

# Suffering

You can use these answers and examples to get help if you are stuck and to check your answers when you have finished them, and to improve your work if you can.

For many of the questions, there could be more than one way of writing a good answer – in these cases, we've given some examples of what a good answer might say, but there are also other things that you could correctly use in your answer.

The questions are in bold, and the answers and examples are in italics.

## Page 1

**Working in pairs or small groups, discuss what types of suffering and what causes of suffering there are in the world. Try to make a list of at least six different examples. You can use the pictures below for ideas – how are the people in them experiencing suffering?**

*Your examples might include things like illness or medical emergencies, financial hardship, homelessness, natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes, domestic abuse and being the victim of a crime.*

**Which of these forms of suffering are caused by humans? Which of them are not caused by humans?**

*From the examples given above, the ones which could be caused by things that humans do might be illness or medical emergencies (whether caused by someone else, or even by an unhealthy lifestyle), financial hardship and homelessness (if they are the result of unwise decisions or fraud), domestic abuse, being the victim of a crime.*

*Natural disasters and some cases of illness and medical emergencies happen without being caused by humans, though a case can be made that things which humans sometimes do can bring them about, for example natural disasters related to climate change and illnesses caused by pollution.*

**Is there one form of suffering which is worse than others?**

*What you choose here is up to you and will depend on your own view.*

## Moral and Natural Evil

Write your answers to the questions on the previous page into the correct section on the diagram below. Where do they overlap, and are there examples which can be said to be both natural and moral evils?

*It will depend on what your six examples are. Sometimes an overlap can be seen in which things which appear to be examples of natural evil actually have deeper causes rooted in human activity, which would make them morally evil as well, as in the example about climate change above.*

Do you think that there is more moral evil in the world today, or is there more natural evil?

Is one of the two types of evil worse than the other? Explain why.

*These are both questions where your own perspective will influence how you respond and there is no right or wrong answer.*

## Why is there suffering in the world?

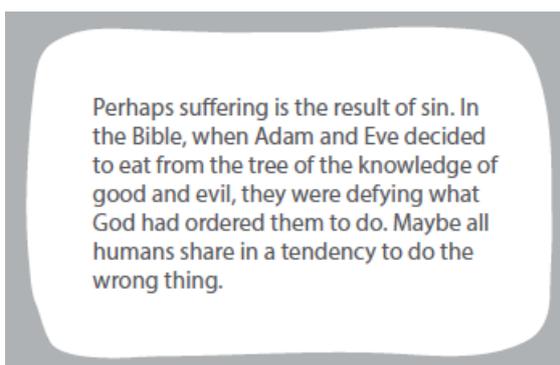
Take a set of cards (there are eight cards in total). Each card describes a possible reason for the existence of suffering in the world.

Working in pairs or small groups, lay the cards out on the table and arrange them in order, from the one which you think is the most likely explanation for why suffering happens down to the least likely.

*This is another question where there is no right or wrong answer – it depends on your own views.*

## What does the Old Testament say about suffering?

Look again at the cards you used in the last task. Which explanations would the author of the story of Job have said were the most likely? Which cards would Job have disagreed with?



*Job definitely would have disagreed with this card, because he knew that he hadn't done anything wrong so his suffering couldn't have been the result of sin on his part.*

Suffering might be a punishment sent by a God on people who have disobeyed his rules. They might be being punished until they change their ways.

*Job would also have disagreed with this card. He did think that his suffering somehow came from God, but not that it was a punishment.*

Perhaps suffering has no purpose. It is just the way that the world is. There should be no attempt to see a purpose, but we can respond by supporting those going through suffering.

*He probably also would have disagreed with this card. He spends most of the story trying to work out what the purpose behind his suffering was, but he never seems to think that it had no purpose.*

Perhaps suffering is a great mystery, so we cannot hope to understand it. A God alone could fully understand its purpose, not human minds.

*At the end of the story God makes it clear to Job that he cannot expect to understand everything from his human perspective, so in the end he might have agreed with the 'Perhaps suffering is a great mystery ...' card.*

### **What can Christians learn about suffering from the story of Job?**

*At the end of the story, God makes Job realise that not everything in the world is understandable, and that God's purposes might not be intelligible to humans. Christians might learn from this that at times suffering might simply be beyond their understanding as well. There are also things that the book of Job seems to indicate that suffering isn't – for example, Job's suffering doesn't happen because he had done anything wrong.*

### **Is it helpful to say that suffering can never be completely understood?**

*You can answer this question in any way you want to, and what you say will depend on what you think about that.*

## Page 4 and the additional pages

### What does the New Testament say about suffering?

#### Paul writes to the Christians in Rome

**Put into your own words what Paul said to the Christians in Rome about suffering.**

*There are lots of ways you could do this. Here is an example:*

*Things might be really bad right now, but it will seem like nothing compared to being in heaven. Even though it doesn't always seem like it, good can come out of bad situations because God loves his followers. There is nothing that is too big or too small in this world or in another world, nor any leader of any country anywhere that can separate us from the love of God.*

**What do you think his purpose was for including this in his letter?**

*The letters in the Bible were all written to individuals or groups of people, sometimes in response to their questions or to try to sort out a problem. We usually don't know what those questions or problems were, but sometimes it can be worked out by looking at what the letters say. In this case, perhaps the Christians in Rome had undergone suffering – early Christians were sometimes persecuted by the Romans – and Paul wanted to encourage them and give them hope. Or maybe Paul was writing about his own suffering (he was often unwell and was imprisoned at least twice) and how he had got through it.*

**Choose three adjectives to describe how reading this passage might change how Christians feel about any suffering they are going through.**

*There are lots that you could choose here. Some words which describe what Paul probably wanted them to feel are: comforted, hopeful and encouraged.*

#### Jesus heals a deaf man and mute man

**Rearrange the parts of the story into the correct order.**

*The correct order is:*

*Then Jesus returned from the region around Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards Lake Galilee. He went through the land near the ten cities known as Decapolis.*

*Some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk. They begged Jesus just to touch him.*

*After Jesus had taken him aside from the crowd, he stuck his fingers in the man's ears. Then he spat and put the spit on the man's tongue.*

*Jesus looked up towards heaven, and with a groan he said "Effatha!" which means "open up!"*

*At once the man could hear, and he had no more trouble talking clearly.*

*Jesus told the people not to say anything about what he had done. But the more he told them, the more they talked about it.*

*They were completely amazed and said, "Everything he does is good! He even heals people who cannot hear or talk."*

Mark chapter 7 verses 31–37 (CEV)

*(if you're using the version of this resource which uses the NRSV Bible translation, you'll find that there are some minor differences to the CEV version used here).*

**How might Jesus' healing miracles influence how Christians think about other people who are experiencing suffering, and any actions they take?**

*In the Gospel accounts of his life, Jesus has a clear concern for people who are disadvantaged, whether they are poor, isolated or unwell. In the Gospel accounts of his life there are over 25 examples of healing miracles carried out by Jesus. The culture Jesus lived in often explained suffering as the result of God's disfavour, but Jesus didn't agree and was willing to heal people from whatever they were suffering from. Christians are likely to view people who are unwell as needing help and be inspired by Jesus' sympathetic approach to them. They often pray for healing for themselves and for others, and they give thanks to God when people recover from an illness. They might also find practical ways to help which could include supporting medical research charities or working in medical care themselves.*

## The Crucifixion

**How might belief that Jesus knew what suffering was like help a Christian to deal with their own suffering?**

*Christians believe that because Jesus knew what it was like to suffer, God can relate to human suffering and truly understands what humans are going through when they suffer. This might make them feel less alone with their own suffering and it might strengthen them to know that God has been there before them.*

**Which of these types of writing do you think is easiest for someone today to use to find out what the Bible says about suffering, and which is the hardest? Explain why.**

*Each of these forms of literature from the Bible has something to say about suffering, but they do so in different ways. Which of them you think is easiest and hardest is up to you. Here are some ideas:*

*What Paul wrote about suffering and hope speaks of his own suffering and the suffering of others he knew, but what he said can be difficult to understand unless you remember that it was part of a letter written in specific circumstances.*

*The accounts of the healing miracles in the Gospels illustrate Jesus' approach to suffering and his desire to relieve people of suffering.*

Using the same cards as you used earlier on in this topic, work in pairs or small groups and organise them again, but this time organise them into two groups : explanations for suffering which Christians might believe, and explanations which Christians would not believe.

For each explanation, either match it to something you have learned about how Christians respond to suffering, or explain what it is about the explanation which would mean that a Christian would not believe it.

*As we have seen, Christianity doesn't offer one single explanation as to why suffering happens. Instead, as Christians think about the presence of suffering in the world, they might relate to many of the explanations for suffering on the cards and consider them to be possible answers.*

Perhaps we are asking the wrong question if we assume that suffering starts with a God. A God does not make instruments of torture or weapons of mass destruction like atomic bombs, or people to do bad things. Maybe human beings create suffering, not a God.

*This explanation is one which most Christians would agree with. Christianity teaches that God is good, so he would not inflict undeserved suffering on the world. It also teaches that humans can be sinful, and that they sometimes do wrong things which cause hurt or harm to themselves or others.*

Perhaps suffering is a great mystery, so we cannot hope to understand it. A God alone could fully understand its purpose, not human minds.

*This explanation is one which Christians who have read and reflected on the book of Job might agree with. In Job, God tells Job that his understanding is too limited to comprehend all of the workings of the world, which only God can understand.*

Perhaps suffering is the result of sin. In the Bible, when Adam and Eve decided to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were defying what God had ordered them to do. Maybe all humans share in a tendency to do the wrong thing.

*Christianity teaches that humans have an inherent tendency to be sinful. The fourth-century CE Christian thinker St Augustine said that all humans are born in a condition of 'original sin', which can explain much of the suffering which goes on in the world, and why both the world and humans are less good than they would like them to be.*

Suffering may be a test that a God uses to discover people's character or test their faith. Maybe its purpose is to strengthen them, making them a better person, more fit for heaven.

*Sometimes Christians might see suffering as a test of their faith, or as an opportunity to respond in a way that strengthens it. Job's suffering is a painful process, but he ends with a deeper understanding of himself and of God.*

*A second-century CE Christian thinker called Irenaeus proposed something similar to this explanation. He taught that God creates humans imperfectly so that they have an opportunity to develop and grow into better people, and that suffering is an unavoidable consequence of that.*

*Here are the explanations which Christians would probably either totally disagree with, or that they would say don't give a good enough answer to the question of suffering.*

Some suffering can act as a warning, so perhaps the existence of bodily pain can be seen as a helpful thing. It might give us a warning that we need medical treatment.

*This explanation says that pain is simply the body's way of telling us that something is wrong. Christians probably wouldn't disagree with that on a scientific level, but perhaps they might say that it only explains the process (why injuries hurt) and ignores the deeper questions such as, 'Why do we need to get unwell in the first place?'*

Perhaps people create the causes of their suffering themselves through wrong things which they have done in the past.

*Christians might agree with this explanation up to a point, because suffering does sometimes come about as the result of people's own mistakes. However, they don't believe that a wrong action inevitably brings about a matching punishment or misfortune, or that all suffering happens in this way.*

Suffering might be a punishment sent by a God on people who have disobeyed his rules. They might be being punished until they change their ways.

*There are examples in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, where it says that God punished people for wrongdoing, often through natural disasters. Christians believe that God is just, and that human wrongdoing has consequences. In the Middle Ages, Christians often thought that suffering was a divine punishment. Christians today more often believe that those consequences come after death rather than by having suffering inflicted while alive.*

Perhaps suffering has no purpose. It is just the way that the world is. There should be no attempt to see a purpose, but we can respond by supporting those going through suffering.

*Christians believe that the world was created by God according to his design and plan, and they usually don't believe that any part of it is purposeless. They would usually agree, though, that they should respond to and support those who are going through suffering.*