we find ourselves in a painful situation.

In the same store, you will also find books on the topic of evil. I don't mean dark dramas about monsters, demons, or aliens. I mean serious discussions about the nature of the world we live in. For centuries, suffering has driven people to ask questions about God. If God is perfectly good and powerful, the argument goes, then evil is incomprehensible. A good God would want to eliminate it. A powerful God would be able to. So, why does evil exist? Why do people suffer? What possible explanation can it have?

The difference between these various approaches is rather sharp. Books of the first and second sort sit in the self-help or popular psychology section of the store. The others rest among weighty tomes on theology or philosophy. The division isn't airtight, of course. Philosophers occasionally touch on the practical consequences of their theories, and how-to books sometimes appeal to philosophical positions. But ordinarily a book will focus on one concern rather than the other.

Although philosophers and sufferers respond to suffering in contrasting ways, it is important to bring their various concerns together—to explore the connection between ideas *about* suffering and the personal experience of suffering. As we noted, suffering comes to everyone, philosophers included, and over the long run we need an approach to suffering that is more than just a philosophical treatise on the subject or a how-to book for sufferers or

caregivers. We need something that probes the connection between these concerns—a response to suffering that brings together theological ideas and practical experience.

We need an approach like this because ideas have consequences, as it is often said, and in the case of suffering these consequences can be tremendous. In fact, there may be no experience in life where ideas play a more important role. “The way we interpret suffering,” Wendy Farley observes, “has a great deal to do with how we experience suffering.”<sup>1</sup> And the way people respond to crisis often reflects a particular vision of how, when, and why God acts, or doesn’t act, in the world. When we consider ways to respond creatively to suffering, therefore, it is important for us to explore the relation of each religious or philosophical interpretation to concrete, lived experience.

Of course, theory and experience are seldom in perfect alignment. When sufferers view a great loss through the lens of their religious convictions, they are sometimes reassured, sometimes perplexed, sometimes disillusioned. Once in a while, people find that their suffering fits comfortably, and comfortingly, within a well-developed framework of understanding. Their long-held ideas and convictions give them great peace.

Quite often, however, suffering forces people to change their views about God—sometimes dramatically. “Given what I believe about God,” one person may say, “my suffering makes perfect sense. I know exactly what it means.” “Given what I always thought,” another may say, “my suffering makes no sense at all. Now I don’t know what to believe.” So, there are people whose suffering draws them closer to God, and others whose suffering drives them away. Because suffering is such a formidable and complex challenge, we need all the resources we have to meet it.

### **Suffering as Life-Changing Loss**

“There is one question that matters, and only one,” says Harold Kushner in his best-selling book on suffering, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. “Why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting.”<sup>2</sup> Kushner emphasizes what everyone knows. Suffering is typically a great obstacle to faith. When people don’t believe in God, more often than not, the number one reason they give is the suffering they

have experienced personally, or the suffering they see in the world around them. And for people who do believe, suffering is still a tremendous challenge. As philosopher Alvin Plantinga sees it, the argument from evil is the one argument against God’s existence worth taking seriously.<sup>3</sup>

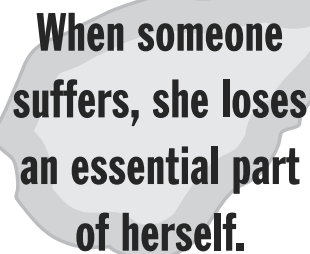
People use the word “suffering” to refer to a great many things, from minor inconveniences to much more serious matters. But the sort of suffering we are talking about isn’t something that merely interrupts or complicates our lives. It isn’t something we can make a few adjustments to accommodate, and get on with business as usual. The sort of suffering that concerns us here is like a natural disaster. It sweeps away all the familiar landmarks, like the tidal waves that devastated southern Asia in late 2004 and the eastern coast of Japan in early 2011, or the hurricanes that inundated New Orleans and battered the shores of New Jersey and New York, or the devastating floods of 2010 in Brazil and Australia, or the tornadoes that cross the midsection of the United States with increasing frequency. Suffering sometimes engulfs large numbers of people and sometimes cuts into the lives of a few. Either way, great suffering is like a tsunami or Katrina of the

soul—it alters the landscape of our lives. It transports us to a strange new world. And everything about us changes... permanently. Suffering, to put it simply, is life-changing loss.

In a horrific accident, college professor Gerald Sittser lost his mother, his wife, and one of his three children. A drunk driver crashed into the van he was driving. When Sittser climbed out of the

wreck and saw the effects of the collision, a powerful sensation settled over him. He began to realize that things would never be the same. By the time the ambulance reached the hospital, two hours later, he knew he could never go back to the life he had before. In his words, he “stepped out into a whole new world.”<sup>4</sup>

When someone suffers, she loses an essential part of herself, something central to the meaning and purpose of her life. What is lost may be a physical ability, someone or something we love, a career, or an income. Suffering can obliterate the work of a lifetime. It can destroy things that took years to accomplish or accumulate. It dashes hopes and shatters dreams. And when it does, it makes us strangers to ourselves. Sittser is right. To suffer is to enter



**When someone  
suffers, she loses  
an essential part  
of herself.**

a world we've never known before. Suffering leaves us feeling isolated, abandoned, and betrayed.

Suffering can disturb us even when we are not the ones suffering, because suffering anywhere reminds us that suffering is everywhere. I've taught university classes on suffering for many years, but I've never kept a file on the topic. I don't need one. All I have to do is check the morning news. It always contains plenty of examples. In fact, by my rough count, ninety percent of the items on a typical front page of the *Los Angeles Times* connect in one way or another to some form of suffering. Whether it's in a far-off corner of the world or just down the street, suffering is everywhere.

Most of us can list disasters that have befallen people we know. Just recalling some of the people I went to school with years ago brings to mind a catalog of tragedies. One died when his motorcycle ran into a truck. Another perished in a traffic accident on her way to meet her husband at the airport. A third died from burns after a space heater set fire to some cleaning fluid. A fourth ended her own life during the holidays one year. Another has a son who was sentenced to life in prison for killing a fellow high school student when a drug deal went bad. I could go on. So could anyone. We all know people who have suffered greatly.

### **Suffering and the Meaning of Life**

But if suffering is so common, you have to wonder, why do we hear so much about it? Why does something so pervasive upset us? It looks like suffering is a just a part of life. So, why don't we simply accept it and move on? People obviously take great interest in suffering—"If it bleeds, it leads," say newspaper editors—but why? What accounts for its "shock value"? Why do we react with a shudder?

Here's the reason. Suffering unsettles us because it threatens one of our deepest convictions. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we all cling to the belief that the world is orderly and life makes sense. This is one of those "basic beliefs" that provide a foundation for everything else we believe...and for everything we do, for that matter. It is a part of what we might call a

basic existential faith, "our basic confidence in the abiding worth of our lives," as one thinker puts it.<sup>5</sup> Because suffering threatens this visceral confidence that reality is stable and our lives have meaning, we are compelled to make some sense of it. We are driven to look for ways to fit suffering within some framework of meaning. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, our minds abhor absurdity. We need suffering to be sensible.

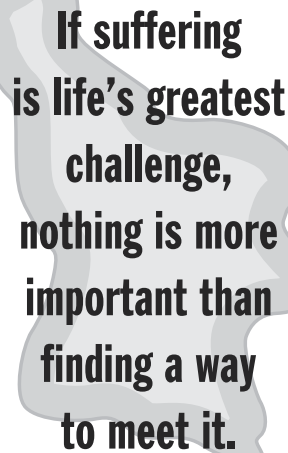
In fact, this urge to make sense of suffering is just as pervasive as suffering itself. As the ambulance made its way to the hospital after her accident, my mother said, "I know it happened for a purpose." Here she was, just minutes after a violent collision, wracked with pain, not knowing the extent of her injuries, or how they might affect her life, yet she considered the eternal questions that suffering brings. "Why?" "Why did this happen?" "Why did this

happen to me?" And, she voiced an answer. She found comfort in the thought that there was a reason, an explanation, for what she was going through. The crash was not an empty, meaningless, random event. There had to be a purpose behind it.

If suffering is life's greatest challenge, nothing is more important than finding a way to meet it. And that, in a nutshell, is the most fundamental question that suffering raises. What can we do to respond to it creatively and resourcefully? How can we resist the threat that suffering poses to the meaning of our lives?

### **Theodicy and the Quest for Meaning**

In many discussions of suffering, whether technical or not, there is an unusual expression that often appears, and that is the word *theodicy*. The word originated with a seventeenth-century German thinker, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Along with science, mathematics, and metaphysics, Leibniz took a special interest in the problem of evil. And to give his book on the topic a title, he coined the word *theodicy*, combining the Greek words for "justify" (*dikaioo*) and "God" (*theos*). A theodicy is an attempt to justify, or defend, God in the face of evil. And in spite of its philosophical overtones, it has become fairly common for people today to use the word to refer to any thoughtful



**If suffering  
is life's greatest  
challenge,  
nothing is more  
important than  
finding a way  
to meet it.**

interpretation of suffering.

As a philosophical exercise, a theodicy serves a minimal purpose. It does not presume to explain why specific instances of suffering occur. Its only goal is to show that the presence of evil in the world is not logically incompatible with God's existence. For most of us, this doesn't accomplish very much, even if it succeeds. People who are actually suffering want a good deal more than this. To rebuild our lives after a devastating loss, we surely need more than a philosophical treatise. At least, that is the conventional wisdom. "Sufferers don't need explanations," we often hear. "What they need is compassion. Instead of burdening them with theories, offer them a listening ear, a sympathetic touch, something in the way of concrete, practical assistance."

Not only do suffering people want more than theories, they may not want theories at all. In fact, instead of relieving suffering, theoretical explanations sometimes make it worse. That was true of history's most famous sufferer. When the biblical figure of Job lost everything—property, children, and finally his health—three friends came to visit him. They sat in sympathetic silence for seven days, but when they started to speak, the burden of their mission became clear. One by one they gave Job an explanation for his suffering. "Innocent people don't suffer," they told him. "Guilty people do. Your predicament is not a baffling mystery. It is perfectly understandable. For some reason or other, you have brought this suffering on yourself. You deserve what is happening to you."

With friends like these, we are tempted to ask, who needs enemies? No wonder people say that sufferers need compassion rather than theories. But that is only part of the picture. Certainly, no one in the throes of grief or loss wants to sit through an abstract discourse on the nature of reality. But the fact that people in pain don't want explanations doesn't mean they will never want them. As time goes by, those who have endured a great loss often crave nothing more than some serious reflection on their plight.

We noted that suffering alters the landscape of our lives. Its seismic upheavals leave us bewildered and dis-

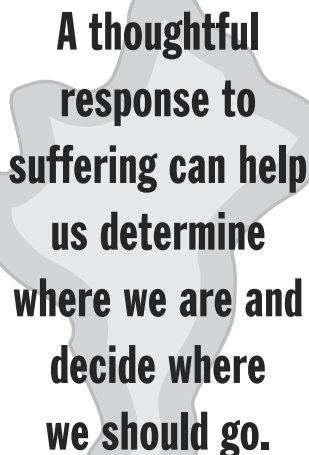
oriented. In order to continue life's journey in this strange new world, we must thread our way through enormous obstacles. That's where theodicy, reflecting carefully on the nature of suffering, comes in. A theodicy is a kind of map. Its purpose is to locate our suffering on the landscape of human experience and help us find a way through it.

A theodicy, then, is like a pause in a journey. If you are in the middle of a long trip somewhere and you realize that you are lost, the best thing to do is stop and take your bearings. Once you figure out where you are, you can plan your next move. That's what a theodicy can do. A thoughtful response to suffering can help us determine where we are and decide where we should go. By providing an aerial view of our location, so to speak, it gives us a way to place our suffering within the larger landscape of our lives. It's a little like a diagram with a "You are here" dot on it.

To change the comparison, a theodicy is less like emergency surgery than physical therapy. It may not belong in a first aid kit for sufferers, but it does have a place in long-term care. Ordinarily, people numbed by enormous loss are not ready for theorizing. They need a sympathetic touch, a helping hand, a shoulder to cry on. Over the long haul, however, they often need something more—a sense of where they are, and a reason to keep going. That's where theodicy can help.

A friend of mine lost his son several years ago in a tragic accident. He often talks to groups about the experience and how it has shaped his life. Over the years, the emphasis in his remarks has shifted. Early on, he described the loss in some detail—what happened and how he and the rest of his family reacted. Then, he added some reflections on what this loss might mean. As time went by, however, my friend came to devote less time to the accident and its immediate aftermath, and more to the way his religious perspectives have changed. He now views his loss within a well-developed theological framework.

This progression illustrates something important about suffering. Practical problems often have a theoret-



**A thoughtful  
response to  
suffering can help  
us determine  
where we are and  
decide where  
we should go.**

ical side, and this is never more true than when we suffer. Although suffering often swamps us with tremendous practical problems, the challenges don't stop there. We are creatures of thought as well as action and feeling, and suffering raises unavoidable questions. Because suffering threatens the very meaning of life, an effective response to suffering must help us recover that meaning. And for that, careful thinking is indispensable. As Viktor Frankl discovered in the midst of the Holocaust, someone who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.<sup>6</sup> Without a theoretical element, then, without a theodicy of some sort, no practical response to suffering will be enough.

This is why it can be helpful for us to become acquainted with a number of the influential responses to the intellectual challenges that suffering poses. A careful look at various theodicies reveals that each one of them has both a theoretical and a practical side. Each offers an interpretation of suffering and implies that we should adopt certain attitudes and practices in response to it. It is important to examine both sides—both the thinking behind each position and its personal, practical applications.

There is something else that is true of each influential interpretation of suffering—some people like it and other people don't. No one theodicy has universal appeal. Each one has attractive features, and each has its limitations. Both deserve attention. In the case of each theodicy, it is therefore important for us to note the questions it raises, especially the questions it leaves unanswered. If a theodicy is an attempt to map the experience of suffering, then it will leave some of the territory uncharted. After all, no map perfectly represents the terrain it seeks to cover. And for this reason we may need to draw on several theodicies in order to develop a personal, practical response to suffering.

There is another reason to consider various approaches to suffering. Different people draw personal strength from different positions. No one size fits all. In fact, the very responses that some people find helpful will strike others as offensive. If we want to be helpful to others who suffer—and that may be the most important thing anyone can do—we need to remember that there is a wide variety of perspectives and each one has tremendous appeal to certain people.

As we consider the landscape of suffering, then, there are three things to keep in mind. First, suffering is uni-

versal. In one form or another, suffering is all around us, and sooner or later it reaches everyone. Second, the urge to make sense of suffering is universal, too. We have an instinctive desire—a deep-seated need, in fact—to come to terms with our suffering, to come up with some way to explain or interpret it. And people have been doing that since the dawn of history. And third, no theory or explanation for suffering perfectly accounts for it. Every theodicy has its attractions and its questions. We need to look at both sides. The ultimate goal of such efforts is a practical one. From reflections like these, we want to bring some ideas about suffering that will help us, and help us help others, when the unavoidable invades our lives, and we face the question that never goes away. ■

---

**Richard Rice** joined the faculty of Loma Linda University in 1974. He has graduate degrees from Andrews University (MDiv) and the University of Chicago Divinity School (MA, PhD). His areas of particular interest are the doctrine of God and the theology of suffering. He and his wife Gail, who also teaches at Loma Linda University, have two children and three grandchildren. *Sensible Suffering* is his seventh book.



## References

1. Wendy Farley, "The Practice of Theodicy," in *Pain Seeking Understanding: Suffering, Medicine, and Faith*, eds. Margaret E. Mohrmann and Mark J. Hanson (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), 103.
2. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 6.
3. Alvin Plantinga, "A Christian Life Partly Lived," in *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 72.
4. Gerald L. Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 21.
5. Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 37.
6. Frankl attributes this statement to Nietzsche in *Man's Search for Meaning*, rev. ed. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 97.