

Why We Are Afflicted

We are obsessed with understanding the origin of the suffering that afflicts us. Perhaps we are asking the wrong question.

“Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, were afflicted” (Psa. 107:17).

“It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes” (Psa. 119:71).



Suffering is a universal experience of mankind. Whether young or old, rich or poor, good or bad, all of us encounter pain in our lives at one time or another. Philosophers and theologians have struggled to explain the origin and purpose of suffering, but definitive answers are difficult to pin down.

There are two explanations that can be dismissed as too simplistic. First, some argue that *all affliction is the result of sinful behavior*. This was the counsel that Job’s friends offered to explain his pain. In their simple world view, good people are rewarded with good things, and bad people receive bad things. Job suffered horribly; therefore, he must have done something really bad to deserve it. The problem with their theory, of course, was that Job was “blameless and upright” (1:1), a man who served God with all his heart and soul. And how does this idea explain the suffering of Jesus? At least some suffering, therefore, appears to be arbitrary.

At the opposite extreme is a faulty hypothesis that *attributes all suffering to pure blind luck*. In this view, whatever happens to us in life is entirely the product of chance. Like the card player who sometimes draws a bad hand, we are victims of tough breaks that fall randomly across the population. This explanation is popular among those who seek to escape responsibility for their actions. But this denies the unmistakable cause-and-effect relationship that exists between behaviors and their consequences. “Fools, *because of their transgression*, were afflicted.” As much as we would like to dodge it, we cannot deny that at least some of our misfortune we bring upon ourselves by our poor decisions.

We are left with a conundrum: Some—but not all—affliction is the result of our own poor behavior; while other suffering is entirely arbitrary in its origin, striking good and bad alike. There is no simple all-inclusive explanation that covers everything.

So where does that leave us? Instead of addressing directly the Gordian knot of *why* we are afflicted, perhaps we would be better served to spend our time learning *how to deal with it*. There are three simple principles that should guide our response to suffering.

First, we should learn the humility necessary to *see the flaws in our own character that may be contributing to our struggles*. If our foolish choices keep blowing up in our face, we should have the good sense to adjust our decision-making paradigm.

Second, we *mustn’t become bitter and lash out at God or others* for the hardships that plague our life. Whatever the source of our afflictions, giving in to rage and anger will only exacerbate the problems. We must learn the value of patience and endurance.

Finally, at a deep intellectual level, we must *change how we view the afflictions in our life*. We must see them, not as setbacks or defeats, but as tools of training. Like the soldier in boot camp or the athlete in a tough exercise regimen, we should see our problems as *discipline* that God is using to make us stronger, wiser, and more effective in His service. When we can truly say “it is *good* for me that I have been afflicted,” then we will finally have a satisfactory answer to why God has allowed it to come into our life.

— David King