

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

A. A Universal Problem

Activity 8.1

Use a mind-map or some other framework to note down all the Old Testament passages you can recall with a bearing on the problem of suffering.

For each one, what do you understand the passage to be saying about the problem?

What is your own best answer to the question, 'Why does God allow people to suffer?'

The foremost religious question of our day is 'Why does God allow suffering?' Probably this is because we are so used to being in control. Previous generations seem to have been able to take suffering for granted. But in our generation, such things as accident or illness cut across our carefully planned lives. We are familiar with death from our T.V. screens but not in our immediate experience: most deaths take place in carefully sanitised surroundings outside our homes and often away from even close relations.

These things remind us uncomfortably of our limitations and our dependence on a much larger universe. But the universe in which we have come to believe is vast and impersonal and takes no account of us. The question of suffering is part of a bigger question still: the question of meaninglessness, which is part of the meta-narrative of the post-modern era.

The Old Testament offers no single, all-embracing solution to the problem of evil and suffering. Instead it offers a variety of answers, including actual disagreement. Mostly, the problem is dealt with from within the wisdom tradition: this is, after all, a universal human problem rather than one concerning Israel alone. But there are also insights to be found in the other literature, especially the prophets.

We will need to bear in mind that the Hebrew tradition of wisdom is very different from the Greek. In Hebrew wisdom there is no supposed extra-terrestrial vantage point from which a complete answer might be grasped. All wisdom emerges from experience and speaks to experience as 'spectacles' or frameworks for understanding that experience. Sometimes that means that we will not be able to appreciate the answers being offered until we are able to share the experience, or something like it.

Another difference between Hebrew and Greek wisdom concerns the acceptance of mystery. In Hebrew wisdom, not knowing the final answer does not invalidate a partial answer. God is not expected to show himself or to reveal all his ways. The issue is not whether we understand him as well as we would like but whether we trust him.