

Simple answers to complex questions are simply unhelpful.

No one answers the question, “Does God want His children to suffer?” with an unqualified “yes,” but unfortunately many do with a comprehensive “no.” Many state emphatically that God does not want His children to suffer as if that fully answers the question. But half-truths are half-untruths.

What do we Mean by “Want?”

“Want” is a difficult concept. Do we *want* to exercise and eat healthy? Do we *want* to go to the dentist? Do we *want* to discipline our children? Do we *want* to drive the speed limit? Do we *want* to pay taxes, go to work or always do the right thing? If we have a simple understanding of the term “want,” we have a simple answer to the question, but sometimes simple is insufficient.

I don’t enjoy the inherent act of exercise, and I doubt you take pleasure in the act of discipline. I *want* to drive the speed limit for a number of reasons (I *want* to be obedient to authority, and I don’t *want* to endanger myself or others), but not because I love driving 40 mph. I *want* to drive 40, but I don’t *want* to drive 40. Though we may not enjoy every aspect of actions, we still do them because we *want* what is produced by them. We exercise, eat and discipline our children for the sake of something greater, and in that we take pleasure. We desire it. We will it. We *want* it.

Why Suffering Is “Wanted”

Acknowledging the complexity of our desires provides insight into how to answer the question, “Does God want His children to suffer?” Does He take pleasure in our pain? Of course not! Does He ordain and employ it for the sake of what He does find pleasurable? Absolutely! God does not *want* His children to suffer in the first sense of the word, but He does in the second sense. The same word is being used, but the connotation is radically different. God *wants* His children to suffer, but He does not *want* His children to suffer. God *wants* His children to suffer because He loves what is accomplished through it – our happiness and holiness in Christ.

Suffering is not an end in itself. The suffering that His children experience in this world is not ultimate. In fact, Paul says that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18) and calls it “slight momentary affliction” (2 Corinthians 4:17). This is coming from a man who was shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, bitten by a

viper, lashed, bound, imprisoned and eventually beheaded for the sake of the gospel.

Suffering, trials, tribulations, hardships, pain and persecution are not ultimate. They are tools in the hand of a wise, compassionate, sovereign and skillful surgeon. They are used by God to produce that of inestimable value in us: steadfastness (James 1:2-3), endurance, character, hope (Romans 5:3-4), holiness, righteousness (Hebrews 12:3-11), praise, glory and honor (1 Peter 1:6-7). God wants these things for us and thus wants that which brings them about.

The Will of God and Suffering in John 11

John 11:1-44 is an interesting passage to observe in relation to this truth. John recounts the death of Lazarus and the response of Jesus. I am always struck by the complex beauty of the first word of verse six, “so” or “therefore.”¹ As verse five states, Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus and “so/therefore” He delayed. What was the result of this delay? Lazarus’ death. That sounds unloving on the surface. We think the text should read, “Jesus loved them, so He hurried to them,” but instead of hastening to help, He waited. Jesus delayed, and Lazarus died because He loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. His delay does not disprove His love; instead, it demonstrates greater depths of it.

Even more startling are the words of Christ in verse 15. After confirming that Lazarus died, He stated, “I am glad I was not there.” The phrase “I am glad” is a translation of the Greek word *χαίρω* (*chairo*), which is elsewhere rendered rejoice, delight or take pleasure in. Christ is saying, “I rejoice that I was not there” or “I am pleased that I was not there.” Christ delighted in a delay that allowed a death and brought about such distress? He did this because He loved the one who died and those who wept?

A short and simple answer simply won’t cut it here. Jesus loved Mary, Martha, His disciples and Lazarus so much that He delayed, allowing Lazarus to die. He then rejoiced in the fact that He was not there to prevent it. Did Jesus then *want* Lazarus to die? In some sense, we have to say yes to take the text seriously. Jesus wanted Lazarus to die and Mary and Martha to experience great sorrow.

¹ Some translations miss this nuance and translate the Greek conjunction as “yet” rather than the better “therefore.” I was glad to see that the latest version of the NIV (2011) contains the better reading, whereas older versions did not.

Why would Jesus want Lazarus to die? He is not murderous or cruel. Jesus does not take pleasure in suffering itself. Though the event was not pleasing, what it produced was profoundly pleasing to Him! He loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus and desired their good. He valued something more than He valued their not experiencing pain and suffering. What then did He value?

There are two ways to answer this question, and they are inseparable. The first is found in verse 15: "I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe." Christ's delay was for the faith of those He loved. Faith pleases Christ (Hebrews 11:6), and Christ is pleased with the instrument used to prompt faith, even if the tool is not inherently pleasing.

But this is not the only way to answer the question. The other way is to consider what He always holds as most valuable. We know that He always delights most deeply in the glory of the triune God. Verse four states this explicitly: "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Christ valued glory and thus delayed so that Lazarus would die.

One way of answering the question, "Why did Christ delay?" is to conclude that He delayed to promote the faith of His beloved. Another way is to say that He delayed for the sake of His own and the Father's glory. But these answers are not distinct. They are inseparably connected. Verse 40 helps us see this connection more clearly: "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" Faith sees and embraces the glory of God and further expresses this glory. God is glorified when we trust in Him.

This helps us see why God *wants* His children to suffer. He *wants* us to suffer so that we might lean more upon Him and seek Him as our refuge and hope. In this we are satisfied, and He is glorified. As we find our contentment in Him alone, especially in suffering, God becomes a greater treasure to us. He does not *want* us to suffer except insofar as it is used by Him for our joy which He desperately *wants*.

Conclusion

Sometimes God is glorified by removing the pain (John 11), but sometimes He is glorified by sustaining through the pain (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). We must embrace both perspectives, not one or the other. Sometimes our faith is increased by seeing the blind healed and dead raised, and sometimes it is sustained through His daily provision in the midst of the desert, death, blindness, floods and famine. God's goodness, sovereignty and love do not prove that His children will not suffer, but that they will overcome, persevere and endure. God does not promise that

we will not suffer, but that suffering will not separate us from His love (Romans 8:35-39).

Does God want His children to suffer? It depends on what you are asking. Does He enjoy our pain? Of course not! But does He enjoy what is accomplished through it, namely our eternal joy and His infinite glory? Of course! To Him be the glory.

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:5-11

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