

Is God Cruel?

A Sermon on One Topic in Two Parts.....

Is God Cruel?
Why does He allow pain?
Why does He allow evil?
If God is all powerful and loving, then why does He allow suffering?

These are questions that cross everyone's lips
And if not people's lips, they crosses everyone's mind at some point

These questions are as old as the first tear; and questions as recent as the latest news broadcast.

Not a single day will not go by without some news about death and cruelty and injustice- not only to adults, but also to helpless children and babies

When we think about it, we find there are two kinds of evil:
Moral evil- as a result of the choices made by creatures that possess free will;
Or natural evil: as a result of natural processes such as earthquakes and floods-

But I would hasten to add that God is in charge of even these so-called 'natural processes'
We know this from Prophecy, like that we find in Daniel

So, really, when you think about it nothing is really going on that God is the direct author of or God is allowing to take place (natural or otherwise)....
You might want to recall Job...?
Remember that satan had to ask for permission to strike God's faithful servant....

When you talk to people, I am sure that you realise that many will cite the issue of the suffering around us as the main reason they have difficulty accepting GOD exists:

'How is it that a loving GOD could allow evil and suffering amongst His creatures?'

But never mind the non-believer, even the faith of a believing Christian can be severely tested by evil and suffering. Again, Job, is a case in point.
And, I am sure, that all of here have had our moments.....

Another objection that I come across when I talk to people, is that they think that 'the GOD of the OT is mean. cruel and angry; the GOD of the NT is so full of Love.'

They will cite God's commands, for example in Samuel (15:2-3) '.....go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man, woman, child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'

Are those the commands of a loving and merciful GOD they ask you?
You expect me to worship such a God?

Surely, this OT God is a regular butcher, putting to death innocent children- with total disregard for even the basic standards of even the Geneva convention...

Actually, if you are going to be technical about it, even Jesus said that he was not a man of peace, but he came to put father against son and mother against daughter....check out matthew...

Atheists go so far as to suggest that the God of the bible, being cruel, does not deserve being considered worthy of existence, implying that such a God is unworthy of their sense of moral or ethical values...

We, as Christians who believe in a loving and all powerful GOD...

We are left with a lot of explaining to do.....

How can we defend our faith in God given all that goes on around us?

How can we defend our faith in God given the some of the actions that GOD commissioned in the OT?

How can we defend our faith in GOD when our non-Christian friends see that our lives are falling apart at the seems? Much as it did for Job? Remember what Job's wife said? ‘

Curse God and die...

So, today I would like to take the opportunity to examine the issue of Is GOD cruel?

It is an important issue:

We might need to defend our reliance on GOD...when friends and neighbours complain about what they read in the papers or when things are going wrong for them...why should they have faith in our God?

Someone (John Sttot) said that: ‘The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith.’

More importantly it is an issue that we need to ourselves understand when life feels as though it is coming apart; when it is US who need to maintain our own faith in the fire of trial and tribulation.....

I want to look at two issues in this sermon:

I want to look at the accusation that we often hear: that the GOD of the OT is Cruel...and see how we can defend ourselves, and God, from that accusation...

And secondly, I want to address the issue of our own suffering on a daily basis

These are two quite large topics and I am going to split them up into two sermons.....I am going to tackle the issue of God being cruel in the OT today...

But, because the events of the OT may seem far removed from our trials and tribulations today, next week I am going to look at our own personal suffering.....

Let us examine the charge of ‘The God the OT is cruel!’

We can start looking at where sin actually comes from? Let us remind ourselves....

God did not intend for us to know what sin was like....and we had a voting booth in the garden of Eden: it was the Tree of Knowledge

In granting us the dignity of the freedom of choice, God also created the potential for sin

Without granting us the facility of free choice, God would not have been able to enter into a meaningful personal relationship with us...

But sin did come about, the rest is a matter for history;
The point now is that we are living in a fallen world....

So, the reason we are seeing so much evil is that it is the consequence of our original moral choice.....God did not want us to experience sin in the first place... or the sinful nature that causes us to continue to sin....

And what about natural evil?

Once again, this too stems from our moral choice

Because in a non-fallen world where the rebellious angels and rebellious humans would not have had their way, God would not have allowed earthquakes and floods and hurricanes
So, we can say that natural evil also stems from moral evil also
You might ask:
Why might an all-powerful God allow suffering to continue?
It is an important question.....why?

Because critics will say that: a good God would want to destroy evil
An all-powerful God would be able to destroy evil

However, clearly we around us that evil is not destroyed

Therefore, such a good and all-powerful God cannot possibly exist
So, they say, it is impossible to explain the existence of both a good and just God and evil....

Let us briefly examine the issue of Divine Omnipotence..
When we say that God is omnipotent...what do we mean?
We mean that God can do anything.....stuff like miracles...
And that is what scripture teaches....that 'with God all things are possible' (Matt 19:26)

But let's be clear about what that does not mean: it does not mean that God will do things that are irrational for He is certainly a rational person....

He is not going to make a square circle
He is not going to make take that which is clearly false and turn it into that which is true

So, just because you know GOD can do anything, does not mean that you can make silly and illogical demands of Him...like please GOD, show me a square circle.....

Just because I put God in front of an illogical and meaningless statement, does not mean that the illogical and meaningless statement suddenly becomes logical, meaningful and true...
He is not going to do nonsense

So, yes, have no doubt that God is omnipotent and quite capable of eliminating sin, but that would require us to be eliminated as well as we are all sinners- but His mercy abounds and He has provided us a means of being redeemed....

God respected our choice but at the same time has put a plan to salvation into action, countering the accusation that He could not be both just and merciful.....
And it required the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ to for completion and fruition....

In allowing sin to continue God, you might like to think of it as GOD allowing us to live on a 'temporary overdraft of mercy',
Remember: that God is 100% holy and does not have to tolerate sin at all

But rest assured that He is also working out His will and sin will be eliminated

Whilst we examine the accusation that the GOD of the OT is cruel:
I ask you bear in mind a few points:
Firstly: it is we that sinned and have caused the current state of affairs,
Secondly: GOD does not have to tolerate sin at all...
But, thirdly: remember that in His Mercy, He has set in motion a plan of salvation

So lets start,
We are familiar with the OT
In it we find that GOD did order, through the prophets, a mass slaughter of whole nations of ancient peoples....so critics' imply that such a GOD is no God of love...

We find Moses in Exodus/Numbers and Deuteronomy being accused; likewise Samuel, Ezekiel and Hosea...

So what is going on here?

Well, it is really easy if we were to take a very superficial reading of some of those books to come to the conclusion that God was being cruel...The usual method of the critic: quote out of context...and not examine texts to a deeper level...

But to find out the whole truth we need to read all the relevant chapters and enquire into other books in scripture that have a bearing on these matters.....we also need to ask the most important question:

We must ask why God ordered what HE did?

This is the same God that places such a high value upon life; the same God who was the author of the 6th commandment forbidding murder

Did these people who lay the charge of cruelty upon God ever stop to consider why? Have you ever considered why?

When take such an approach and ask such questions....we see that the main issue behind all these incidents was that God was calling to Himself His own special people for His own Special purpose

And seeking to protect them from the infectious customs of the various tribes and nations whom they would encounter on the way to their promised land...

By Infections I mean customs such as idol worship, human sacrifice and sexual perversions.....for example.....'thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Molech neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God. I am the Lord. (Lev 18:21)
By this, God is referring to the sacrifice of young children to the god molech

Recall that God had singled out Abraham to be a beacon through which all other of the earth would be blessed.....in sanctioning the destruction of these people and their practices, God was preserving the purity of His own children and their descendants...

Let us examine some of the individual cases...in all, about 8 passages are cited when people are complaining about God being cruel.....

Lets take them in turn....

Midianites: Moses had fled to Midian after killing an Egyptian and married a Midianite- so there was no enmity there to begin with.

After Israel was released from Egypt, the Prince of Moab persuaded the Midianite to attack Israel killing many of the weak and stragglers.....

After this a thousand men from each of the twelve tribes of Israel attacked the Midianites, destroyed their army and captured women and children.

Moses was at this point was aware that Midianite women had led Israelite men into false practices of the Moabs.....so only virgin women were allowed to be incorporated and women and male children were killed.....

Now, lets be clear: this incident refers to only a certain group of captives and not the whole nation of Midian.....

In fact, from the bible come to learn that, later, the Nation of Midian attacked and almost destroyed Israel during the time of Gideon....

So, in this episode, God's actions were concerned with keeping Israel's ways pure...

But more importantly, the Midianites as a people were not wiped out...as people charge and would have you believe

We come to the Amalakites that I mentioned previously.....Saul was ordered by prophet Samuel to destroy adults and children and animals.....Why?

Well the Amalakites were not nice people: they were a depraved people

Here is what they did: they would heat up their idol, Molech, until it was glowing and then they would place their newborn babies in the arms of the idol and watch them burn to death...

Saul was sanctioned to kill the Amalakites:
What did Saul actually do?

He killed all the people whom he could find but spared King Agag, befriended him and retained the best of the animals....

Saul in fact did not follow through on God's command; we know was rejected as King of Israel.

What happened later? We find later that Amalakites again attack Israel and capture wives and children of Israel

David defeats the Amalakites and recovers the families
Did Israel wipe out the Amalakites as the Charge against God goes?

No they didn't; the bible later tells us that the Amalakites still troubling Israel in the days of Hezekiah

Next, let us take Moses' warning: Deuteronomy 32: as he is about to die, Moses gives his final word to the Israelites about what shall befall them if they are unfaithful to God.

But then, this is not actual event but only a warning...

Likewise Ezekiel's vision (9) in which God warns of the punishment to be visited upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem if they sinned against Him

But once again this is only a vision and not an event....

We have Hosea's prophecy in 13:16.....that warns that women with child shall be ripped up....but once again this is a warning and not a command for action....

What else?

We have the rule about the rebellious sons in Deuteronomy 21:18-21.....

Rebellious sons had to be accused by both parents and charges laid to the City elders to judge upon its merits and if no solution could be found then the charge would be presented to all the men of the city....they again could exercise judgment before stoning the child to death...

Yes, does sound harsh...but let us think about the context in which this rule was applied

But remember that this was a primitive society with no law enforcement
The flip side of it is that this law also protected children as a brutal fathers that killed their children could not justify themselves by saying that he had a rebellious son:

They were required to go through the correct procedure...
When you think about it, this law not only punished, but also served to protect and save

Next, we have the Egyptians and the death of the first born of Egypt: I think we are all familiar with that one:

But recall that God had already visited upon the Egyptians nine plagues previously and Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go. Each plague that God had wrought upon the Egyptians had challenged an Egyptian god....so obviously it was going to take something yet more significant. So, God sanctioned the death of the first born...Remember that God was seeking to secure the release Israel, the country through which our redeemer would later be born.....recall also that even after this tragic event Pharaoh still came after Israel because of the need their reliance upon them for slaves.

Finally, the eighth piece of scripture that is cited to support God as being cruel is the episode when Moses descended from the mountain, only to find Israel worshipping a calf: 3000 were killed; the rest reconsecrated themselves to God.

The logic here is quite obvious; these people were rebelling against God despite all the manifestations of God's power in leading the people out of Egypt.....the deaths, limited to God's own people...

So there we are; those are the eight pieces of scripture that are cited to support the notion that God is cruel.....

Let's be clear about these and summarise: the Egyptians, the Amalakites and Midianites were killed but none were 'wiped' out....

Then we have three visions.... And that is all that they were...visions

We have a law that protects children; but also is a way of dealing with disobedient children...

When people say that how could God have ordered the destruction of these innocent people? They have not actually looked into the nature of the people that were judged:

They *assume* that the people being ordered destroyed were morally equivalent to the Jews who replaced them....

Note that God was quite clear:

'It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' (Deu 9:5)

So, it was not for Israel's status as chosen people that they deserved the land, but because the people themselves were judged to be an abomination in the eyes of the Lord....

When Israel itself was being slaughtered, the deaths were to protect God's greater purpose: the salvation of the whole Human race....had Israelites all degenerated into idol worshippers and given themselves over to human sacrifice then ask yourselves where would we be? Could God have fulfilled his plan of salvation through them?

Remember what God said to them 'I am using you here in this war as an instrument of my judgement upon this nation, and I'm bringing my violence upon this unbelievably wicked people....I'm going to have them destroyed.....'

He also said.....'I am calling you out of my Grace to be a Holy Nation. I am tearing down in order to build something new, and out of what I build new, a holy nation, I'm going to bless all the peoples of the world. Therefore I want you to be separated, and I don't want any of the influences of this pagan heritage to be mixed into my new nation that I'm establishing'

We can say that God acted to keep His chosen people pure from the worst excesses of Human Sin.... We can say that no whole nation was wiped out....

Like a police officer that has to use force in order to deal with disorder and disobedience God always acted either to restrain evil, or deter some other even greater atrocity

God has always given warnings and second chances after pointing out a sin and disobedience.....when finally God's justice was visited upon people, it was upon people that were being stubborn and doing their own thing in spite of warnings

God has given his reasons: but people still choke on them
And we know we are disobedient and we know that God is Holy- we should be able to accept it.

But it doesn't end there: the clever critic might then argue 'does that mean that the end justifies the means?'

Well, we have to face some hardcore facts in answering that one...

Firstly, a fact that we have to accept is that when the Righteous Judge of the Universe is sitting in judgment, *any* means that HE may chose to use is self-justified

After all HE is the both the Creator and the Sustainer of Human Life
We are talking about the same GOD who will have access to all information
Who will see all the possibilities unfold before Him and know what is for the best

Remember that when we start to accuse God of cruelty, we are acting only on a very limited amount of information about the present situation, and even more limited information with respect to future events;

And we cannot know like God can, the true motives and aspirations and intentions of the people that He condemned; God is able to go beyond the evidence that we can as Humans

I am quite sure that in making those decisions where He has sanctioned the use of extreme measures, He has exhausted all other options; much like when the only way to save us was to allow the sacrifice of His only Son

But of this I am even more sure, I am very sure that it will have given Him absolutely no pleasure in seeing the very life that He created have to be destroyed at His own command
Remember that God places great value upon Human life; God authored the 6th commandment

So it would give Him no pleasure in seeing innocent babies that HE too created being burnt alive because of the disobedience of humans...

The fact that we have to accept here is that God gives life and He ahs the right to take it away too as He see fit for His purposes

Another fact that we have to accept is that the innocent do inevitably suffer when justice is being metted out...you are quite right when you say that innocents were killed... but I remind you that God's Son was innocent too...

Once we carefully investigate the reasons why God acted in the way that He did and seek out the facts

Rather than base our accusations on our own personal prejudices and emotional arguments, we see that the reason God acted the way he did is that GOD is Love and wants everyone to Love Him.....God does not need anything; we need Him
Yet this person chooses to pay the ultimate price and suffer great humiliation that we may be redeemed.....The fact is that there is a greater plan unfolding and it is for our own sakes
God is running after the sheep of the flock that got lost...

Recall as we said at the start, God in no way needs to tolerate sin
God is 100% holy

Instead of complaining about the few occasions when HE judges and authorises punishment
We should marvel at His mercy;
We should be quite amazed at His tolerance
We should be thankful for his patience
In fact, we really ought to be surprised that HE did not deliver judgement MORE often than HE did.
In reality, when you read to two testaments as they were intended we find the same GOD:
rich in mercy and who will not let sin go unpunished...

The problem is that we have a difficult time reconciling God's love and God's Righteousness:
One requires the other: love demands justice.
We do it all the time:

As we discipline children when they disobey;
So to, as children of God, can we expect to receive discipline if we do not meet His requirements

Sin, selfishness and self-centredness prevent us from keeping all of God's Laws:
the harsh but truthful reality is that God would have been quite justified in destroying all of us for our disobedience to Him.

It is only through His extraordinary love and grace that we are allowed into His presence

So, next time so one confronts you with a quote from the OT that God was acting cruelly in the OT...urge them to ask why God made the decision that HE did rather than focussing on the calamity only

You might then remind them that to charge God with cruelty is to judge God- remind them that God, not man, sets the standard for value judgments;

It is by God that we have an absolute standard of moral values; not man

And that it is God, and not man, that can read the full intent and motive of the hearts;

And that it is God, and not man, that knows the end from the beginning

God, and not man, that knows what the BIG picture looks like....
He is decides on the basis of complete information; we attempt to judge on incomplete information

God alone knew the long-term consequences of allowing the sinful practices that HE condemned to continue...; we would be lucky if we could predict what happens tomorrow

You cannot say that these people, the Midianites and the Amalekites might have changed their minds.....because I am sure that God read their Hearts and minds and decided that they would not change their evil ways...
Remember that HE sees beyond what we see; this is not like human court of Law where we are restricted to examining the evidence; this is God's court, He will be able to read the heart and the minds

Next, remind people that accuse God of being cruel that whilst they may think that God's punishments for sin are too harsh, their assessment of the horror of sin may be too low

God says that sin is lawlessness: by that we mean a violation of God's laws
Not only is God setting the moral standards but God is free of sin

He alone is the proper judge to determine, to determine the full extent of the horror of sin
And HE alone is the best person to determine innocence and guilt

And when found guilty, He alone is the proper judge to determine appropriate punishment

Ask these critics if they are in a position to make a proper assessment?
Do they have access to a complete, perfect and unbiased record of the information to make a judgment? As humans, are they able to make an unbiased judgment?

As humans we may not wish to inflict punishments the sort of punishments as God might deem fit
But then human desires and thinking is based once again on a limited amount of information, human thinking on matters relating to moral governance will be biased by culture and experience

God's judgments will be neutral and unbiased, and they will rise above cultural difference

Finally, When people say that the OT portrays God as cruel, they are letting their prejudices, emotions and feelings get in the way of the facts.....

In fact, when read in its totality, the bible portrays the GOD of the OT in many ways, not just cruel...He is good, He is merciful, He is just.....

What do I mean when I say that God is all these things ?
We all like to laud these qualities of our God...but do we really stop to think and understand what they actually mean?

Lets work though it....

The scriptures abundantly testify to the goodness of God
That HE is Good means that He supplies temporal needs,
that good and perfect good come from Him;
but what does this also mean? What is the other side of the coin?

Like it or not...it means that, because of His goodness, HE will not tolerate evil
Sin will be punished

What about God being merciful.....
Well, that means God is forgiving
He pardons iniquity, saves us,
God would much rather have us repent
He would much rather people do right and enjoy his blessings rather
than people do wrong, and receive His curses

The very fact that we need His mercy means that somewhere someone has actually made a mistake ...

We must all appreciate God's mercy, because if it were not for this, we would not be here...
It was of His *own* initiative, He set in motion the plan of salvation and the sacrifice of His only Son to atone for our sins

That God is just means that He judges in righteousness.....this is the bit that people choke on
People like that bit where God is supplying our temporal needs and God is exercising His mercy even though they don't always appreciate what that means...

But now, we come to the business end of His nature.....his Justice.....

When God created the Heavens and the earth, he also laid down His moral rules and regulations to govern people's conduct within it....

We have a saying on earth, it goes something like this....there can be no freedom without law.....

We see it happen on earth all the time, as soon as law is not enforced, human behaviour is such that we see looting and pillaging and rapingand then forces have to be sent in to restore law and order....

Well, God already foresaw all this and established His absolute rules regarding moral conduct....

Justice requires that God renders verdicts.....either He pronounces condemnation...
Or he acquits from guilt.....
God proportions the punishment to fit the specific sin.....

Like it or not, you have only two choices.....that is to obey or disobey,
To obey will result in eternal blessings,
To disobey will result in punishments
That God will be fair, we can have no doubt.....

I would summarize like this....
When people accuse the God of the OT of being cruel...we need to remind people that...

Firstly, we exercised the freedom that God granted us to sin; that resulted in us suffering that HE warned us that He did not want us to experience

Secondly, we need to remind people that God does not need to tolerate sin; if it were not for His mercy, we would not have an opportunity to be redeemed through the plan of salvation

Thirdly, only God, the creator and sustainer of life, is in a position to fully evaluate the horror of the sin, the motive behinds it, the consequences of letting it go unpunished, and the appropriate punishment

Finally, OT Scripture paints many aspects to God's nature; that includes a loving GOD, a kind God, a Merciful God, and a Just God

And, when the critics say that God is cruel- what the critics are really saying is that they don't like it when God exercises His Justice....

Those that are yet unconvinced, I would remind them that God will provide an opportunity to examine God's judgments in the millennium after Christ's return and HE will justify all His actions

You might think that the events of the OT might seem quite removed from our day-to-day tribulations, so the next sermon will look at personal suffering.....Why does God allow it? Why should we rejoice in it?

Can I invite everyone to praise God with our closing hymn.....