

# **Where is God when things go wrong?**

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# Where is God when things go wrong?

Her father had come through the nation's Great Depression by skilfully building things 'from stuff others threw away', eventually becoming a successful businessman and on the United States wrestling team at the 1932 Olympic Games held in Los Angeles.

With her three sisters she had assimilated their father's secure core values, while delightful family holidays, sports (she was captain of the girls' lacrosse team at her school) and a place in the school's Honour Society were seamless parts of her serene teenage years. In her own words, 'As far back as I could remember, there had been nothing but happiness surrounding our lives and home.' To cap it all, God also seemed to be on board. Churchgoing was almost as natural to her as breathing and in her mid-teens she had professed herself a committed Christian.

She must have felt on top of the world. Now, as the sun was setting at the end of that hot July day, she anticipated the thrill of knifing through the cool, refreshing water. She flexed her suntanned arms and legs and dived in. Five seconds later her life had changed for ever...

As she turned back towards the surface, her head struck a rock, trapping her on the sandy floor of the bay. Sprawling out of control, she felt ‘something like an electric shock, combined with a vibration — like a heavy metal spring being suddenly and sharply uncoiled’. She desperately tried to fight her way to the surface, but her arms and legs failed to respond to the frantic messages from her brain. When she could hardly hold her breath any longer, a tidal swell lifted her part of the way up. Her sister Kathy reached down to grasp her and with the help of others manoeuvred her onto dry land.

An ambulance rushed her to hospital and as the siren wailed she tried to fight her fear with long-remembered verses from the Bible: *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures...* In the emergency room, confused, frightened and feeling queasy from the usual hospital smells, she again reached out to Scripture: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...*

After a series of tests and X-rays, doctors performed emergency surgery on her head. The next days were spent drifting in and out of consciousness while strapped into a Stryker Frame, a canvas ‘sandwich’ which allowed her to be turned over every two hours without individual parts of her body being moved. Her conscious hours were punctuated by fear and

pain and her unconscious ones by terrifying dreams and drug-induced hallucinations.

A bone scan and a myelogram followed, then delicate surgery to offset the damage caused by a fracture-dislocation of the spine, but eventually the doctors faced her with the facts: she was a total quadriplegic. In layman's language, injury to her spinal cord meant that she would never again be able to use her arms, hands or legs.

She was utterly devastated. The weeks that followed included fleeting moments of hope as the doctors suggested various forms of treatment and therapy, but they were soon shut out by bitter resentment:

'Oh, God, how can you do this to me? What have you done to me? What's the use of believing when your prayers fall on deaf ears? God doesn't care. He doesn't even care.'

Grief, remorse and depression swept over her 'like a thick, choking blanket

... the mental and spiritual anguish was as unbearable as the physical torture... How I wished for strength and control enough in my fingers to do something, anything, to end my life!'

Earlier years of spiritual security now seemed a mocking background to one inescapable question: 'Where is God when things go wrong?'

## God in the dock

The question goes back thousands of years and the argument behind it can be summarized like this:

- Evil and suffering exist in the world.
- If God were all-powerful, he could prevent evil and suffering.
- If he were all-loving, he would want to prevent these.
- If there were an all-powerful, all-loving God, there would be no evil and suffering in the world.
- God is therefore powerless, loveless or non-existent.

The logic seems pretty watertight and the case against God even stronger when we read what the Bible says about him. It claims not only that he is *God of gods and Lord of lords ... mighty and awesome* (Deuteronomy 10:17) and *works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will* (Ephesians 1:11), but that he is *compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love* (Psalm 103:8). At first glance it seems impossible to reconcile these statements with what is happening every day in the world around us and, as we know that catastrophes, accidents, disease,

evil, pain, suffering and death are *facts*, many think it logical to conclude that God is non-existent. Man would agree with the statement, 'The history of the human race is nothing less than the history of suffering.' Apologist Ravi Zacharias says, 'I have never defended the existence of God at a university without being asked about this question of evil in the world.'

For some people, the question arises in a moment of terrible trauma. During the ruthless 'ethnic cleansing' of Kosovo in the late 1990s, one woman told the news media of soldiers separating ten women from their families and raping them by the roadside. As they did so, they sneered, 'We are not going to shoot you, but we want your families to see what we are doing.' Telling her story to reporters, she added, 'It was then that I came to know that God does not exist.' This was not a formal declaration of philosophical atheism, but a passionate cry from the heart, one that many others have shared in moments of searing pain. Hard-core atheists turn the question into a creed: 'There is no God; and evil and suffering prove it.'

In contemporary usage 'evil' is a broad term describing anything that is seen as bad or harmful. This covers two main categories: on the one hand, naturally occurring events which cause harm and suffering, and on the other, morally reprehensible human behaviour. We could cite countless examples of both.