

As deeply caring as she is wise, deep, and helpful, Amy Orr-Ewing has written for all who are suffering and in pain. She has been there herself, and she also knows the sure path to comfort, healing and faith. A book to be read slowly and cherished—and shared with others who are in pain.

**Os Guinness**

Author, *Unspeakable*

This book arises out of the conviction of the author that if Christian faith is worth considering, it needs to be deep enough to cope with our most rigorous human scrutiny and our most heart-rending questions. Amy is not afraid to address the “why” questions, and that of suffering and pain is the hardest of all for any of us. With a sympathetic heart and a probing, honest mind, she helps the reader think through a wide range of causes of our pain and distress, and introduces us to the incomparable grace of the Good Shepherd, who himself suffered and gave his life for the sheep. A book to be read and shared—especially in this time of global pain.”

**Professor John C. Lennox**

Emeritus Professor of Mathematics, University of Oxford

This is a brilliant and beautifully written introduction to the thorniest issue of all time by one of the sharpest thinkers I know. Drawing on ancient wisdom and contemporary thought, Amy Orr-Ewing brings refreshing clarity, empathy and hope to the question that taunts and haunts the human soul: *Where is God in all the suffering?* Everyone should read this book.

**Pete Greig**

Author, *God on Mute: Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer*

This remarkable book, written in a clear and engaging style, is a “must read” for Christians and non-Christians, young and old. The author is a gifted communicator and combines vivid first-hand experiences with thorough, sound theological reflections and biblical commentaries. No human life is devoid of suffering in one form or another; all can benefit from what has been lived and recorded here.

**The Most Rev Dr. B.A. Kwashi**

Archbishop of Jos, Nigeria

Many assume that suffering in the world proves that God is simply not real, especially when we consider severe suffering. Amy Orr-Ewing, in her candid, open-hearted, intellectually rigorous and beautifully written book, shows that the very opposite is true. Amy tackles some of the very worst forms of suffering that we face, and shows that even in the deepest, darkest, most depraved recesses of our world, the case for a loving God still stands. Whether you have intellectual questions or are in deep pain, you will find *Where is God in all the Suffering?* extremely helpful. I highly recommend it.

**Sharon Dirckx**

OCCA The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics;  
author, *Why? Looking at God, evil and personal suffering*

In an extraordinary combination of argument and empathy, Amy Orr-Ewing weaves together the Bible story of suffering and her own experience as a woman, a wife, a mother, an academic, a pastor and a friend. And this in turn enables her to ask the reader, “What is your story so far?” Such a timely book for these days of COVID-19.

**Rico Tice**

All Souls Church, London; Founder, Christianity Explored

Amy Orr-Ewing isn't afraid to face the tough questions in life, and in this brilliant book she takes on one of the toughest of all. The fact that she does so not only with a sharp intellect but with a compassionate heart makes this a very unique read. No one escapes suffering, and Amy's wonderfully wise words will be a helpful guide and a healing balm for so many.

**Matt Redman**

Christian Worship Leader; Singer-Songwriter; Author

The strongest argument against a loving God is the presence of human suffering. This truly helpful book brings to this daunting subject a profound realism, a warm sympathy and a deep Christian faith. Highly recommended!

**J. John**

Pastor; Author; Broadcaster

Where  
is God in  
all the  
Suffering?

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**ZACHARIAS**  
INSTITUTE

Where is God in all the Suffering?

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Published by:

The Good Book Company in partnership with

OCCA The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics and The Zacharias Institute

[thegoodbook.com](http://thegoodbook.com) | [www.thegoodbook.co.uk](http://www.thegoodbook.co.uk)

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN: 9781784982768 | Printed in Turkey

Design by André Parker

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*For my boys, Zac, JJ and Benji Orr-Ewing.*

*With love always.*

# Introduction: A world in pain

**A**s I write this, my dear friend Brenda has just died. She was 36 and leaves a husband and three children, the youngest of whom is a five-month-old baby.

A few days ago I walked behind her casket into her funeral service, carrying her baby girl in my arms. I find myself asking: is there any hope in this seemingly hopeless situation? Is there any comfort for a daughter who will grow up not remembering her mother? Is there a loving God who could pour his love and comfort into our grieving hearts? Is God really there in all our pain and heartache over loss?

Right now I find myself working at home during a government lockdown, in isolation with my family. The death toll from COVID-19 climbs daily. We have all been shocked to discover how vulnerable and helpless we are against a microbial virus that has taken loved ones, closed borders, shops and restaurants, and halted the economy of half the planet. Where is God in the fear, suffering and grief of this global pandemic?

As you have picked up this book and started to read, I'm assuming that you want to think, to question and to consider what it means to be in pain and where God might be

in the midst of that. But I want you to know at the very start that I don't want to attempt to "fix" you, or to "fix" how you experience pain. Rather, I hope my reflections here might be a helpful and comforting companion to you as you think about where God might be in this world filled with suffering.

Books on suffering written by academic types rarely connect with people who are actually suffering. I work in Oxford, and I have had the opportunity of studying and teaching throughout my adult working life. In the course of that time, I have found myself drawn to thinking about and reflecting on some of the toughest questions of life. Through all of that, I have come to realise that if Christian faith is worth considering, it needs to be deep enough to cope with our most rigorous human scrutiny *and* our most heart-rending questions.

### **JUST HAVE FAITH?**

One of the worst things people in religious circles sometimes seem to say to someone suffering is "Don't ask why", closely accompanied by "Don't think about it" or "Just have faith." These comments are just so unhelpful.

A questioning and thoughtful response to our human experience of suffering can be a really important part of coming to terms with terrible things that have happened to us. But I want to suggest that it can also be a crucial part of exploring the Christian faith. The Bible is full of people's questions to and about God in the context of human suffering. Questions like *Why would you let this happen?* and *Where are you, God?* So, if you are reading this book while you are going through an experience of personal suffering that is causing you to question and rethink everything, I'd



like to thank you for letting me be a part of your journey. I hope that as you reflect on some of the thoughts offered in this book, you will find that Christian faith can be a warm home both for those who are intellectually curious and for anyone who finds themselves in a season of pain. Questions and doubts are not dangers to be avoided or suppressed but can be companions on a journey towards a relationship with God, and a genuine exploration of faith.

### **WHERE I AM COMING FROM**

There are other things about me that you might like to know before we embark on this voyage together. Am I an ivory-tower academic coming at this question as a puzzle to be solved?

*No...*

My own personal experience has graphically coloured this question of suffering for me. Although I am a writer, a thinker and a teacher, I have spent 14 years of my life living in deprived neighbourhoods—in the inner city. I lived for seven years at a time in two of Britain's most disadvantaged and dangerous neighbourhoods. As a teenage girl I was physically attacked, but, perhaps more significantly, in my early thirties I lived under the specific threat of violent attack (rape and murder) for two years.

As a pastor I have also walked closely with loved ones who are suffering. When you hold a dying child in your arms in a hospice and weep with friends over the loss of their child, it is clear that well-meaning theories about purpose in suffering ring hollow. I once heard an academic at a conference sincerely offer the view that human suffering can be likened to a dog being taken to the vet for vaccinations. The dog can't see the purpose in the suffering, even though it is

ultimately for its good. *Really?* I was completely floored by that illustration and actually quite angry. Listening to and crying with heroic survivors of sexual and domestic violence or the relatives of murder victims colours my approach to this question of discovering a God of love in our suffering world—as do my experiences of walking closely with people who experience the more day-to-day challenges of grinding poverty, debt, extortion, harassment and decay.

Personal experience inevitably shapes our thoughts about the question of suffering and evil, and we all need to be honest about that. For me this question is profoundly personal; it is not primarily abstract or theoretical. How do we make sense of the suffering in the world around us when it feels like *this*?

#### UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Even closer to home, as I write this, my husband and I are processing together the full extent of the abuse he experienced as a child. New discoveries about the horror of the things done to him have come to light in documents that came into our possession. It has taken us weeks to muster the emotional energy to read the pages of legal testimony and hospital reports. At times it has felt as if we are looking evil directly in the face. The person I share my life most closely with has been subjected to unimaginable trauma.

Wondering why a loving God might allow suffering, or, for that matter, where he is while we suffer, are not questions that any of us can dissect with sterilised instruments in a clean laboratory removed from outside influence or bias or personal pain. Because, even as we ask these questions, we live *here*—in this world—where brutal, senseless, tragic things happen to people we love. This book is intended to

be a reflection from the perspective of Christian faith in the midst of this dark world on *why* there might be such suffering in this world *if* God is loving, and *how* God—if he exists at all—interacts with people who are in pain.

When my university friend died in a freak accident while travelling in South America a year after our graduation, a whole crowd of us in our 20s, just starting our first jobs, gathered at his funeral. I remember one of them saying, “Is pain the price we pay for love?” Grief was, and is, a strange and disconcerting experience. Grief involves fear, sadness, tears, a sense of shock and maybe even a disconnect from the loss. And then, as life goes on, the intense feelings subside only to suddenly and unexpectedly resurface. One moment life is bumbling along, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, a wave of sorrow and sadness hits, crashing over you, threatening to drown you, sucking the very life from your lungs. You realise that the person you have lost is not there and you will never see their face again.

### THE PRICE OF LOVE

A Hebrew poet in Psalm 23 in the Bible powerfully describes this experience as “the valley of the shadow of death”. This shadow is cast most profoundly over those who loved the person who has died most intimately, but it touches all who knew them. So, as my friend asked, *Is pain the price of love?*

At the funeral of the child of some dear friends, the service began with the thought that this precious newborn baby boy had never known a day without love. The pain and grief of those who loved him most was the cost of that love. He was loved.

For me, love is the starting place for untangling questions of pain and suffering, and especially the question “Where

is *God* in all the suffering?” Love seems to be at the absolute core of why suffering feels like it does. Suffering feels so wrong to us because of our love for another person who is in distress. We instinctively rage against injustice because we feel that people deserve love and dignity. And when I suffer, the question I am struggling with at the deepest level is this: *Am I loved?* And if I am truly loved, *how could this be happening to me?*

When we ask these kinds of questions, we are making an assumption: that people have inherent and sacred value by virtue of being human; that *I* have value because I am human. But can we take for granted that love is a foundational concept from which to ask questions about suffering and God? As we try to wrap our heads around the human experience of suffering and the question of where God is in suffering—is love really that important? Aren’t there other ways of looking at this question that are not grounded in a relational perspective and all that follows from the prospect of the existence of a loving God? Can we even meaningfully say that suffering is *wrong*, rather than simply unlucky?

It is these questions we explore first.

# Asking “Why?”

*“I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness. I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us too. I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again.”*

ANNE FRANK

Whatever your beliefs about the world—why we are here, whether there is purpose to our existence, why there is so much pain in the world, whether there is a God, and what that God may or may not be like—at some point most of us are likely to find ourselves asking the question “why?” And this often happens during an experience of pain. The instinct to ask “why?” is deeply human.

When I was 29, I gave birth to twin boys. I’ve been asked the question “What’s it like having twins?” so many times that you would think I would have a quick and pithy answer by now. But I always stop and take a deep breath

because it is so hard to put into words—it’s an incredibly intense experience. When twins are toddlers, it is so utterly exhausting that, although it is often wonderful, it can be completely overwhelming. Simple things like eating, getting dressed or going outside with the pushchair created untold chaos.

When my boys were starting to speak and to formulate their thoughts into words, they both went through a stage of asking “Why?” in stereo to every single thing that was said to them or asked of them. I once counted 98 different occurrences of the “why” question from them in a single morning. I made a note of it in my diary. The phase went on for weeks. Somehow I held on to my sanity and lived to tell the tale. But “why” questions stand out to me now as profoundly human. As human beings it seems we are wired to ask “why?”

As we reflect together on the question of suffering, and consider why it happens, why it hurts so much and where God might be in it all, there are many different potential starting points. Human beings have wondered, written and thought about pain and suffering since time immemorial. But not every framework of thought begins with love. Should we take love for granted as a starting place in exploring pain, grief and suffering? Why would love matter so much?

### **IS IT KARMA?**

You may be aware that Eastern philosophy views human suffering through the dual lenses of karma and reincarnation. When something painful happens, karma tells me that there is a moral law of cause and effect guiding the circumstances of our lives. If I get a disease or have an accident, the law

of karma means I am getting what I deserve. The fact that the thing I have done that makes me deserve pain may not immediately be obvious to me is complicated by the idea of reincarnation. In this view, the universe recycles us over multiple lifetimes, so, it is believed, we may be experiencing the effects of karma for something done in a previous life.

I had a neighbour for a couple of years in Oxford who believed that she had been a member of the French resistance in a previous life. She felt that her failure to pass on a particular message in time during the war was the cause of her back pain in this life. Karma was running its course. Karma does not love. Suffering is inflicted by a faceless system of law, leaving us with what it determines we deserve.

Buddhism encourages its followers to seek detachment as a way of processing suffering. The Buddha left his wife and home on the night that his first child was born. He left his palace in order to seek enlightenment, and that meant moving away from emotional bonds to become detached from them and this world. Buddhist enlightenment is essentially following the Buddha's example in choosing disconnection from everything.

Human suffering, he taught, comes from desire. Wanting, desiring something or someone is at the root of suffering, so the Buddhist answer is to expunge all desire for anything or anyone: to cease wanting things and to reach a state of enlightenment—which is a kind of nothingness. Is pain the cost of love? This way of looking at the world would answer “yes”; and so, to avoid pain, the answer offered is to get rid of all attachment—even love. Where is God in this system of thinking? Nowhere and everywhere. God is not a personal being but rather a state of realisation that all is one and one is all.

## IS IT FATE?

Islam gives us a different perspective. It has a monotheistic view of the world—there is one God—but it is a fatalistic religion teaching that a transcendent God is absolutely and directly in control of every aspect of the universe. As a consequence, human beings do not have real choice. There is only one will in the universe, and that is Allah’s will. That is why the word *inshallah*, meaning “*if-God-wills-it*” is so significant for Muslims.

A few years ago a friend described to me his experience of training a group of Iraqi soldiers for service in their own armed forces. He was required to take them through a survival exercise, and so they took over a disused swimming pool and filled it with water. The British officer explained that each person, fully clothed and carrying their heavy pack, would be pushed into the deep end of the pool. The goal was to swim to the surface, tread water for a certain amount of time and then to climb out.

The first two recruits were selected and thrown fully clothed into the deep end. One struggled to the surface and then clambered out of the pool, but the other sank like a stone. The instructors quickly realised there was a problem and one dived in, dragged the man to the surface and pumped his chest. The man coughed up water and gasped for air. “Why didn’t you swim?” they shouted at him. He shrugged and replied, “If it be God’s will that I live, I would live; if it be his will that I die, I would have died. Clearly it was God’s will that I lived.” *Inshallah*. I embrace my fate because it is the will of God.

This illustrates the extent to which a mindset of God’s will being all that matters can influence our way of seeing the world and acting in it. And logically since both good and



evil exist, they must both be God's will.<sup>1</sup> In other words, from this widespread perspective, when we are in pain we can conclude that everything that is happening to us is directly God's will. God is the author of it all and so we may as well just accept it. Love doesn't really come into it. And neither does asking "why?"

### IS IT MEANINGLESS?

A different point of view is offered by what we might call naturalism. Naturalism is the system derived from the belief that everything in life has a purely natural or physical explanation. In answer to the question "Where is God in all the suffering?" naturalism would say, "*Nowhere*—because God doesn't exist." Naturalism tells us that there is no spiritual or religious dimension to life and there is no God who created the natural world. Human beings are their own highest authority and are well able to determine their own destiny and their own morality. Within this way of looking at the world, any experience of pain is essentially random; it is a consequence of living in the physical world and nothing more. And since the physical biochemical world is all that exists, any sense of connection to another person and love for them is viewed in primarily physiological terms. The pain I may experience as a result of the loss of someone I am connected to does not have any deeper metaphysical or spiritual dimensions. Suffering, like everything else, is merely physical, material and natural.

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1 Muhammad was asked about this and his reply is recorded in the Hadith: "Abu Bakr asserts that Allah decrees good, but does not decree evil, but Umar says that he decrees both alike. Muhammad replied to this 'the decree necessarily determines all that is good and all that is sweet and all that is bitter, and that is my decision between you ... O Abu Bakr if Allah had not willed that there be disobedience he would not have created the Devil.'" Quoted in Arthur Jeffrey, *Islam: Muhammad and His Religion*, p 150.