



2023
DECEMBER

If God Is Real, Why Is the World so Messed Up?

by Sharon Dirckx, Ph.D.

Scientist and Apologist

A glance at the news and we are bombarded with suffering in many forms. From stabbings and shootings on a local level to wars and refugee crises on a global level. Then, we each have our own experiences of grief, illness, relationship breakdown, stress, anxiety, and so on.

There is no shortage of suffering in the world. Why? And why would God, if He is real and good and powerful, allow the world to be this way? Suffering is one of the biggest barriers to faith, and there are no easy answers.

What are my options?

If God does not exist, how might we make sense of suffering? I remember the late Christopher Hitchens being interviewed on CNN about his terminal cancer diagnosis in 2010. He was asked whether, despite his atheism, he had been tempted to ask the question, why me? His response? “You can’t avoid the question however stoic you are, you can only bat it away as a silly one. Millions of people die every day. Everyone’s got to go sometime.” A response that was courageous given that he died the next year, but entirely consistent with his views. If there is no God, this is just the way the world is. Mutations play a vital role in creating genetic diversity, but sometimes they lead to cancers. Death is part of the life cycle, but questions of why?—which probe deeper explanations—are futile.

Natural explanations are important, but on their own are they enough to help us make sense of the whole of the experience of suffering? Why do questions arise that need to be batted away? If this is just the way the world is, why do we get so angry about injustice, abuse, and trauma—and even more so when it is close to home? To object to suffering is to express discontentment with the way the world is and express a belief that things ought to be better than they are. The Christian faith says that this reaction is not a pointer away from God but toward Him. As C.S. Lewis puts it in his book *Mere Christianity*, “A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”

Christians also believe that God has given people the dignity of a meaningful existence by giving them agency to make their own choices.

*If God Is Real, Why Is
the World so Messed Up?*

Christians believe that the brokenness of this world hits us so hard precisely because a good God—the “straight line”—exists. But something has also gone wrong, meaning that we live in a universe in which good and evil are realities that impact every area of life. Christians also believe that God has given people the dignity of a meaningful existence by giving them agency to make their own choices. But the flip side of this is that humans can also be cruel to each other. This far from answers all of our questions, but it highlights that our intuitive response to the wrongness of suffering finds a home *if God exists* more so than if He doesn’t.

Does God care?

But what kind of God would allow the world to be so broken? Does He understand, from His lofty throne, what it is actually like to live here? Many picture God, if He exists, as being aloof and indifferent to the human plight. Yet at the heart of the Christian faith is a God who knows what it is to suffer. People today wear crosses around their necks as a fashion item, at times forgetting that this was a brutal and degrading instrument of torture and death in the Roman world, reserved for the lowest of the low. Jesus ended His days on earth on a cross. Abandoned and betrayed by friends. Humiliated and in agony. He is described in an Old Testament prophecy as “a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.” If we bring our suffering to Him today, we come to One who knows the depths of human despair and sorrow, who understands because He has *been there Himself*.

But Jesus didn’t just suffer *like us*; He also suffered *for us*. By dying on the cross, Jesus mended the brokenness that exists between people and God so that a way could be opened up for us to know His comfort, peace, and very real help even if our worst nightmares come true. Jesus is the only person who never contributed to the evils of this world, and He took them upon Himself so that evil need not destroy us. Somehow, by His wounds, we are healed.

A bigger story?

We each have our stories of struggle and pain, but some people seem to have far more than others. Some stories are so broken that it is hard to see any possibility of relief in this life. Does the Christian faith offer any hope for making sense of senselessly deep devastation and tragedy?

The Christian faith contends that there is a bigger story, a broader perspective that we need if we are going to make any sense of suffering. Can our individual broken stories be fixed? Yes, by embedding them in this much bigger story in which good wins and evil loses. It’s a story that isn’t finished yet but one day will be, and justice will be carried out in its fullest sense. God will right the wrongs and comfort His people in extraordinary ways. Why do Christians believe this? Because Jesus rose from the dead as the forerunner of anyone who follows Him today. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “For I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18 ESV). This life with its sorrows is not all that there is. There is more.

