

LOVE STORIES

A Biblical Perspective on Pain and Suffering by Ignacio Silverio

Admiral Jim Stockdale once said in an interview, “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end — which you can never afford to lose — with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” This well-known saying has come to be known as the Stockdale paradox.

A paradox is a statement that at first glance seems absurd or self-contradictory, yet when it’s investigated or explained it is proved to be true.

The paradox that Admiral Stockdale is pointing to is that we must never give up hope, but at the same time we cannot deceive ourselves about our current reality. In other words we cannot choose to ignore the things that may cause us to lose hope in the end, and we never must give up hope.

Yet what many often don’t recognize is that Christianity comes prepackaged with a similar paradox as well. That is that we have a future hope, that Jesus will one day redeem this world, and this hope is tethered to the brutal fact of sin and suffering.

Now the problem for many Jesus followers is that we get so focused on the future hope that we try to pray away, faith away, and obey away the brutal fact that is part of the Christian package. In fact, some versions of Christianity simply deny the brutal fact. So what is this brutal fact?

There is a cause/effect relationship between sin and suffering. And the majority of people know and agree with this reality because of personal experience. Meaning that oftentimes the pain and suffering we experience in this world is connected to some of the choices we make. Yet there’s another element to the brutal fact of sin that many of us are uncomfortable with. That is that there is a global relationship between sin and suffering. And this is the brutal fact that we often resist.

But why? Well, we resist this aspect of it because it’s not fair and it takes everything out of our control

The fact is that when sin entered the world it held the door for death, sorrow, illness, and despair. So, the question then is, what hope does the Bible offer for this paradox that we find ourselves in? Let me offer 5 principles that can help us hold on to hope, while never neglecting the brutal fact we find ourselves in.

1. Death is not part of God’s will

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

The language found in John couldn’t be any clearer. God’s will for all of humanity is that we should all experience eternal life. We see this established in the Garden of Eden and then re-established again in the final chapters of Revelation.

2. Pain and suffering are not always a direct result on personal choices

One day as Jesus is walking with his disciples when they came upon a blind man. Like many today, Jesus’ disciples only knew about the cause/effect relationship between sin and suffering. Meaning, they assumed that any pain and suffering was directly related to an individual’s personal choice to sin. John 9:2-5 recalls the story. “And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’”

Jesus' statement in this story becomes a subtle reminder that God is not the initiator of pain and suffering, yet at the same time He's able to take this pain and suffering and bring glory to Himself.

3. Christianity is not a faith that believes that good things happened to good people and bad things happen to bad people.

As mentioned earlier the causal relationship between sin and consequence causes many of us to fall into the trap that the disciples believed. That is that all pain and suffering are correlated with an individual's choice to commit sin. And if this was the only relationship that existed, the majority of people would be more understanding. Because this would mean that good things would happen to good people and bad things would happen to bad people so that they would want to become good people.

Yet, Christianity is a faith that believes that the worst possible thing happened to the best possible person who ever lived. Christianity is a faith that believes that Jesus, the sinless son of God gave his life as a ransom for sinners. This act is what is referred to as the Gospel. The good news that God provided a way for fallen humanity to be redeemed unto Himself.

4. God/Jesus journeys alongside us in our pain and suffering.

Sometimes it feels as if God has completely abandoned us when we're experiencing pain and suffering. Yet this couldn't be farther from the truth. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they were cast into the fire, Jesus comes in and journey's besides us. Hebrews 4:15 reminds us, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

Although God is not the cause of pain and suffering, He does seem to use it in order to help us turn to Him for help. This concept is echoed in 1 Corinthians 1:8-10. "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again."

As C.S. Lewis once penned, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

5. God/Jesus will one day redeem this world and make it whole again

Ultimately, Christianity is a faith that believes in an Eden to Eden perspective. Meaning that one day everything that once existed in the Garden of Eden before the fall will once again be restored and made even better. This is the blessed hope that we hold on to as Jesus-followers. As Revelation 21:4-5 states: "He will 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. And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'"

Although that day will one day come, our current reality is that while we're in this world we will continue to experience the Global effects of sin in our lives. As Admiral Stockdale put it, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end — which you can never afford to lose — with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Were you raised to assume there is a one-to-one correlation between bad behavior and suffering? If so, how did that view influence your view of God?
2. What is, or has been, your go-to explanation for why good people suffer?
3. Has suffering ever chipped away at your faith?
4. Read **John 9:1–5**. How does this account address the myth that *good things happen to good people, while bad things happen to sinners*?
5. Read **Hebrews 4:14–16**. What stands out to you? According to verse 14, why should we remain faithful during seasons of suffering? According to verse 16, what can we expect from God during seasons of suffering?
6. How does **1 Corinthians 1:8-10** contradict the popular notion that “God will never give you more than you can handle”?
7. If left unaddressed, what is currently happening in your life that has the potential to undermine your faith?
8. What hope if any, does **Revelation 21:4-5** offer to you today?