

Why Does God Allow Tragedy and Suffering?

A preacher reflects on a local mass shooting.

By Lee Strobel, Posted: July 24, 2012

Editor's Note: Originally published in 2012, the following is adapted from a sermon preached in response to the mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado by author and apologist Lee Strobel on Sunday, July 22, at Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

It's already being called the worst mass shooting in American history: 70 people shot by a gunman, 12 of them killed, while they were watching the midnight showing of a new movie. It all happened just 21 miles from where we're sitting. There are no words to describe the anguish being felt by those who are suffering today; our heart and prayers have, and will, go out to them. There are so many tragic stories, so much pain. And many people are asking the question, "Why? Why did God allow this?"

This has been a heart-rending summer for Colorado. First came the wildfires, which ravaged the houses of hundreds of our neighbors, prompting many of them to ask the same question, "Why?"

And those two tragic events are just added to the everyday pain and suffering being experienced in individual lives. There's illness, abuse, broken relationships, betrayal, sorrow, injuries, disappointment, heartache, crime and death. And perhaps you've been asking the question too. "Why? Why me? Why now?"

That "why" question is not a new one; it goes back thousands of years. It was asked in the Old Testament by Job and the writers of the Psalms, and it was especially relevant during the 20th Century, where we witnessed two World Wars, the Holocaust, genocides in the Soviet Union and China, devastating famines in Africa, the killing fields of Cambodia, the emergence of AIDS, the genocide in Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. And the 21st Century didn't start any better. There was 9/11 and now the Syrian slaughters, and on and on. Why do all of these horrific things happen if there's a loving and powerful God? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Several years ago, I commissioned a national survey and asked people what question they'd ask if they could only ask God one thing. The number one response was: "Why is there suffering in the world?"

Maybe you've never asked why our world is infected with pain and suffering, but my guess is you will when they strike you or a loved one with full force. And Jesus said they are coming. Unlike some other religious leaders who wrote off pain and suffering as mere illusions, Jesus was honest about the inevitability of suffering. In John 16:33 he said, "You will have suffering in this world." He didn't say you might—he said it is going to happen.

But why? If you ask me, "Why did God allow the gunman to spray the Aurora movie theater with gunfire just two days ago?" the only answer I can honestly give consists of four words: "I do not know."

I don't have God's mind; I don't share his perspective. In 1 Corinthians 13:12 we're told, "Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity."

Someday we'll see with clarity, but for now things are foggy. We can't understand everything from our finite perspective. And frankly, the people suffering from the Aurora tragedy don't need a big theological treatise right now; any intellectual response is going to seem trite and inadequate. What they desperately need now is the very real and comforting presence of Jesus Christ in their lives. And I'm so grateful that so many churches and ministries of this community are helping them experience that.

Yet it's still important to grapple with the question of why God allows suffering in our lives. Even though we can't understand everything about it, I believe we can understand some things. Let me give you an analogy.

Once Leslie and I were driving from Chicago to Door County, Wisconsin, which is that thumb-shaped peninsula that juts into Lake Michigan. We were driving up the highway in the dark, when it started raining heavily and we hit dense fog. I could barely see the white stripe on the edge of the road. I couldn't stop because I was afraid someone might come along and rear-end us. It was frightening!

But then a truck appeared in front of us and we could clearly see his taillights through the fog. He apparently had fog lamps in front, because he was traveling at a confident and deliberate pace, and I knew if we could just follow those taillights, we'd be headed in the right direction.

The same is true in understanding why there is tragedy and suffering in our lives. We may not be able to make out all the details of why certain things happen, but there are some key biblical truths that can illuminate some points of light for us. And if we follow those lights, they will lead us toward some conclusions that I believe can help satisfy our hearts and souls.

The first point of light: God is not the creator of evil and suffering.

This answers the question you hear so often: "Why didn't God merely create a world where tragedy and suffering didn't exist?" The answer is: He did! Genesis 1:31 says: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

But if God is not the author of tragedy or evil or death, where did they come from? Well, God has existed from eternity past as the Father, Son and Spirit, together in a relationship of perfect love. So love is the highest value in the universe. And when God decided to create human beings, he wanted us to experience love. But to give us the ability to love, God had to give us free will to decide whether to love or not to love. Why? Because love always involves a choice.

When my daughter was little, she had a doll with a string in the back, and when you pulled it the doll said, "I love you." Did that doll love my daughter? Of course not. It was programmed to say those words. Real love always involves a choice.

So in order for us to experience love, God bestowed on us free will. But unfortunately, we humans have abused our free will by rejecting God and walking away from him. And that has resulted in the introduction of evil into the world.

Some people ask, "Couldn't God have foreseen all of this?" and no doubt he did. But look at it this way. Many of you are parents. Even before you had children, couldn't you foresee that there was the very real possibility they may suffer disappointment or pain or heartache in life, or that they might even hurt you and walk away from you? Of course—but you still had kids.

Why? Because you knew there was also the potential for tremendous joy and deep love and great meaning.

God knew we'd rebel against him, but he also knew many people would choose to follow him and have a relationship with him and spend eternity in heaven with him. And it was all worth it for that, even though it would cost his son great pain and suffering to achieve our redemption. So as we ponder the mystery of pain and evil, we need to be mindful that God did not create them.

The second point of light: Though suffering isn't good, God can use it to accomplish good.

In Romans 8:28 the Bible promises, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Notice the verse doesn't say God causes evil and suffering, just that he promises to cause good to emerge. And notice that the verse doesn't say we all will see immediately or even in this life how God has caused good to emerge from a bad circumstance. Remember, we only see things dimly in this world. And God doesn't make this promise to everyone. He makes the solemn pledge that he will take the bad circumstances that befall us and cause good to emerge if we're committed to following him.

You might say, "No, he can't bring good out of my circumstance. The harm was too great, the damage was too extreme, the depth of my suffering has been too much."

But if you doubt God's promise, listen to what a wise man once said to me: "God took the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the universe—deicide, or the death of God on the cross—and turned it into the very best thing that has happened in history of universe: the opening up of heaven to all who follow him." If God can take the very worst circumstance imaginable and turn it into the very best situation possible, can he not take the negative circumstances of your life and create something good from them?

The third point of light: The day is coming when suffering will cease and God will judge evil.

Many people wonder: "If God has the power to eradicate evil and suffering, then why doesn't he do it?"

But there's a flaw built into the question. Just because he hasn't done it yet doesn't mean he won't do it. I wrote my first novel last year. What if someone read only half of it and then slammed it down and said, "Well, Lee did a terrible job with that book. There are too many loose ends with the plot. He didn't resolve all the issues with the characters." I'd say, "Hey! You only read half the book!"

The Bible says that the story of this world isn't over yet. It says the day will come when sickness and pain will be eradicated and people will be held accountable for the evil they've committed. Justice will be served in a perfect way. That day will come, but not yet. In other words, we've only read half the book!

So what's holding God up? One answer is that he's actually delaying the consummation of history in anticipation that more people will put their trust in him and spend eternity in heaven. He's delaying everything out of his love for humanity. Second Peter 3:9 reads: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

To me, that's evidence of a loving God, that he would care that much for us.

The fourth point of light: Our suffering will pale in comparison to the good things God has in store for his followers.

In Romans 8:18 we read: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Remember these words were written by the apostle Paul, who suffered through beatings and stonings and shipwrecks and imprisonments and rejection and hunger and thirst and homelessness—far more pain that most of us will ever have to endure.

I certainly don't want to minimize pain and suffering, but it helps if we take a long-term perspective. Think of it this way. Let's say that on the first day of 2012, you had an awful day. You had an emergency root canal at the dentist—and then ran out of pain-killers. You crashed your car, and had no insurance. Your stock portfolio took a nosedive. Your spouse got sick. A friend betrayed you. From start to finish, it was like the title of that children's book: *Alexander & the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*.

But then every other day of the year was just incredibly terrific. Your relationship with God is close and real and intimate. A friend wins the lottery and gives you \$100 million. You get promoted at work to your dream job. Time magazine puts your photo on its cover as "The Person of the Year." You have your first child and he's healthy and strong. Your marriage is idyllic, your health is fabulous, and you have a six-month vacation in Tahiti.

Then next New Year's Day someone asks, "So, how was your 2012?" You'd probably say, "It was great; it was wonderful!" You'd remember that first bad day. You might think, that was a bad day, no denying it. It was difficult at the time. But when I look at the totality of the year, when I put everything in context, it's been a great year. The 364 terrific days far outweigh the one bad day. That day just sort of fades away."

And maybe that's a good analogy for heaven. Listen to me—that is not to deny the reality of your pain in this life. It might be terrible. It might be chronic. My wife Leslie has a medical condition that puts her in pain every single day. Maybe you're suffering from a physical ailment or heartache at this very moment. But in heaven, after 354,484,545 days of pure bliss—and with an infinite more to come—if someone asked, "So, how has your existence been?", you'd instantly react by saying, "It has been absolutely wonderful! Words can't describe the joy and the delight and the fulfillment!"

It's like the story that British church leader Galvin Reid tells about meeting a young man who had fallen down a flight of stairs as a baby and shattered his back. He had been in and out of hospitals his whole life—and yet he made the astounding comment that he thinks God is fair. Reid asked him, "How old are you?" The boy said, "Seventeen." Reid asked, "How many years have you spend in hospitals?" The boy said, "Thirteen years." The pastor said with astonishment, "And you think that is fair?" And the boy replied: "Well, God has all eternity to make it up to me."

And he will. God promises a time when there will be no more crying, no more tears, no more pain and suffering, when we will be reunited with God in perfect harmony, forever. Let the words of 1 Corinthians 2:9 soak into your soul: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

Finally, the fifth point of light: We decide whether to turn bitter or turn to God for peace and courage.

We've all seen examples of how the same suffering that causes one person to turn bitter, to reject God, to become hard and angry and sullen, can cause another person to turn to God, to become more gentle and more loving and more tender, willing to reach out to compassionately help other people who are in pain. Some who lose a child to a drunk driver turn inward in chronic rage and never-ending despair; another turns outward to help others by founding Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

We make the choice to either run away from God or to run to him. And what happens if we run to him?

Above I quoted part of what Jesus said in John 16:33. Now let me give you the entire verse: "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. But be courageous! I have conquered the world."

In other words, he offers us the two very things we need when we're hurting: peace to deal with our present and courage to deal with our future. How? Because he has conquered the world! Through his own suffering and death, he has deprived this world of its ultimate power over you. Suffering doesn't have the last word anymore. Death doesn't have the last word anymore. God has the last word!

Let me finish the story of Leslie and I driving through the fog in Wisconsin. We were following the taillights of that truck when the fog slowly began to lift, the rain began to let up and we entered a town with some lights. Things were becoming clearer, we could see better, and as we rounded a curve, silhouetted against the night sky, guess what we saw? We saw the steeple of a church and the cross of Christ. After driving through the confusion of the fog for so long, that image struck me with poignancy I'll never forget.

It was through that cross that Jesus conquered the world for us. As a wise man once said to me, "God's ultimate answer to suffering isn't an explanation; it's the incarnation." Suffering is a personal problem; it demands a personal response. And God isn't some distant, detached, and disinterested deity; he entered into our world and personally experienced our pain. Jesus is there in the lowest places of our lives. Are you broken? He was broken, like bread, for us. Are you despised? He was despised and rejected of men. Do you cry out that you can't take any more? He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Did someone betray you? He was sold out. Are your most tender relationships broken? He loved and he was rejected. Did people turn from you? They hid their faces from him as if he were a leper. Does He descend into all of our hells? Yes, he does. From the depths of a Nazi death camp, Corrie ten Boom wrote these words: "No matter how deep the pit, God is deeper still." Every tear we shed becomes his tear.

God does much more than sympathize with you in your troubles. After all, any close friend can do that. Any close friend can sit beside you and comfort you and empathize with you. No, Jesus is much closer than your closest friend. If you've put your trust in him, then he is in you. And, therefore, your sufferings are his sufferings; your sorrow is his sorrow.

So when tragedy strikes, as it will; when suffering comes, as it will; when you're wrestling with pain, as you will—and when you make the choice to run into his arms, here's what you're going to discover: you'll find peace to deal with the present, you'll find courage to deal with your future, and you'll find the incredible promise of eternal life in heaven.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/july-online-only/doesgodallowtragedy.html>

What if **LOVE** is the **REAL CHOICE**?

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I was a fierce, unhappy, intellectual twenty-eight-year-old, still uneasy with all things “mystical,” stalking in old jeans and cheap army boots around Jerusalem. My guide to the mysteries of the Old City was “Isaiah,” plump, bald, late-middle-aged Israeli poet and mystic who looked, as he himself said often, “like a semi-enlightened sunburnt frog” and who had, over two days, become a friend. I loved his sardonic wit, his baroque flights of phrase, his kabbalistic learning, the way his eyebrows twitched asymmetrically when he got excited, which he did often. On this particular day, he was wearing bright red sneakers and a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt with great orange suns on it. Our talk was light, fact-stocked, and airy until we found ourselves in the early afternoon on the Mount of Olives, and stood, suddenly silent, in the stubby ochre olive grove where Christ wandered on the night before His crucifixion.

Even on a cloudless afternoon like this, Isaiah whispered, “this place is so sad. It is as if you can still hear Him weeping for all of us, for what must happen.”

He stretched out his arm and pointed to the bricked-up golden gate in the wall of the Old City opposite us.

“Some Jews believe that the Messiah will come through that gate.” He started to laugh. “Don’t hold your breath. And suppose He’s a She? Wouldn’t that drive all the old boys in black out of their curled heads?”

It was then that I noticed the faded black numbers on the bare arm sticking out of his Hawaiian shirt. I gasped; the afternoon before we had walked in silent anguish together through the Holocaust Museum. Isaiah had said nothing then. Now, he turned slowly and stared at me, into me, steadily, as if weighing my soul.

Then he began to talk in a low, even voice I had not heard from him.



“Yes, I was in Auschwitz. As a child. From nine to thirteen. I don’t know how or why I survived, but I do know what I learned.” I waited. He opened his mouth, then stopped, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Words are hopeless. I want to say something so big, but I only have small words to say it with. That is why I speak of these things so rarely, and to so few people. Perhaps the old Jewish prophets were right; some things are too terrible and too holy to be spoken of.”

The afternoon darkened slightly. He paused, as if to gather strength, and went on: “I am not going to dishonor the horrors we all lived through in that hell by going over them. You know many of them, and you have the heart to imagine more, although nothing you can imagine can come close.”

“But it is not of these things that I wish to speak to you. I want to tell you what I discovered in hell. It may shock you.”

“In Auschwitz, I discovered that there was one thing I was even more terrified of than death. When you live in an atmosphere of terror, you realize that all the fears you shrink from in ‘normal’ circumstances are relatively minor and that there is one terror that everyone has which is overwhelming, and that hardly anyone ever talks about, because very few have gone through enough to find it out.”

“And what is this terror?” I asked, a little afraid by now.

“The terror of Love, of Love’s embrace of all things, all beings, and all events. Everyone pretends they want to know and experience Love, but to know and experience Love is to die to all your private fantasies and agendas, all your visions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; even ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Everyone who comes to that death is dragged to it kicking and cursing and screaming and weeping tears of blood, just as Jesus was in this garden.”

He breathed deeply as if to steady himself.

“I was twelve years old. It was mid-winter. I was in despair. My mother, father, and sister had all starved to death. I knew by then that the chances of surviving or of being saved were very slim. There was a guard who was particularly sadistic who used to beat me with his leather strap until I bled.”

“I was only twelve. What did I know about anything, about God? All I knew was that I had to decide, once and for all, whether the horror I saw around me was the ultimate reality or whether the joy and tenderness I could still feel stirring inside me was the truth. I knew that they couldn’t *both* be the truth; if the horror of the camp was the reality about human nature and life, then what was stirring in my heart was some kind of mad joke. If what was stirring in my heart was real, then it was the horror that was the mad joke.”

“I thought about this for months. ‘Thought’ is too polite a word. I *bled* about this, I wept over it, I wrestled with it as Jacob must have wrestled with the angel, for my life. I had to know, or I would drown in the darkness. For the first time, I started to pray. My prayer, which I began to repeat at every moment, was only four words: ‘Show me the truth’. Nothing came. Not a single insight, not a single vision, no dream with any comforting angel. Nothing at all.”

“But I went on praying, more and more desperately, and then early one winter morning I heard a quiet voice say to me, ‘You must decide’. What did it mean? For a week, I wrestled with this. What could

the voice mean? Was this the devil laughing at me? Was I god in disguise? The maddest thoughts swirled round my brain.”

“Slowly, I began to understand. I understood that I was always free to decide whether the world I was being shown was the real one or whether the world I felt in my heart was the truth. When I really thought about it, the second choice seemed even more frightening than the rest. What if Love was the real choice? Would I have to love the guard who had beaten me? Would I have to forgive the apparatus that had killed my parents and hundred of thousands of others? Would I even have to forgive in some mysterious way God Himself for having allowed these horrors to take place?”

“I lived through indescribable torment, much worse, even than what I had suffered in the camp at the hands of the guards. A twelve-year-old soul, let me tell you, has abysses some of the angels would be scared of.”

“Then, one morning, I awoke and knew quite simply what I had to do. I had to choose what was at the bottom of my heart, the fire I felt there when I thought of my mother, or our cat at home, or the flowers and vegetables in our kitchen garden. So I went out into the camp yard, covered with snow, with a gray, lowering, hopeless sky overhead and, closing my eyes, I screamed with my whole being silently, ‘I choose Love! I choose Love! I choose Love!’”

“And then it happened. When I opened my eyes, a sun not of this world had come out and was blazing in glory all around me. The snow along the barbed wire glittered like diamonds, and the air was sweet and hard like the skin of a cold apple against my cheek. The guard I hated at that moment came out of another building, smoking a cigarette. He didn’t see me, but I saw him and— this was the miracle—I felt no fear at all, and no hatred, only a burning pity that scalded my eyes with tears. I did not feel vulnerable as I had feared; the *Thing* in me that was crying was stronger than anything or anyone I had ever encountered. It or He felt like a calm column of fire that nothing could put out.”

“Somehow I survived for another year until release came. Whenever I could, I would gaze at the way the ordinary light changed on the ground, along the wires, on the roofs of the huts and the crematoria. I knew now Whose light it was a reflection of. The fire in my chest did not leave. It has never left. I have tried to live and breathe and act from it and from its laws.”

The sun was setting in a riot of rich red light in the sky, setting the gold dome of the Temple Mount alight. Isaiah took both my hands in both of his.

“I doubt if we’ll ever meet again. You are leaving tomorrow, and I am in the last stages of cancer. I am not afraid. The Glory is here always. I see it with open eyes, every day; I am not unique; there are thousands of us, maybe millions, all over the world, of all kinds, classes, sexes, and religions. The Glory gave me life and It is giving me now my death; but through another death long ago It gave me a Life beyond all dying. And it is into that Life that I am going.”

“You have a long journey ahead of you. I have a feeling it will be a difficult and wonderful one. Remember always three things—forgive me for being so ‘rabbinical’, and in such a shirt and wearing such sneakers—but write these down in that black notebook of yours. (And you don’t have to worry about your ideas being stolen; not even the seraphim could read *your* writing.)”

“Pain can be terrible beyond any human description, but it is transient; Bliss is eternal.”

“Evil is real, but only in its dimension that includes this world; the Glory shines forever here and everywhere in a way evil cannot stain or defeat.”

“Horror has its day, or year, or decade, or century; the Sun of Love has never, and will never set.”

“And here’s a fourth: whatever you have to go through to come to know this, beyond any shadow of a doubt, it is worth it.”

“And now I am going to buy you a dinner of the best shish kebabs in Jerusalem in a little place off the Via Dolorosa.”

“I thought you only ate kosher food!”

“Are you mad? Arab cooking is wonderful. One way to start making peace with your neighbor is to eat his food. Don’t they teach you anything in that university of yours?”

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