

WHERE
IS GOD
in a
MESSED-UP
WORLD?



Roger Carswell

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This book is dedicated to those individuals who were born deaf. They are one of the West's most neglected group of individuals. They may never have heard the birds sing, the enthusiastic chatter of a group of friends or a Beethoven symphony, but I pray that they will hear the still, small voice of Almighty God speaking to their hearts.



*You have allowed me to suffer much hardship,
But You will restore me to life again
and lift me up from the depths of the earth.
You will restore me to even greater honour
and comfort me once again.*

Psalm 71: 20–21 (NLT)





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Thank you to friends who have shared their own personal struggles, and helped to keep a human, personal perspective when considering the issue of suffering.

I also learned much from my travels to the Middle East, India, and Central and South America. The dire poverty and sense of injustice, particularly when compared to the wealth and indulgence I have witnessed in Europe and the USA, have shaken me to the core.

While I have not suffered to the extent of many, a dark period of depression took me to the depths, and I thank God for all He taught me during this time.

I am also grateful to the hundreds of individuals with whom I have discussed and debated the issues covered in this book. Their genuine questions provided the basis for it.

Finally, my thanks to 10ofthose, and particularly to my editors Emma Balch, who has used her skills to immensely improve what appears in this book, and Eleanor Trotter, for her encouragement and patience in getting the earlier edition of this book to where it is today. Thank you as well to Julie Hatherall and Brian Webster.



PREFACE

I first witnessed a shanty town when I was thirteen. Having been brought up in England, nothing could have prepared me for the shock of seeing such dire poverty and destitution in the Middle East.

Years later, the memory of that first shock gripped me again while working in India and then in Nicaragua. I was deeply stirred by the empty faces and staring eyes of those living off the scraps of rubbish tips, trying to beat dogs and birds to getting anything to eat. A week before I arrived in Nicaragua, in the town next to where I was working, eleven people in one house were discovered, having starved to death. It left me very sombre throughout my time there.

I would love to make, as some say, poverty history. I long for the day when suffering and tears are banished forever. As an ordinary individual, I feel something of the hurt and pain of those who really do experience tragedy and trauma. I have wrestled with issues as to why, and this book is an attempt to answer these big questions. I am as

certain that there is a God who creates and cares as I am that this world is not as God designed it.

Roger Carswell, May 2020



INTRODUCTION: LOOKING FOR GOD IN A MESSED-UP WORLD

The Students Union bar is packed. Chairs, sofas and floor space are taken up, and it's standing room only. Students tuck into baked potatoes and listen intently. The floor is opened up and they start firing questions:

I stopped believing in God when my best friend was killed last year. You say God is loving but if that's true, why would He allow that to happen?

If God is so powerful, why couldn't He stop a tsunami from happening?

I spend a lot of time visiting universities and colleges, churches and youth events, and everywhere I go I meet people who ask these kinds of questions. For many,

their life experience to date may not have brought much personal tragedy. Yet when meeting people of an older generation, I find that they have the same questions but often weighed down with heaviness of heart or a sense of despair at the state of the world. The subject of suffering – and more specifically, why God can't stop wars, pain, death, tragedy, disaster and pandemics – is without a doubt *the* issue people struggle with when it comes to Christianity. And I can understand why.

The issue came into focus again in 2020 when the coronavirus (Covid-19) shook the world. Of course, there have been plagues and pandemics before,¹ but somewhat smugly most of us thought that these were confined to history. With medical advances such as we have, we assumed we could never be impacted in the way that past generations have been.

I have given my life to sharing with others the truth about Jesus Christ and the hope He brings. I believe the Christian gospel (or good news) to be absolutely true. However, at times I have to admit that I too wonder why God does not intervene and stop the human suffering which is so evident in the world around us. I am deeply distressed when I hear of hundreds killed in a train crash in north India; of a baby born with a serious disability; of genocides, war and resulting starvation; of beautiful, little or even unborn children murdered at the hands of the callous and cruel; or the death of a child through cancer.

I don't have an answer for all the 'whys' that I ask, and which people often ask me. But I do have absolute

confidence in the character of God and His words to humankind as expressed in the Bible. I have studied what the Bible says about God, and I have seen His transforming power in my life and that of others. As a result, I am convinced that we do have an explanation for why the world is as it is; about why God doesn't put an immediate end to all that is wrong with the world; and that we can find comfort and hope in Him. Christians don't have to be silent on the subject of suffering, even though we cannot explain every individual situation or why one person suffers so much more than another.

The first section of this book looks at the question, 'why?' It considers some of the reasons behind our questions, the places we search for answers and whether we can ultimately find the responses for which we are looking.

The second section focuses on what Christians believe about why the world is as it is. It explains how God intended the world to be, what has gone wrong and what He has – and is – doing about it. The challenge here is to work out whether what the Bible says is true. Are Christians deluded, or not? Is the Bible worth further investigation? Can you share the same certainty as Christians that God *is* in control, and isn't silent?

The third section of the book is more pragmatic and considers how the Christian faith works in practice. It looks, for example, at dealing with pain; the benefits that can come out of tragedy; and how to avoid bitterness and to find comfort.

You may be sceptical about God and how He can speak into all that is wrong with the world. I am also aware that your reason for picking up this book may be because you are carrying deep hurt and raw pain. Please forgive me if at any point I sound glib. It's tough to write generally on a subject which is often deeply personal. I don't claim to be an expert, but I am sure that you can find hope, certainty and answers.

SECTION ONE





CHAPTER 1

LIVING WITH QUESTIONS

A UNIVERSAL PARADOX

John Diamond, Jean-Dominique Bauby and Ivan Noble are each names now famed for writing about their struggle with terminal illness. John Diamond was working as a journalist for *The Times* when he was diagnosed with throat cancer. He eloquently described his journey towards death in a weekly column for the paper. Jean-Dominique Bauby, previously editor-in-chief of the French magazine *Elle*, was paralysed from a stroke. His autobiographical account, *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly*,¹ which was dictated by ‘blinking’, captures his claustrophobic struggle with paralysis. It sold over 150,000 copies in the first week of publication. Ivan Noble, a young BBC journalist, chronicled his battle with terminal cancer on the BBC website, which is now published in the book *Like a Hole in the Head*.²