

# MEETING 2

## THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING AND DEATH

- **Review previous session**

The 5 things that point to the existence of God.

- **Question**

“If there is a God, why is there so much suffering and death in the world?”

- **Sharing in the group**

Tell why you think that there is so much suffering and death in the world.

- **Teaching from the Bible**

People can point to many things as the cause of suffering and death.

The Bible reveals that there are 5 main reasons for suffering and death:

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### A. THE GODLESSNESS OF PEOPLE LEADS TO SUFFERING

#### 1. The nature of godlessness.

What is the meaning of “godlessness”? *Read* Romans 1:18-23.

- “Godlessness” means two things:

- Godlessness is not believing in the existence of God at all and thus living an atheistic life-style in which the person himself is his own god and does what he pleases.

- Godlessness is not believing in the true God, but believing in gods which have been made or devised by people. These idols may be either idols of stone or non-existent ‘gods’ devised in their minds.

In short, godlessness is living without the true God who revealed himself in the Bible!

- What do godless people do with the true God?

Although people can know that there is a true God, they do not glorify or thank him. Although people realise that God exists and that he is powerful, they do not acknowledge his existence or power. They do not respect and honour him. Instead of worshipping and serving the true God, people worship and serve their own idols.

- Why do people make idols?

People make idols to look like themselves (Psalm 115:8), because they want to control their idols and thus control their own life-styles! The kinds of idols they make are the kinds that allow them to do what they like, even to live in sin! Their idols might require them to change with respect to “what they do” (religious duties), but do not require them to change with respect to “who they are” (i.e. to repent and reform their attitude, words, deeds, character, etc.)!

- What must happen in order that people respect and worship the true God?

When people begin to respect and worship the true God, they cannot continue to live just as they like. *The true God requires them to change with respect to who they are as well as with respect to what they do!*

#### 2. The consequences of godlessness.

What are the consequences of godlessness? *Read* Romans 1:21.

Godlessness affects a person’s mind and heart. The Bible says, “Their thinking becomes futile”, that is, in God’s eyes, their thinking is worthless, useless and fruitless, because they do not know the truth that God has revealed. Without God’s truth and wisdom, people live in a world of lies and deceit. They deceive and are deceived and thus suffer and cause suffering to others!

The Bible also says, “Their foolish hearts become darkened”, that is, they lack the necessary “light” to live a moral life. Many people cannot find “power” in themselves to do the good things that they really want to do. Without moral character, people suffer and cause others to suffer!

The Bible says, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven over them” (Romans 1:18). The relationship with the true God has been broken.

**Summarise:** People suffer because either they deny the existence of the true and living God or they exchange the true God for gods that have been made or devised by people. In short, GODLESSNESS causes people to suffer!

## B. THERE IS SUFFERING BECAUSE OF THE WICKEDNESS OF PEOPLE

### 1. The nature and extent of wickedness.

- What is the meaning of “wickedness”?

**Read** Romans 1:24-32. While “godlessness” expresses *the wrong relationship towards God*, “wickedness” expresses *the wrong relationship towards people*. People continually invent ways to do evil. People drag one another into indecent and depraved life-styles and do every conceivable kind of evil to one another. People also approve of the evil people do in the world! Consider the things listed in Romans 1, like spiritual arrogance and making gods whom other people must worship, sexual immorality and perversion, commercial greed and deceit, social gossiping and boasting and political senselessness and faithlessness. People are filled with wickedness. No wonder, when people do these wicked things to one another, they all suffer!

### 2. Why do people do these wicked things to one another?

**Read** Romans 1:24-32. People’s relationship to God determines their relationship to other people! When people exchange the true God for false idols or simply want to be gods themselves, then the true *God gives them over to* the sinful desires of their hearts, to shameful lusts and to a depraved mind. Then God allows people to become what they want to become and to do what they want to do. Thus people suffer the consequences of their own desires. Because they want to be Godless, they taste what a life without the true God is like! Because they choose to be *godless*, they become *wicked*.

- Who in this world do these wicked things to one another?

**Read** Romans 3:10-12,23. The Bible says that all people in the world do wicked things like these to one another.

**Summary.** People suffer because they do wickedness, promote wickedness or approve of wickedness. They pervert one another and harm one another. In short, WICKEDNESS causes people to suffer!

## C. THERE IS SUFFERING BECAUSE OF THE FALSE BELIEFS OF PEOPLE

### 1. The nature of truth.

- What is truth?

**Read** Numbers 13:19. “Truth” is who God is and what God says and does.

- What are two very important truths?

**Read** Romans 1:18, 25; Isaiah 43:4 and Jeremiah 29:11. Two very important truths are:

- God wants to give *security* to people, that is, the knowledge that you are unconditionally loved and permanently accepted. In Isaiah 43:4 God says, “You are precious in my eyes and honoured in my sight, ... I love you, ...” The truth is what God says to his own people, “You are precious, honoured and loved by God!” That is real security!
- God wants to give *significance* to people, that is, the knowledge that what you do is meaningful and important. In Jeremiah 29:11 God says, “I know the plans I have for you, ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” The truth is that God gives you a meaningful and hopeful task! Your life is significant in God’s eyes!” That is the real significance in life!

Thus, “the truth” about anything is inseparably bound to God and to his words and his deeds.

### 2. The resistance to the truth.

- Why and how do people suppress or exchange the truth?

**Read** Romans 1:18,22-23.

- People *suppress* the truth when they do not want to hear the truth, know the truth or live by the truth. They feel ashamed to be associated with God and so they deny or ignore the truth. They feel guilty or afraid about their relationship with God and so they avoid or resist the truth.

- People *exchange* the truth when they deliberately believe in false beliefs and false values.

Therefore, whenever people suppress or exchange the security and significance which God wants to give to the, they suffer!

**Summary.** People without the true and living God also tend to be without righteousness and the truth. When they do not know the truth about God, they cannot know the truth about themselves or the truth about the world. They don’t know who they are, where they come from, why they are here or where they are going. They suffer because they feel insecure, disoriented, and worthless. They suffer because they see no meaning in life or because they have blindly committed themselves to a destructive lifestyle. In short, THE BELIEF IN LIES, FALSE BELIEFS AND BASE VALUES cause people to suffer.

### 3. The three wrong relationships.

**Question.** How does the Bible describe natural man?

By nature every human being has:

- a wrong relationship to God
- a wrong relationship to other people
- and a wrong relationship to himself.

By nature, every human being is:

- godless
- wicked
- and believes in lies, false beliefs and base values.

The Bible calls these three wrong relationships with one word, namely “sin”. The word “sin” means “to miss the goal of God”. The real reason for so much suffering in the world is “sin”. “Sin” is always defined in relationship to God and as a consequence also in relationship to other people and yourself.

- “The root of sin” is a broken relationship to the true and living God, or, independence from God and thus self-sufficiency.
- “The fruit of sin” is doing what God forbids and neglecting what God commands. The lists of sins in the Bible are all descriptions of the fruit of a tree which has as its root independence from God or a broken relationship with God.

“Sin” is:

- to miss Gods goals
- to transgress the commands
- and to twist Gods truths

Thus the real reason why there is so much suffering in the world is “sin”. People suffer because they are SINNERS.

**Read** Romans 8:7-8. How does the Bible describe the ability of natural man?

The natural man, i.e. the unregenerate unbeliever, has a hostile attitude towards the God of the Bible. He does not submit to God’s Word and *he cannot submit himself with his so-called “free will” or “personal effort” to God’s Word!* Natural man can do nothing by himself to please God!

## D. THE REALITY OF DEATH CAUSE SUFFERING

**Discuss** the question below.

### 1. The meaning of the word “death”.

**Read** Romans 6:23; Ecclesiastes 5:15; Ecclesiastes 9:3-6. What does “death” mean to you?

The consequence of sin is “death”! Death is feared by all people. Death is so terrible, that many people do not even want to mention the word or think about death. Death is experienced by most people as the climax of all suffering. “Death” means “separation”.

- Death means *separation* from your body. Your body returns to the dust of the earth (1 Corinthians 15:50).
- Death means *separation* from your loved ones. You have to leave them behind
- Death means *separation* from your possessions, loss of all your education, loss of your job, leaving behind all your accomplishments and position. You can take nothing of all you have worked for so hard during your lifetime along with you in death (Psalm 49:10,17; 1 Timothy 6:7).
- Death is also *a terror* for those who are left behind. They must continually miss you and do not know what to expect when it is their turn to die. They live constantly in fear of death (Hebrews 2:15).

**Summary.** “Death” means separation from everything on earth and causes untold suffering to yourself and to all whom you leave behind. Death is the greatest enemy most people know. In short, DEATH causes people to suffer.

## E. THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD CAUSE SUFFERING

“Judgement” in the Bible refers to two distinct kinds of judgements, namely, the present judgements of God and the future judgement of God. Both cause suffering.

### 1. The present judgements of God.

- **How does God allow his present judgements to come over people?**

**Read** Galatians 6:7-8. The present judgements that God allows to come over people are the immediate consequences of their own sins. God created the earth and man and determined the purpose for the existence of man. *God has also built laws into his creation and creatures.* If these laws are transgressed, they bring punishment with them. If you ignore the law of gravity, you can have a nasty fall. Likewise, if you transgress the spiritual and moral laws of God in creation, then God allows you to suffer. For example, laziness in work leads to poverty. Hatred leads to broken relationships. Tyranny and oppression lead to wars. Mismanagement of the earth leads to droughts or floods. Corruption in business leads to crime. Greed leads to destroying others. Sexual immorality leads to all kinds of sexual diseases. Taking drugs leads to slavery. In many such kinds of ways, the consequences of sin catch up with the sinner.

• **How does God bring his present judgements over people?**

**Read** Leviticus 26:14-33; Amos 4:6-12; Haggai 1:3-11 and Ezekiel 14:21. God controls the universe, including the events of history and the forces of nature. In times when people disobey God or when the relationship between people and God is broken, *then God withdraws his care from people or even punishes them*. He withdraws people's basic needs of food and clothing. He causes people's wages to be insufficient and blows their high expectations of life away. In this way, God uses all kinds of disasters like earthquakes, floods, and especially droughts and famines throughout history to show his displeasure against sin and to warn people to repent and turn back to him.

• **What is the relationship between your personal sin and suffering?**

Suffering can have different causes:

- Numbers 12:6-10: your own sin.
- 2 Samuel 24:15-17: the sin of another person.
- 1 Samuel 5:1-6: the sin of your nation.
- Luke 13:16: not sin, but the evil intentions of Satan.
- John 9:1-3: not sin, but the good intention of God.

Thus, on the whole human with every kind of cause is the consequence of the spiritual degeneration of mankind to which all men belong. The whole mankind is liable to suffer. The Bible rejects the idea that the suffering of an individual is directly proportional to his personal sin (which is the "karma-samsara" teaching of Hinduism). The Bible teaches that God not only deals with people as an individual, but also as a family, as a nation, and even as part of all mankind bound to Adam or a part of the body of believers bound to Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12,18-19). That is why any specific form of suffering as for example sickness, not necessarily the result of one's personal sin. (We do not discuss the significance of suffering here).

• **What is the real reason why God brings his present judgements on people?**

**Read** 1 Corinthians 11:32; Hebrews 12:4-13. "When we (believers) are judged<sup>1</sup> by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be doomed<sup>2</sup> with the world (the unbelievers)" (1 Corinthians 11:32). *God brings his present judgements on people in order to safeguard them from eternal damnation!* He does not desire people to remain lost forever! The purpose of his present judgements is to discipline people, that is, to warn people, to expose their sins and to rebuke them for their sins. God's goal is to do what is best for people *now*. To allow people to continue in their present sins, would lead to their ultimate slavery to sins and consequently to God's eternal punishment for their sins. The purpose of God's present judgements is to cause people to turn from their godlessness and wickedness and instead share in God's holiness and righteousness.

## 2. The future judgement of God.

• By looking at the life-styles of wicked people, why would you describe life in this world as just or unjust?

**Read** Psalm 73:2-16. Life is manifestly unjust! The good suffer, the unselfish are exploited, the meek are terrorised, and the poor are deprived. On the other hand, the evil flourish, the selfish make fortunes, the brutal oppress the meek and the rich cause the poor to get poorer. Tyrants die peacefully in their beds while saints are tortured to death. If, as we are assuming, there is a God who is all-powerful and good, how can he possibly allow the injustices in the world to continue? If he does nothing about all the injustice in the world, either now or after this life in order to redress such gross injustice and put down such rampant evil, then:

- he is either not all-powerful and so cannot do it
- or he is not good and so does not care!

However, the Bible teaches very clearly that God is all-powerful and good and that justice on a cosmic scale will be done and that all the people who ever lived on earth will be present at *the last judgement!*

• What does God's last judgement look like?

**Read** Hebrews 9:27; Matthew 25:31-33; Ecclesiastes 12:14. The Bible says that death is not the end! At the end of human history in this world, Jesus will return to earth and judge all the people that ever lived. This day is called "the Day of Judgement". Jesus Christ will separate the Christians from the non-Christians and they will be judged. God will judge all people for everything they have done, both good and evil. God will even judge all hidden things. No one and nothing will escape his judgement!

• For what things will people be judged?

**Read** the Bible passages below. The non-Christians will be judged for the following things:

- Romans 5:12,17-19. God will punish all people for sharing in the fall into sin of the representative of all mankind, Adam.
- Matthew 13:41-42; Revelation 21:8. God will punish the world for its *evil* and the *wicked* people for their sins.
- Matthew 25:41-46. Even people who do not regard themselves as wicked will go to eternal punishment, because they are not righteous and have *neglected* to do what God commanded.
- John 3:18-21,36. God will punish people for their *unbelief*.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9. God will punish people for their *ignorance of God* and their *disobedience to the gospel*.

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<sup>1</sup> Greek: krinò

<sup>2</sup> Greek: katakrinò (cf. Romans 8:1)

- Isaiah 2:11-12,17-19. God will put an end to the *arrogance and pride* of people and bring down the mighty political and military rulers from their thrones.
- Matthew 5:3-12. God will judge the needy with righteousness, the poor with justice, but send the rich away empty-handed and slay the wicked.

- Why will God's future judgement be far worse than all present suffering?

**Read** the Bible passages below.

- Mark 9:42-49. The place of eternal punishment is called “the lake of fire” or “hell” and it is a place of fire, agony and torment. “Hell” is a place of burning without dying.
- Luke 16:23-31. Hell (here called “Hades”) is a place of no return – a place from which no one can get out.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9. Hell means to be punished with everlasting destruction, which does not mean annihilation, but suffering because they are removed and shut out from the loving presence of God and the majestic and powerful care of his creation.
- Matthew 25:45-46. Hell means eternal punishment, which is the opposite of eternal life.

The Bible says that “death” is not the end! After death there will be the final judgement. At the end of human history in this world, Jesus will return to earth and judge all the people that ever lived.

Jesus Christ warns that all unbelievers and all wicked people will suffer in the future age. This is very serious! Suffering in God's future judgement will be far worse than the present physical death! The suffering is God's future last judgement will be the worst suffering ever!

- Who will be thrown into the lake of fire?

**Read** John 14:6; Revelation 20:15. Everyone whose name was not found written in “the book of life”, that is, everyone who does not have eternal life, because he does not believe in Jesus Christ.

**Summary.** People suffer because God already brings their present sins into judgement. People also suffer because “they know that one day they will have to give an account of everything they have done. Even their hidden sins will be exposed and judged.” GOD'S PRESENT AND FUTURE JUDGEMENTS cause people to suffer.

**Summary. The 5 main reasons for suffering:**

1. There is suffering because of the godlessness of people.
2. There is suffering because of the wickedness of people.
3. There is suffering because of the false beliefs and values of people.
4. There is suffering because of the death of people.
5. There is suffering because of the judgement of God on people.

**ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING SESSION**

1. During the next week, read the Bible passages again. Consider what the Bible says about the reasons for suffering and death.
2. During the next week, consider the following question: “If you were God, what would you do to solve the problem of suffering and death?” Think of some solutions to the problem of suffering and death.