

Why Pray and Why God Allows Suffering?

(By Lincoln Forlong)

As Christians, it's not difficult to become clouded in our thinking about the pains of life and God's role in the big scheme of things if we are not grounded in God's Word and praying through our thoughts. If clouded thinking does occur, it can result in a confused or lethargic attitude towards both God's Word and prayer.

Therefore, in this lesson, I wish to address two issues which are often poorly understood, yet, when combined within a biblical framework, can bring greater clarity and trust in God. Why Pray and Why God Allows Suffering? are interactive issues, and a poor understanding of either will negatively impact the other.

An excerpt from Got Questions on prayer reads as follows. *God intends prayer to be the means of obtaining His solutions. We pray in preparation for major decisions (Luke 6:12-13); to overcome demonic barriers (Matthew 17:14-21); to gather workers for the spiritual harvest (Luke 10:2); to*

gain strength to overcome temptation (Matthew 26:41); and to obtain the means of strengthening others spiritually (Ephesians 6:18-19). END QUOTE.

Below are a few summary reasons why prayer should be a key part of every Christian's life.

~ **Prayer glorifies God** as it raises our awareness of God's eternal sovereignty in our thoughts, beliefs, and lives. This happens as we grow in understanding that Yahweh has accommodated, planned for, and purposely willed His responses to all our prayers from eternity. Likewise, the Lord often initiates His answers before we make our requests. Yet, from our perspective, He answers following our prayers. This is because Eternal God lives outside of time and space as we know it. We see this in Isaiah's prophecy for Israel, *before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear* (Isaiah 65:24).

While mankind views time as past, present, and future, God lives in and views all spheres as the ever-present now. God is not restricted by the dimensional limitations of mortality or by our

time dictated universe. This is important, as it expands our understanding and acceptance of God's unique ability to hear and respond to prayers outside of our sphere of time.

Before the mountains were born or You brought forth the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God (Psalm 90:2). Genesis 1:1, *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*, meaning, before anything in our sphere/universe existed, God already was. Towards the end of the Revelation, which from our perspective is future, the Lord says, *"It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end..."* (Revelation 21:6). Here, Jesus reinforces the fact that even before these events take place in our time and existence, they are already *"done"* in His eternal sphere.

To this, some may ask, *"why pray if God has already determined His response before we pray?"* This question expresses a form of fatalism, meaning, my choices change nothing, therefore what I do is irrelevant. Which, of

course, is neither biblical nor correct. Whereas, when God sovereignly plans to do something in our future, it's a certainty that event will happen, it's inevitable. Likewise, as God determines a fixed event, He also determines every single component that builds up to and enables that event to happen, which includes our prayers. When God ordains an end, He also ordains the means to that end, which includes our prayers. There is no fatalism here.

In the biblical record, as in our own experience, God responds to prayer. Moses prayed about the bitter water when the Israelites became thirsty in the wilderness, and God purified it for them (Exodus 15:23-25). Hannah prayed for a child (1 Samuel 1:10-20), and God gave her baby Samuel. Zechariah prayed that his barren wife would have a baby, and God gave Elizabeth baby John the Baptist (Luke 1:13). These three examples, and many more, were determined by God to happen, but God also determined that Moses, Hannah, and Zechariah would pray and

be answered, and, that these answers would not have happened if they had not prayed for them.

- ~ **Prayer is our active service for God in obedience to Him, as God commands us to pray.** Philippians 4:6, *do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* Prayer is the forum where worship, gratitude, general requests, and deeply felt intercession takes place. God desires this personal level of fellowship and waits to unite with us in this way. Furthermore, James tells us that *the fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much* (James 5:16-18). The undercarriage of prayer is the belief that *...God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:19). Therefore, the only prayers that go unanswered are those we fail to pray, or we pray with selfish motives. James 4:2b-3 *...You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

- ~ **Prayer fuels the angel's glorification of God.** Ephesians 3:10 explains, *so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*

Through the obedience of believers to prayer, holy angels witness the church's faith being expressed. They also watch God's response to believer's prayers, which again gives them reason to glorify the Lord.

Similarly, bad angels (demons) also observe Christian's prayers and God's responses. This testifies to the rulership and grace of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit within the believer. Again, our prayer life is a powerful testimony of the believer's faith to our enemy.

- ~ **Prayer is the mechanism by which believers upload their hearts to the Lord.** Through prayer, God's children engage in divine counsel with the Lord as we open our deepest thoughts and feelings to Him. This is an important part of the process by which we align our hearts and beliefs

with God and His Word. As God's children communicate honestly and openly with the Lord in prayer, the Holy Spirit applies comfort (1 Corinthians 1:3), inner affirmation, and possibly correction or conviction within the one praying.

In Romans 8:26-27, Paul informs us that *the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

During those times of most earnest prayer, should we exhaust our human vocabulary, God the Holy Spirit picks up where we leave off. He, who knows our hearts better than we do, takes the essence of our desires, thoughts, and feelings, presenting them to our Heavenly Father in a divine language which Paul could only describe as groaning. This should reassure the believer of the intimate fellowship and

engagement prayer provides, linking heaven to earth via our prayers.

As believers, our heavenly access and acceptability is guaranteed through Jesus Christ, who *is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them* (Hebrews 7:25). With access to the Father assured, the Holy Spirit presents our prayers and heart's desires with perfect accuracy.

- ~ **Prayer enables wisdom.** James 1:5-6, *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.* In those times when we become aware of our lack of wisdom and vulnerability, prayer is a means of discerning God's will and wisdom, especially in conjunction with God's Word. As the believer prays and reads God's Word, the Holy Spirit illuminates, or clarifies, the application of God's Word in the area being

prayed about. This requires discipline and routine as the child of God fellowships with God via prayer and Scripture.

- ~ **Prayer motivates God's children to watch** for God's activity in conjunction with their prayers. This is the endless pattern of prayer, observation, review, more prayer, and more watching for God's response. King David explains this was his pattern, *O Yahweh, in the morning, You will hear my voice; In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch* (Psalm 5:3). Similarly, the apostle Paul explains in Colossians 4:2, *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving*. This cycle of prayer and observation gives opportunity for ongoing grateful dialogue with the Lord. Prayer is our primary means of seeing God at work in others' lives as well as ours. Therefore, may God find us often before His throne, for we have a high priest in heaven who can identify and sympathise with all we experience, think, feel, and hope (Hebrews 4:15-16). As our High Priest has experienced life as we have, yet He did so

without sin, He is qualified to present our case to the Father. Therefore, it's *with confidence* (we) *draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16).

~ **Jesus Christ left us with a rich example** to follow through His prayers. Likewise, the early church leads us by example (Mark 1:35; Acts 1:14; 2:42; 3:1; 4:23-31; 6:4; 13:1-3). Also, we have Jesus' instruction to His disciples on a right pattern for personal prayer found in Matthew 6:6-13...

⁶ *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

⁷ *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.*

⁸ *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

⁹ *Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread,*

¹² *and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

¹³ *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

Jesus did not intend this sample prayer to be used as a chant, or as a formula for leverage upon God. Rather, this prayer sample shows the personal and intimate connection between the believer on earth and the Lord in heaven. Personal prayer is private, it's worshipful, it's confessional of personal failures, and it's surrendered to the sovereign will of Almighty God.

- ~ **God promises that our prayers are never wasted**, even if we struggle to see God responding in ways we prefer or recognise (Matthew 6:6). He assures us that when we ask in accordance with His will, He will give us what we ask for (1 John 5:14-15). Which means, if our prayers are

outside of His will, they won't be answered, or, the answer will be no. At this point, from our finite and flawed perspective, we sometimes struggle with two aspects of God's response. First, if He answers our prayers in a different way than we expected, we struggle. Second, if He answers in a different timeframe to our expectations, we probably need to rethink the matter from the Lord's perspective.

This issue of the timing of God's answers usually requires some thought. From within our sphere of time, the Lord often delays His answers according to His wisdom and eternal perspective (Ephesians 1:5). God knows that these delays are for our benefit and His glory (Romans 8:29-31), and it's for us to agree with Him because He is God, and we're not. In times of delay, we are to be persistent in prayer (Matthew 7:7-11; Luke 18:1-8) as we wait upon the Lord. Micah 7:7 expresses correct confidence through prayer, *but as for me, I will watch expectantly for Yahweh; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me.*

~ **There's another area where we sometimes feel conflict**, it's when we disagree with God's sovereign will in a matter. This can be difficult, as our convictions, beliefs, passions, and desires are often all involved. Here's the sticking point, when God's will permits or orchestrates suffering, we often feel conflicted. Suffering can range from mild inconvenience to heinous crimes or insidious diseases, the spectrum is great, as are our responses. Somewhere in our thoughts, we may hear the words of challenge, *"how could a holy and loving God, will to permit suffering?"*

At this point, to aid our understanding of prayer while observing the realities of sin, it's advantageous to move our attention to answering, **"Why God allows suffering?"**

Obviously, this matter is both important and broad, as it directly impacts our view of God, plus, if and how we pray to Him.

There are many reasons individuals and humanity at large suffer. Sometimes it's simply because we make wrong or foolish decisions which play out to be harmful. There are other times when, as the result of sinful decisions, people suffer. This can range from personal sin which causes harm to us or those close to us (Proverbs 13:15). It also includes those in positions of authority who make sinful decisions which impact large numbers of the population, as with governments and the military.

It's common for people who suffer to demand independence, with freedom of choice, apart from God. Yet, the very ones seeking independence from God, still require God to sovereignly enforce His will upon their lives in one area only, to prevent suffering with no expectation of gratitude, worship, or allegiance to Him for such grace.

This is a large subject with enormous implications, so, let's consider a few of the issues.

- From the beginning, from Adam and Eve, God never promised to remove suffering until the end. This is where biblical eschatology is

especially valuable because it rightly presents God's timeline and the place sin, Satan, humanity, and suffering have within that timeline.

- **Wherever there is sin, there is suffering.** Only after the rapture of the church, after the 7 year tribulation, after the Day of the Lord judgement, after the 1000 year earthly Kingdom, and after Satan's final rebellion, after all his followers are thrown into the lake of fire, and after God creates the new heaven and earth, will God *wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away* (Revelation 21:4). Until this God appointed end arrives, we live with the conflict of sin, death, and suffering while being under God's sovereign reign as He moves mankind to that end.

All evil is evil, yet we tend to grade sin by degrees according to our human understanding and values. For this reason, we may fail to view

all sin as utterly evil, but God does. Scripture paints a clear picture of sin and mankind's association with it. David confessed to the LORD, *against you, you only, have I sinned...* (Psalm 51:4). Paul affirmed that in *sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ* (1 Corinthians 8:12). Ezekiel declared the ultimate price of sin for the individual, *the one who sins is the one who will die* (Ezekiel 18:20), *for the wages of sin is death...* (Romans 6:23a). Therefore, all types of sin, not just the really bad stuff by our method of evaluation, attracts *the wrath of God*, (which) *is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth* (Romans 1:18).

While it's natural to focus on God when questioning the matter of suffering on a grand scale, there is also another party who shares responsibility in this matter, mankind. Of course, we know that God could step in and bring it all to an end, right now, if He chose. But,

from the beginning, humanity has preferred independence from God. Every successive generation willingly lives in idolatry against God and independently fill their lives with sin to varying degrees. Yet, when mankind experiences the heinous consequences of sin, especially the sins we commit against each other and humanity, mankind challenges God. For some reason, our fleshly hearts create a disconnect from man's responsibility and sin's consequences, as if God has acted unjustly in allowing humanity to live as they want, while knowing that the day of judgement for their sin is coming.

Once again, Romans 1:21-22a speaks to this issue. *For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...* Invariably, mankind demands the right to live independent of God. In so doing, God is deliberately removed, or exchanged in their thoughts and beliefs. But the

realities of God and sin are not changed by this form of self-delusion (Jerimiah 17:9). *Therefore, God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity... For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever* (Romans 1:24-25). The inescapable result of humanity continuously exchanging God's truth for lies and worshipping ourselves rather than God is that God gives mankind over to what they want. Consequently, sin reigns in this world while under God's governing watch.

For some people, their sin appears from man's perspective, to be innocent and harmless on the surface, just naughty or mischievous. Other's sin seems more harmful, and breaks the law of our country, and society disapproves. Then there are those who sin on a far grander scale, those who kill and maim those we think of as innocent. Sins such as child abuse, slavery, murder, abortion, or genocide, etc. Yet, these grand scale sinners are, in essence, doing the same as those who we think of as harmless,

exchanging the truth of God for a lie, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. Whether it's the murderous dictator or the belligerent child, all claim to have so-called freedom of rights and religion. All claim the right to do that which is right in their own eyes by excluding the Lord (Deuteronomy 12:8; Judges 21:25; Proverbs 12:15).

- Only God knows all the innumerable variables involved with why people suffer. The true condition of a person's life and their inner most thoughts, plus all the circumstances involved in their lives, the entire history relating to the suffering, people's motives and agendas, plus the secret things which only God is capable of knowing. *For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths* (Proverbs 5:21). *I will rejoice and be glad in Your lovingkindness, because You have seen my affliction; You have known the troubles of my soul* (Psalm 31:7). Therefore, we entrust all the unknowns of suffering into God's care.

Only God is the righteous judge who assesses all components through His holiness. He weighs all facets with equity. Only God accurately remembers every facet of history connected to those suffering. Consequently, He alone knows the true relationship those suffering have with Him in minute detail. Job 37:23-24 declares, *“The Almighty – we cannot find Him; He is exalted in power and He will not do violence to justice and abundant righteousness. Therefore men fear Him.”*

- Only God can process people after earthly death. While humanity views physical death as final and ultimate, God is the one who transitions every soul from earthly mortality into eternity. Yahweh correctly assigns each soul to their correct eternal destination with the appropriate level of reward or judgement. Romans 9:14-16, *“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have*

compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus which Jesus told in Luke 16:19-31, we see that God determines the destination of a person at the time of death. Among the many lessons in this parable, we see also, that once a soul arrives at their God-appointed destination, there is no returning to earth and no crossing over to any other destination. Similarly, there is no communication with those left behind on earth, the portal is permanently closed and irreversible.

- Only God is capable of the innumerable and incalculable interactions between billions of humans as events unfold and scenarios play out. Only God governs the boundaries and flow of human history, bringing to completion His predetermined end while respecting mankind's responsibility.

Despite this being a huge subject, for believers in Jesus Christ, we put our trust in God, knowing that He is the righteous judge. And while sin and suffering, in all their ugly formats, play out, believers *wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come* (1 Thessalonians 1:10).