



## IN THIS ISSUE

**A Christian Response to Tragedy** by Professor Lee Barrett addresses what is possibly the most frequently asked question by Christian believers: if God is in control, why does he permit tragedy and suffering to occur? **Skulking Through the Inevitable** gives advice to a student which, the author says, will "do you good." Eugene Peterson offers his insights to Bible readers in his introduction to **The Message**.



Because of all that's going on down there, St. Peter might ask you if you have any personal baggage you wish to declare.

## Skulking Through the Inevitable

excerpt  
from a  
letter from  
Baron  
Friedrich  
Von  
Hugel  
to a  
student

*You have now these weeks at School, and whether you take them slackly and ungenerously, or keenly and with a nobly determined heart – there they are. They will have to be got through. And yet I am sure that if you take them the latter way, looking at all the best sides of the School, and throwing yourself as fully into them as ever you can – the time will not only pass quicker, but will pass doing you good. Otherwise it will pass, yes, but will do you harm.*

*I have now come to feel that there is hardly anything more radically mean and deteriorating than, as it were, skulking through the inevitable, and just simply counting the hours till it passes."*

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## A Christian response to **tragedy**

by Lee Barrett, III, Ph.D.

People suffer. We are the victims of tsunamis, earthquakes, viruses, wars, bigotry, betrayals, declining health, and terrors too private to be named. No amount of technological progress or social engineering will ever eradicate the aching reality of human pain.

This universality and intractability of suffering is depressing enough. But for Christianity (and to some extent Judaism and Islam also) the problem of suffering is compounded. Not only does the advent of tragedy cause Christians to feel the emotional anguish that seems to be the common lot of all humanity, but it also has the potential to unsettle their faith. Burdened by grief, many Christian hearts have cried out, "God, if you love me, why are you allowing

this to happen to me?"

This quandary for Christians is that their tradition has historically affirmed three propositions, which, when taken together, seem to contradict one another. The first assertion is that God is all-loving, the second is that God is all-powerful, and the third is that suffering is real. Putting the first two claims together, we must conclude that God wants to protect God's creatures from devastating harm and that God can protect God's creatures from devastating harm. But, in light of the third proposition, we are forced to wonder why the God who wants to project us and can protect us so notably fails to do so. As a

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result, we begin to fear, consciously or unconsciously, that God may have a sadistic streak, or be incompetent, or be asleep on the job, or perhaps not exist at all. Is God real? If so, is God our friend or our enemy? Through the centuries, thoughtful and devout Christians have tried to formulate spiritually and intellectually satisfying answers to the nagging question, "God, why did you allow that to happen?" (Incidentally, neither the Bible nor the creeds and confessions of the Christian churches offer a clear, succinct answer.)

None of these attempted resolutions have proven to be entirely plausible. For example, some folks have maintained that God allows suffering in order to make room for human freedom, a freedom that is inevitably misused, resulting in hurtful decisions and poor choices. But this response fails to quiet the suspicion that God may have been given frail, fickle homo sapiens a good bit too much liberty in an environment that was way far too dangerous. God's act of granting so much freedom to such fallible creatures would be like a parent turning a bunch of three-year-olds loose on a super-highway. Other Christians have blamed suffering on the malevolence of Satan or demonic forces. This response fails to explain why God doesn't just crush those evil foes. If God lacks the power to do so, then God can't really be said to be the Lord of the universe.

Other Christians have claimed that sufferings are visited upon us as trials, tests, challenges and opportunities for spiritual growth. That may seem plausible in regard to some of our woes, but often tragedies befall helpless children who have no possibility of growing through their pain. Yet other Christians have ascribed sufferings to God's inscrutable will

and God's unfathomable purposes. However, it is hard to see how the Holocaust could be the fruit of God's will without implying that God's "love" for humanity is so strange that really should not be called "love" at all.

None of these answers is completely convincing. All of them, if pushed to their logical conclusions, either diminish God's goodness in ways that undermine confidence in God's love, or diminish God's power in ways that undermine hope in God's future.

What are we to make of this impasse? At the very least, we are left with a puzzle. The "Why?" question

Reading is the first thing, just reading the Bible.  
As we read, we enter a new world of words and  
find ourselves in on a conversation in which  
God has the first and last words.

We soon realize that we are included in the  
conversation. We didn't expect this. But this is  
precisely what generation after generation of Bible  
readers do find: The Bible is not only written  
about us but to us. In these pages we become  
insiders to a conversation in which God uses  
words to form and bless us, to forgive and save us.

Introduction to *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Translated by Eugene Peterson.

resists any neat comprehensive answer that would settle the matter once and for all. We are left with a fair amount of confusion and obscurity. But perhaps this tense and unsettling situation is not only tolerable but even spiritually beneficial. Even if no ultimate answer is found, there is spiritual benefit in the very pursuit of the elusive solution to the riddle. Asking the tough questions is part and parcel of growing in intimacy with God. In the Bible, Job, who wrestled

with this issue more relentlessly than anyone else, refusing to let God off the hook, did not get an answer either. Or, at least he did not get an answer to the question that he had asked. But he did get something even better: God spoke directly to him in the midst of his anger, confusion and pain. He experienced a deeper intimacy with God as the fruit of his unsatisfied quest for a definitive answer. So it may be for all of us.

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**Sow a thought  
reap an act**

**Sow an act  
reap a habit**

**Sow a habit  
Reap a character**

**Sow a character  
reap a destiny**