



Christianity Criticisms: Why Would A Loving God Let My Mom Get Cancer?

Before we get into the topic at hand, let me set the stage a bit and tell you a little about my mom. Norma Jean lived all her life in a small town in central Ohio. She was always a servant to her family and to the community. She joined the local church at a very young age. She taught the nursery school class for over 45 years. Often times, she would bring meals to community members who were stuck at home. Within the past few years, she had been sending Sunday bulletins to members who have not been to church in a while just so they could stay connected. She (and my aunt) also grew the food pantry of our church from a little closet in one of the Sunday school classrooms to taking over a big part of our community center and serving hundreds of families every year. All of this while caring for my Dad's poor health until he passed, followed immediately by helping care for her sister's failing health until she passed, and running countless relatives and neighbors back and forth to doctor appointments as their needs arose.

My mom was a faithful Christian all her life. I can probably count the number of Sundays she missed during her life on one hand. She read from 2 devotional books every morning, journaled in her gratitude journal, and prayed constantly.

So, here's my Mom. If you want to know how to live your life like a Christian, you just do as she did. Now, as we look at her legacy, and we see how she did almost everything she was supposed to, it starts to beg the question:

Why would a good God let my Mom get cancer?

Cancer comes in a variety of forms. For every organ, gland, and fluid type in your body there seems to be a possibility it could develop cancer. And cancer doesn't care about who you are, where you come from, how much money you have or what the color of your skin is. We've all seen or know of someone who has suffered through cancer. Watching someone literally waste away because of cancer is heartbreaking - for the person affected and the people around them. It's been enough to make even the most faithful of believers cry out "why God? Why won't you just take me?"

These thoughts and memories of loved ones I have watched waste away came to me when I heard that Mom was diagnosed with cancer. And I thought; is her suffering going to be short? Or is this going to drag out and we get to watch as this woman - who just days before her diagnosis was sorting down about 6,000 cans of food in the food pantry - has to remain bedridden for the rest of her days and slowly withers away?



Intellectual Response vs. Emotional Response

Now, there are two types of responses needed to get through this issue. One is an intellectually satisfying response and the other an emotionally satisfying one. If someone were going through a deep sadness due to the loss of a loved one, I would not try to comfort them with logical, well thought out reasons for why God lets people suffer. What that person needs is an emotional/pastoral response. This article deals primarily with the former. I will say, however, that having an understanding of the intellectual arguments *before* you experience pain and suffering certainly helps put you at peace in those times.

The Challenge

The “why would God...” challenges often get leveled at Christianity to disprove God’s existence. The challenge here is that if God is so loving, why would he let people suffer? And if God is so powerful, why doesn’t he stop the suffering from happening? But, we do see suffering happening every day. So, either he doesn’t care, he is powerless to stop the suffering, or he doesn’t exist

First off, for the nonbeliever, this challenge makes no sense. To an atheist, all that exists is the physical world in front of us. There is no heaven, no hell, no soul. All that exists are the things we can experience with our 5 senses.

As evolutionary biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins puts it

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

In other words, someone who doesn’t believe in a transcendent Creator can’t call anything unjust. Or unfair. It’s just the course of nature for some people to get cancer. Mom just got unlucky. All the things you’ve done in life ultimately mean nothing. We live, we die, the end.

In order for us to call something “wrong” or “unjust”, we have to rely on a standard that comes from outside of humanity to make this determination. Because if we let humanity decide what is “right” and “fair”, it becomes a moving target. If cultures are left to



determine what is fair and just, then there is no way for one culture to call another culture wrong if it kills babies for fun, or promotes rape, or enslaves other people groups.

This quandary is one that C.S. Lewis struggled with and it helped him to see the bankruptcy of atheism. In *Mere Christianity*, he writes:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I gotten this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call something crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.

Without an objective standard outside of humanity, we have no way to say my mom's cancer "wasn't fair" any more than we could say killing babies for fun isn't fair. Or enslaving certain people based on their skin color isn't fair. Or killing thousands of people because of the cultural group they belong to isn't fair. You need a source outside of people to determine fairness and justice; otherwise, it's just a matter of opinion. Like what the best flavor of ice cream is.

Thankfully, my Mom didn't suffer through her diagnosis. It came on quickly and she passed within weeks. Plus, she was 80. So, we are less surprised when older people die. But, what if my Mom had been shot and killed in a parking lot while loading up food for the food pantry into her car when she was just 18? That would seem a lot more unfair. She would have had her whole life ahead of her and her death was from violent means. We would seem to have more cause for outrage in this example. But, with no objective moral standard outside of ourselves, by what basis is this unjust? It was just nature taking its course.

It's OK To Ask Why

So what about the believers? We have this question, too. Why God? Why would you let this person who has lived life the way you wanted and who has done so much good in this little community get cancer and be taken so quickly?

First off, we have to realize that not all suffering is bad. Pain in and of itself is not an evil thing. Pain serves a purpose. If you get your hand too close to a flame you feel pain and quickly withdraw your hand. This is a safety mechanism because otherwise you would be severely injured. So, in this instance, the pain helped you.

Pain is also a useful motivator to get us to stop dragging our heels and get moving. Look back on your life. Sometimes the suffering we experience is the cause for some of the



greatest growth. And we wouldn't have moved forward unless there was some sort of swift and painful kick in the rear.

Secondly, if God exists, then this is a Being of immense knowledge and foresight. He has a vision of the whole story from beginning to end. What we consider suffering He may be using to get people to where they need to be or to accomplish some greater good we don't know about.

If you are a parent, you understand this kind of wisdom and foreknowledge from when you take your kids to the dentist or to get a vaccination. Your kids probably *hated* going to get their flu shot or getting a cavity filled. That needle goes into their skin and the tears start flowing. They look at you and cry out "what have you done!?!? That HURT! And it's YOUR fault!" Yet, we as their parents have the wisdom to know that this moment of pain is only temporary and will result in a greater good (protection from sickness and disease).

Consider how much wiser and more knowledgeable we are than our kids on the ways of life. Now, think of how much wiser the Being that created EVERYTHING must be than us! I can think of a few examples in my life where I was going through something tough and things came out better for me because I went through something hard and uncomfortable.

Finally, if Christianity is true, and life does not end with our physical death, then suffering is relative to the time the person lived and how long they suffered. What I mean by that is if you suffer for 2 years but live for 1000 does 2 years really make a difference? If Christianity is true, and we are granted eternal life, does even 20 years of suffering matter? Or 50? I would say no. It would be like us looking back on that one week we had the flu as a child when we are 70 or 80. That week was insignificant. In fact, we will probably *forget* more "suffering" than we remember!

Thankfully, my mom didn't really suffer in the end. Her illness came on quickly and was over quickly, too. In this case, the only people who suffered (and continue to do so) are the people who knew her. If Christianity is true, then my Mom is where we are all promised to go upon death as followers of Jesus Christ. God didn't let her suffer as some sort of unjust punishment, and he wasn't powerless to stop it. She had already won the race, and the Creator of the universe was using her to get the rest of us where we need to be.



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