In this week’s Readers’ Mailbag we move away from the academic study of the New Testament to much broader and more important questions of relevance to us all, involving how we relate to others and live in the world. The question is about attitudes and responses to suffering. The question came in a comment about an earlier post I had done.

**QUESTION:**

You said ‘My ultimate view is that even if suffering may lead us away from a belief in God, as it did for me, it should at the same time lead us toward humility in the face of the universe and toward a more caring, loving attitude toward those who suffer.’ I guess I didn’t see in your article a clear explanation for why suffering should lead towards the things you mention. I do not think you are wrong, but it would be good to have it rationed out, as I think this is the only place you make a claim without any evidence.

**RESPONSE:**

Ah, I can see how my conclusion may well not make sense when the logic / thinking in my head doesn’t get written down on the page! As it turns out, I don’t have any “evidence” for my view. It’s just my view, a view that seems to follow from my position. Or at least I should say it seems to follow for *me*. I repeatedly notice (not just by reading the daily news, though that’s a blazingly obvious place to start) that my view — that we should be more humble in the face of the universe and more loving toward those who suffer — is not shared by large masses of people, including privileged people, who, because of their privilege, which in most cases is handed to them at birth (I myself: born a white male in mid-century America in very comfortable circumstances. Which of that did I *deserve* or *earn* exactly??) are far more interested in advancing their privilege and growing it at the expense of others, not giving a damn for those they hurt in the process. Hence our daily headlines. But, well, I try not to despair. There are masses of good folk out there as well. Take the members of this blog for instance!

So, briefly, to explain my view of suffering. This will be just a brief statement: I’ve talked about it all at length on the blog before (just look up “suffering” in a word search) and in my book *God’s Problem: How The Bible Fails to Answer our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer*. The basic line: even though raised as a Christian and for many years a seriously committed evangelical, I eventually left the faith, not because of my biblical scholarship and the attendant realization that the Bible is not a completely reliable book handed down by God, but because I was no longer satisfied with the “answers” to why there is so much pain and misery in the world if there was a God who was in charge of it, who interceded for those in need, and who answered prayer.

I had thought about the issue for many years; I had read about it; talked about it; taught about it; pondered the various answers people have given: regular ole folk, philosophers, theologians, etc. At one point I finally decided, I just don’t believe it any more. If everyone suffered about like *I* do, I could probably live with it. But not in a world where five people die of malaria every minute, something like 1500 every hour from not having clean water, something like 20,000 children every day of starvation. Yes, I know we can work to solve these problems, and if we don’t, it’s our fault. But some problems we won’t solve – 300,000 people killed in a tsunami, e.g. And more important, it’s only been within the last century
that we have had the wherewithal even to *think* about ending poverty and hunger and ... so on. If God were active in helping us do that now, finally, where was he for, say, the past 30,000 years?

In any event, I am not saying you should agree with me. Not at *all*. I’m saying that this is what led me to lose my faith in the existence of God. If everyone had roughly my life, yeah, I’d still believe in a loving God who was in control. Absolutely. But it’s hard to tell an eight-year old girl in Ethiopia, emaciated from starvation and soon to die, that God loves her and is doing the best for her. And for me, a well-fed American, to tell her that it’s all OK because she’ll wake up in heaven is – again, for me – a grotesque abomination.

So I left my faith. Others have as well. The question being asked is: why should that make us more humble in the face of the universe and more caring for others?

**Humility.** My view is that the universe we inhabit is not caring and it is not conscious. It does not want the best for us. But it is almost infinitely powerful. We are not going to overpower it. We may *think* that we can control it: but all we are merely controlling part of the tiny bubble we happen to live in. The laws of physics will have their way, and there’s no way to stop them. You may control entropy for a brief while, but in the end, the material universe will disperse.

That means we are not the most important of all things in existence. For one thing, we have not been here long. Many of us on the blog are “historically minded,” and for most of us that means we are obsessed with the events that have transpired at certain (small) points over the past 2000 years, or possibly, for some of us 3000 years, or, possibly, a bit more.

But what is 2000 years in relation to 13.8 billion (i.e., since the universe has been around). Not even the blink of an eye. And what is 13.8 billion to the trillions that lie ahead? Not even the blink of an eye.

The author of Ecclesiastes had no idea of Big Bangs, Entropy, Black Holes, or anything else connected with the universe’s past or future. But he realized that life is short, like the mist of the field you see when you first get up, but is gone by breakfast.

If all this doesn’t make us humble in the face of reality, then, well, OK. Life is short — so go ahead and refuse to be humbled! J

**Caring.** And why should the realities of our existence make us more caring for others? Basic answer (for me): We are all in this together, and there is no one else out there to help us.

We are all related to one another, biologically, socially, culturally, humanly. Being human means having the ability to be aware of ourselves and others (we are endowed with one of the universe’s most amazing miracles: consciousness). We recognize not just what we ourselves need and want, but what others need and want. That enables us to care.

I used to think that God was the ultimate care-giver: if things are bad now, he will make them better later. Now I no longer think so. That means if someone is going to be helped, I have to help them. They are my brother or sister. I want to help them. I better help them. If I don’t, there is no other source of help. Why should I? I’m a human, not a rock or a thorn bush or a slug. I have feelings and a natural tendency to care for others (virtually all
humans do: at least to care for *some* others). Developing the caring nature is better than thwarting it. Better for others and better for me, the one who is endowed with that nature.

And so that’s why I think loss of faith should not only make us more humble in the face of the universe, but more giving of ourselves to others.

I don’t think for a second I can convince people of this. It is easy to find arguments against it. The arguments against it are in our face, every day, in what we read, hear, and see. Many, many people are interested in asserting their power and privilege as much as they can, others be damned. Since life is short, in this view, and I’m going to screw whomever I need to make life better for myself.

I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to turn my back on others who are less privileged than I am, and who are suffering, many of them suffering horribly, because of the accidents of their birth and/or the accidents of their life. It is not because God loves me and I want to imitate his love to others – though I am deeply and profoundly impressed and motivated by people who have this view and act on it. For me it is because I am human, and being human means caring for those who are here with me in a harsh universe where there is no source of good above us who is in control. Caring makes me more human. And it provides a sense of meaning and purpose in this blink-of-an-eye life I have to live.

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