

How Can God Be Good If There's So Much Suffering? You Asked For It

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Good morning! Today we're continuing this series *You Asked For It*, where we are talking about some of the most frequently asked questions pertaining to faith. The feedback and response to this series has been so encouraging, and I want to remind you that next Sunday night, we will be having an open forum Q & A night where we'll talk about the myriad of questions we didn't have time to cover on Sunday mornings. Come out and join us for that if you can! And if you want, you can even text your questions in and we'll do our best to cover them.

Today we are dealing with a pretty big topic. A few years ago, George Barna, the public opinion pollster, conducted a national survey in which he asked a cross-section of adults: if you could ask God only *one* question, and you *knew* he would give you an answer, what would you ask? You might not be surprised to learn that, by far and away, the number 1 answer was this: "why is there so much suffering in the world?" That's a question that almost everyone I know has wrestled through. For many people, this is the biggest obstacle to believing in a loving God. The day I sat down to write this sermon, I wrote four cards to people in our church who lost a loved one. I met a man at Panera whose wife is on hospice care, a young missionary, only 23 years old, was laid to rest after being killed in a car accident the week before. The day I wrote this I prayed for a dozen people who have debilitating injuries that are not getting any better, I prayed for three different women who had recently lost a baby in miscarriage – and that was all on the same day! And those are just personal things, not to mention that macro-level expression of evil and injustice in the world.

And so the question goes: how could there possibly be a good God who would allow all of that to happen? John Stott has said: "The single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, not only in this generation but in every generation, is suffering." And Lee Strobel has said: "As we reflect on horrible evils like the Holocaust, The Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocide of Rwanda, and the torture chambers of South America, we can't help but wonder: where is God? We watch television coverage of earthquakes and hurricanes in which thousands perish, and we wonder: why didn't God stop it? We read the statistic that one billion people in the world lack the basic necessities of life, and we wonder: why doesn't God care? We may suffer ourselves with persistent pain or aching loss or seemingly hopeless circumstances, and we wonder why God doesn't help?"

If there is a good God who cares, surely he would be able to do something about all this, right?! That was the perspective of two women Jesus was friends with named Mary and Martha. Mary and Martha had a brother named Lazarus, who was sick. They sent word to Jesus to let him know, assuming that, of course, Jesus would come immediately and make Lazarus well. But Jesus didn't come immediately. He showed up at their house several days after they sent word. And in that time of waiting, Lazarus died. So, when Jesus finally arrived, each of the sisters say the same thing to him:

John 11:21 – Martha: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

John 11:32 – Mary: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

What's the assumption with each of these women? They know Jesus to be good, and they know that Jesus is powerful. So they naturally assume that if Jesus was there, nothing bad would ever

happen. He would use his power to prevent Lazarus' death, and they would have never lost their brother.

Thus the dilemma many of us are left wrestling with: the Bible tells us that God is all good and that God is all powerful, and also that God is always with us. How can that be if there is so much suffering in the world?! If God is with us, if he always wants the best for us, and if he is capable of stopping the pain and suffering, wouldn't he do so? Wouldn't there be no more miscarriages, no more car accidents, no more cancer, no more abuse, no more spouses walking out? A good God, who is present and able, would never allow that to happen.

At both a logical and an emotional level, this is a major challenge for the Christian faith. And I think it's important to be honest about that. But what I also want us to see is that pain and suffering, evil and injustice aren't challenges that are unique to the Christian faith, they are challenges to every faith system, to every world view – even those that don't include any belief in god. And it is actually Christianity that provides the best possible answers to this problem.

Here's what I mean: If you don't believe in God, what makes you think evil and injustice even exist? CS Lewis talked about this being a lynchpin in his decision as a skeptic to come to faith. He said, "At first I didn't believe in God because the world seemed so cruel and unjust. Then someone asked me,

"How did you get this idea of justice and injustice, of good and evil in the first place? If you say that evil and injustice are real things, not just constructs and preferences, but they are grounded in some sort of objective reality, then even though it seems like evidence against God that evil and injustice exist, the fact that they are real is actually compelling evidence for God. Atheism turns out to be too simple. How can you look at a line and know it is crooked and unless you know what a straight line looks like to compare it to?"

This was part of what led CS Lewis away from skepticism and toward faith in Jesus. He called himself one of the world's most reluctant converts in history. Though at first it was the existence of evil and suffering that caused him not to believe, it was eventually his belief that evil and suffering are real things that persuaded him to believe.

Here's another way of looking at this: if you don't believe in God, what makes you think that evil and injustice are wrong? This is a similar argument, but approaches the conversation from a slightly different angle. We talked about this a few weeks ago when we spoke about the metaphysical realities of this world that science itself can't explain. We believe that loving our spouse and our children is better than cheating on our spouse and abandoning our children, we believe that telling the truth is better than lying, we believe that racism is wrong, slavery is wrong, murder is wrong...now it's hard for us to reconcile how those things can even exist if God is real. But it is impossible to believe that they are actually wrong if God doesn't exist at all. If there is no God, our sense of right and wrong is just a figment of our collective imagination, an arbitrary, unwritten social contract of our own making. And when we become enlightened to that reality, we can disregard them as the illusion they are and live however we want.

But here's the problem: We know that certain things are right and certain things are wrong, to the core of our being. Atheism can't explain that. It's Christianity that gives teeth to these convictions. The Christian view of the world says that truth is better than deception because God

is truth, that love is better than hatred because God is love, that justice is better than injustice because God is just. Truth, love and justice are real things and they are good things, because they emanate from the God who created the world and who commissioned us to live like him.

Those first two statements deal with evil and injustice in general, let me now ask two questions that deal with pain and suffering specifically. First: *if you don't believe in God, what makes you think pain and suffering are an aberration?* We look at pain and suffering and we say: that is wrong, that is out of place, that is not how life should be. But if you don't believe in God, if you think that we got here through an accidental explosion, followed by the spontaneous generation of life, followed by unguided evolution, survival of the fittest, of every life form killing and consuming whatever is necessary to survive, if that is how you believe we got here, then pain, suffering, and death are baked-in parts of the cosmic story. If that is what you believe, then when you encounter pain and suffering you have no reason to take issue with them. You may not like it, but without God, that's how you would actually expect it to be.

It's the Christian view that says that pain and suffering are out of place in this world. God's plan was life, harmony, unity, peace and perfection. When God first created the world, pain and suffering did not exist. Pain and suffering only came about as a result of humanity rebelling against God's plan and choosing our way instead of his. It's Christianity, not atheism, that tells us pain and suffering are out of place in this world. And not only that, but Christianity also tells us that ever since pain and suffering first entered into the world, God has been at work in our lives and in history, working to bring about a solution.

Second question: *if you don't believe in God, what makes you think pain and suffering can actually be redeemed?* This is an interesting conversation. As we go through hardships, we want to believe that something good is going to come from them. And many times we have seen just that. Growing up with an alcoholic father actually made you a better dad, because you learned from his negative example. Being bullied in middle school developed within you a compassionate heart for others who need someone to advocate for them. Losing a loved one makes you more appreciative for the life you have and prompts you to be more intentional about each of your days and about your relationships.

Thinking about the redeeming qualities of pain and suffering can be very helpful, but if there is no God, it's just a placebo that artificially numbs us from facing the reality that our suffering is ultimately meaningless. Even if things get marginally better for us or others because of our pain, the impending eventuality of our death always looms over us. One day we will cease to exist. Everyone you've ever loved will cease to exist. Humanity will cease to exist. This world will cease to exist. We will be swallowed up in a cosmic black hole and be forgotten forevermore. That is the only logical conclusion if you do not believe in God. If you don't believe in God, not only will your pain and suffering not ultimately be redeemed, eventually, they will intensify. If you don't believe in God, our future is not brighter, it's bleaker. But if the God of the Bible is real, if the message preached by Jesus Christ is true, then pain and suffering can be redeemed, and our best days lie ahead.

The Bible gives us three promises about our pain and suffering. First, *God will be with us in our pain and suffering.* The Bible tells us, again and again, that when we are in need, that is the very

moment God will make himself most available to us. Psalm 46:1 says, “God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in time of trouble.” And we read in Psalm 63:7-8, “Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your right hand upholds me.” That is who God is. Not far off and distant. But near to us, consoling us. Psalm 56:8 in the New Living Translation says: “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.” 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says that God is “The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.”

Though often God does not remove our pain and suffering, he meets us in it. One of the most powerful examples of this is with a man named Paul. He had a radical conversion experience where he went from being the main persecutor of the church to the main planter of churches. Though he was clearly chosen by God and anointed by God, though he was living a holy life and was leading countless people to faith, he had a serious ailment that he called “a thorn in my flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7). We don’t know exactly what that thorn was. Some have speculated that it was a degenerative eye disease that stole his sight, others have suggested it was the physical ramifications of having been flogged and stoned several times, leaving him with permanent disabilities, some have suggested it was spiritual warfare and Satan’s constant temptations. We don’t know what it was, but it was certainly some expression of pain and suffering. And do you know what Paul said about it? “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me” (2 Corinthians 12:8). And you would think that if there was anyone who was going to get special treatment and his prayers answered, it was this man, who wrote 13 books of the Bible and was using every ounce of energy he had to worship God and serve others. But what was he told? 2 Corinthians 12:9: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This side of heaven, God seldom takes away all of our pain. But one thing we know for sure: if our faith is in him, he will meet us in our pain and suffering, and his grace will help us get through it.

And it’s not just a psychological thing, either. The Bible tells us that God entered into our world of pain and suffering, took on our flesh with all our limitations and frailty, and then suffered the greatest act of evil and injustice possible by being betrayed, abandoned, falsely accused, mocked, spat upon, jeered, tortured, and then executed. God is no stranger to pain and suffering. He not only meets us in it, he felt it himself to the fullest degree possible, so he knows what it’s like to walk a mile in our shoes.

So, we know that God will be with us in our pain and suffering. We also know that *God will bring about good from our pain and suffering*. It’s more than just his presence enabling us to endure, it’s his loving power at work to restore and renew, to turn to bring beauty from ashes. Romans 8:28 tells us: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Not some things, not most things. *All things!*

That was what Joseph found out. He’s a guy whose story is told in the book of Genesis. He had 11 brothers, but he was his father’s favorite. He got so much special treatment that his brothers abducted him, sold him into slavery, and told their dad that he had been killed by a wild animal. Those slave owners that bought him sold him into Potiphar’s house to do menial tasks. Lots of pain and suffering, but because God was with him, he rose to be head of the household. But

Potiphar's wife wanted to be with Joseph, made countless passes at Joseph, and when she was rejected, she told her husband that it was Joseph who made passes at her. So he was thrown into jail. More pain and suffering. But because God was with him, he rose to be the head of the jail. Even though he stayed in that jail for years longer than he was supposed to, eventually he was brought before Pharaoh, and because God gave him the ability, he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams – which were about taking 7 years' worth of plenty to prepare for 7 years' worth of famine. He had such wisdom that he ultimately rose to be the highest person in the entire kingdom, second only to Pharaoh. And with his position, he literally saved countless lives. He suffered from his brothers, but God was working for the good. He suffered from Potiphar's wife, but God was working for the good. He suffered in prison, but God was working for the good. So often, when we are experiencing pain and suffering we want God to take it away immediately. And though we don't always understand why he doesn't, we know that he will be with us in it, and that he will bring good about from it.

And there is one more thing: we know that *God will ultimately vanquish our pain and suffering*. Revelation 21 gives us such a wonderful picture of heaven when it says:

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

No more tears, no more death, no more mourning or crying pain. He is making everything new! And his words are trustworthy and true. One of my favorite theologians to read these days is a man named Andrew Wilson. He lives in the UK and has two special needs children. Listen to words from a short article he wrote:

I daydream about having ordinary conversations with my children, in a world free of autism, epilepsy, and hyperactivity. In the Bible's beautiful description of the resurrection, we read that our bodies are currently perishable, dishonorable, and weak but one day they will be raised imperishable, in glory and power. That means that Zeke and Anna, in the new creation, will have brains that are able to reason and talk as if autism had never existed. They'll be able to empathize, understand social cues, or just sit quietly and think. I daydream about that. I imagine sitting around a dinner table with them, only instead of cajoling them into eating a cracker, I'll be sharing the meal with them, talking about why they like it, hearing them make jokes, and asking them about their travel plans. I daydream about friends of ours and their children. For obvious reasons, a disproportionate number of children we know have special needs. Many of them can't feed themselves, walk, or talk. Yet! But we know how the story ends, as expressed beautifully in the song "Joy to the World":

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow

Far as the curse is found.

"Far as the curse is found." Like the spring thaw, turning sheets of ice into fresh running water, the power of God will extend to every square inch of this world and turn every curse into a blessing. The tube-fed will enjoy home cooking. The wheelchair bound will go water skiing and mountain climbing. Those who cannot speak will sing and describe and discuss. There will be no need for words like "syndrome" or "degenerative" and no place for DNA testing, Epilim, Ritalin, hydrotherapy, or physical therapy. "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust" – fallen, broken Adam – so "we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49). We will have resurrected bodies, just like that of Jesus, bodies that can eat, cook, walk, talk, laugh, barbecue, and socialize, and yet somehow rise indestructible, teleport at will, never grow old, and never decay. O autism, where is your victory? O cerebral palsy, where is your sting?

There is coming a day when everything that is bad and painful about the world is going to become untrue. God will look at our pain and suffering, and he won't just meet us in it, he won't just bring about good from it, he will vanquish it once and for all!

I want to end by going back to the story of Mary and Martha. Here are two women who lost a member of their family way too soon. Many of you have been there. Some of you have gone through that loss recently, you're still losing sleep, the pain is still fresh, the cheeks are still damp. Jesus not only went to them to be with them in their loss, Jesus *wept* along with them. When our hearts break at the pain and suffering in the world and in *our* world, God's heart breaks, too. Ultimately, he brought Lazarus back from the dead. He turned their funeral wake into a family reunion. And sometimes God does that. He miraculously removes the hardship. But do you know what? Lazarus died again. Mary and Martha died. Everyone in that town and in that country died. The real problem was solved, not with Lazarus coming back from the grave, but with Jesus coming back from the grave. Because he entered into the heart of darkness and overcame it, we know that one day the long, cold winter of pain and suffering that this world is enduring will one day break, and an eternal spring of new life will emerge. The resurrection of God's promise to us that God really will take all that is broken with the world, and with nail pierced hands, make it right, once and for all.