

Suffering: Why?

(PART 1)

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This morning and next Sunday morning I would like for us to think together about a question that has caused many people to struggle with the existence of God, and the question is: If God is truly good, and if God is all-powerful, then why does God allow seemingly innocent people to suffer? And really, when we look around us, we see a world that is full of pain. We see bad things happening all around us – planes crash, ships sink, evil people attack and murder the innocent, storms come in with the power to destroy entire cities – and so the question is: Why does a loving and powerful God allow all of these horrible things to happen?

Some have suggested, 1.) Either God is too weak to stop the suffering we see around us, or 2.) He either causes it or permits it because he enjoys it some way and so he chooses not to stop it. And so the suggestion is: Either God does not exist at all, or if he does exist, then he is either weak or sadistic and is not worthy of our worship.

Now, in response to these challenges, some have come to God's defense with good intentions, but they have made the situation even worse. Some, for example, have suggested that all suffering is the direct result of sin. In other words, if something bad happens to somebody, then they obviously must have done something to deserve it. We see this attitude even in Bible times. We think of Job's friends, for example. Back in the Old Testament book of Job (in Job 1), we find Job losing all of his livestock and servants to an attack by a foreign enemy. As he learns the terrible news, another messenger comes in and lets him know that all of his children were eating together when a wind came up out of nowhere, crushing the house and instantly killing all ten of his children. And then, in Job 2, we find Job losing his health, covered from head to foot in painful boils. It got so bad, in fact, that Job's wife comes in and says, "***Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!***" And so, her response to her husband's suffering was to encourage him to turn his back on God. Again, going back to our challenging question this morning, perhaps she also thought that a God who would allow all of this to happen was not worthy of worship. And this, of course, is an attitude we see all around us today. But the point is, in the next few chapters, Job's friends come in and start trying to give advice.

I would encourage you to turn with me to Job 4:7-9 (p. 806). In Job 4, the first of Job's friends starts to speak, and as he speaks, he basically urges Job to just admit what he has done, and the idea is: Anybody who suffers like this must be guilty of something! Notice, please, Job 4:7-9,

***Remember now, who ever perished being innocent?
Or where were the upright destroyed?
According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity
And those who sow trouble harvest it.
By the breath of God they perish,
And by the blast of His anger they come to an end.***

So, according to one of Job's friends, at least, Job must be guilty of something. He must have done something to deserve this. And yet, of course, if you know anything about the book of Job, you know that Job was not being punished. In fact, notice how the book starts (1:1), ***"There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil."*** So, not all suffering is the direct result of sin. In fact, sometimes we can suffer BECAUSE we are doing what is right.

Others have the idea that God causes all suffering, that God has such an intricate plan for each and every one of us that he causes everything to happen. When little children die in accidents, for example, some might try to comfort the grieving parents by saying, "Well, you just need to accept that this is the will of God." And yet again, let us be careful that we never accuse God of taking an innocent human life! It is not true, therefore, that God causes everything to happen, especially when we speak of some of the terrible things that happen to those who are innocent.

What, then, causes human suffering? Obviously, this is a complex question, and this is a question where we may never have all of the answers. However, even though we may never come to a perfect understanding of this issue, I do believe we can learn something from the word of God on this. And we can definitely learn enough to know that it is not a matter of God being weak, and it is not a matter of God sitting up in heaven sadistically enjoying all of the horrible things that happen down here. Instead (and I know this is a simple concept to apply to such a large question), but I would suggest that most (if not all) of our suffering in some way goes back to the fact that God has given all of us FREE WILL. And if we could back up a bit, it goes back to why God created the human race in the first place. As I understand our purpose in life, we are here to glorify God. We are here to make the choice to follow God. Yes, God could have made the human race like robots. He could have made us like those children's toys where you squeeze it or pull a string and the teddy bear (or whatever it is) says, "I love you." We know, of course, that the toy does not really love us. Instead, God created us with the ability to freely choose. And with our ability to choose also comes the ability to suffer the consequences of our decisions. Giving us free will is ultimately an act of great love on God's part; but again, the freedom to make decisions obviously gives us the freedom to make some bad decisions, and with those bad decisions comes the possibility of suffering.

As we begin our study this morning, I would make several observations. First of all, we will not be basing our study on just one passage (as we normally try to do). Instead, we will need to look at this in terms of a topical study by looking at a number of passages. And then secondly, I would also point out that as we study some of the reasons for human suffering, there is no way for any of us to fully understand what another person might be going through. All of us experience varying levels of pain (both physical and emotional) for many different reasons, and in the middle of it, we really don't need a four-point outline telling us why we are going through what we are going through. Hopefully we can look at our response to suffering over the next week or two. But for this morning's lesson, at least, we do need to look at this subject from the point of view of those who use suffering to try to prove that God is either powerless to stop it or that he has the power but for some heartless reason chooses to just let us suffer.

So, with all of this in mind, I would like for us to do just a brief overview of some of the causes for so much of the pain and suffering we see in the world around us.

I. **And as we begin, I would point out first of all, one of the most obvious reasons for suffering, and that is: THE PERSONAL WRONG CHOICES THAT WE MAKE.**

And for an example of this from the Bible, there are many places we could look, but I would like for us to turn together to the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 (p. 1631). And as we read this passage, I would ask: Why did this young man suffer as he did? Notice, please, Luke 15:11-16,

And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him."

So again: Why did this young man suffer? We go back to the end of verse 13, and the Lord said that the young man **"squandered his estate with loose living."** He nearly starved to death, then, because he wasted his inheritance. And so in this instance, at least, we see a very direct connection between some level of pain and suffering and a choice that this person made. Unlike Job's friends, though, we are not saying that this is the ONLY option. But often, yes, we do something and we suffer for it. And there are hundreds if not thousands of examples of this in the Bible. We will suffer when we make wrong decisions. We think of what Peter said in 1 Peter 4:15, **"Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler."** In other words, some suffering (in fact, much suffering) can be traced back to decisions that we make. If I go out and rob a bank this afternoon, chances are I will suffer for making that decision.

We also see it all around us. People will break a law, for example, and if they get caught they may need to pay a fine or perhaps even spend some time in prison. Does God cause those things to happen? If I go 75 MPH through a school zone and get a ticket, can I blame God for that? If I rob a bank and get sent to prison, can I blame God for that? In Romans 13, Paul says that the government **"does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil."** If somebody attacks a police officer, therefore, we cannot blame God for what happens next. Instead, somebody exercised his or her free will (for whatever reason) and paid the price for making a wrong decision.

But aside from the government, there are many other ways that our own personal choices might cause suffering. We think of a young man who starts smoking. When that young man dies of lung cancer 30 years later, we can hardly blame God for that. When a person gets drunk, violating God's will in the process, and when he plows that car into a tree, we can hardly blame God for what happens there. God is not to blame for the position of the tree; instead, the one who drinks and drives is responsible for making that decision. In the same way, when someone is lazy and refuses to work, that person may also suffer, and God is not responsible.

I don't know whether you noticed this, but late last week a story hit the news, reporting on a recent study where researchers found that up to 40% of all deaths in the United States right now are "preventable." Not that we can stop dying, but when we look at the way we live in this nation right now, hundreds of thousands

of people die every year as a direct result of the choices we make. As a nation, we smoke and drink, we overeat, many of us sit at a desk all day long, and over time, these lifestyle choices have a way of sneaking up on us with some horrifying consequences – heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, various cancers, and so on.

I would also point out that not all wrong choices we make are necessarily sin. I might choose to go on a bike ride, for example, and on that ride I might decide to go a little too fast down a hill. On that hill, I might hit a patch of gravel and take a spill over the handlebars. I cannot blame God for that, I cannot blame anybody else for that, and I probably won't go to hell for that, but looking back on it, I made the choice to go too fast. That decision falls on me. We could think of many other situations where something we do now might be dangerous, but we don't know it is dangerous at the time. Maybe you have heard the argument that carrots will kill you. After all, everybody who has ever eaten a carrot either will die or has already died. Right? Carrots, then, quite obviously are dangerous. I am kidding about that. I love carrots. I use this illustration because carrots are some of the healthiest food I know. I plan on growing a bumper crop of carrots this year. But think about the use of lead paint and asbestos so many years ago. At the time, there were some huge advantages. However, as time went on, we started to figure out the danger. Fifty years ago, though, if I chose to build my house out of asbestos and coat it with lead paint, that was a wrong choice, even though I didn't know that it was a wrong choice at the time, even though I thought I was doing something good. So, for the sake of illustration, let's just say we figure out 50 years from now that carrots really do cause cancer. I would feel really bad about that! I have fed my own children many carrots through the years. I am sure that we could poke holes in some of these illustrations, but the point is (and I hope you will agree with me): Much of the suffering we see around us can be traced back to wrong choices that we make, even if we do not realize it at the time.

II. There is a second category we need to consider, and that is: Often, suffering is the result of WRONG CHOICES THAT ARE MADE BY OTHERS.

And this, obviously, is very closely related to Point #1, but here we involve those who are innocent. Often, somebody will make a wrong choice that affects another person. Several years ago, we studied the life of Joseph in the Old Testament book of Genesis. We don't need to look at each reference, but the story of Joseph's life is found in Genesis 37-50. Early on, Joseph was minding his own business when his brothers sold him into slavery. Not long after that, Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of rape and had him thrown into prison. Now, these are not things that Joseph asked for or deserved in any way, but Joseph suffered. He suffered because of the wrong choices that were made by others.

We think of the situation in Ukraine right now where hundreds of thousands of innocent people are suffering due to the horrific violence in that that part of the world right now. Often, especially in a time of war, the innocent will suffer due to the choices made by others.

I think back to something that happened back in February this year when a terrorist trainer in Iraq accidentally blew up himself as well as his entire class. We can only imagine what that must have been like. The teacher sits down in front of this class of future terrorists and accidentally kills every single one of them. Here we have a combination of suffering because of a personal choice and also suffering because of the choice of somebody else.

We think of parents who hurt their own children – sometimes even before they are born – sometimes intentionally. Sometimes, though, the unborn are hurt unintentionally. We think of the use of Thalidomide

back in the 1950's and early 1960's. At the time, who knew that this medication prescribed for morning sickness was causing these horrendous birth defects? And yet here we have another example of suffering inflicted on the innocent, even if the suffering was not intended. The point is: We do not blame all of these horrific things on God; instead, we realize that innocent people can be hurt when other people (either intentionally or unintentionally) make wrong decisions.

III. I would suggest a third category here (and in a sense we could lump it in with some of what I have said already), but I would point out that some suffering is caused by THE WRONG CHOICES OF SOME IN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS.

We can go back to the Garden of Eden. God gave Adam and Eve the blessing of eternal life. He gave them access to the Tree of Life. However, when Adam and Eve sinned, one consequence was that they were kicked out of the garden. At that point, death entered the world. Remember the first suffering: An animal had to be killed to make proper clothing. At that point, death entered the world. Death itself, then, can be traced back to the very first sin. Not only that, but at that point, Adam also had to work for his food, ***"By the sweat of your face you will eat bread,"*** God said (in Genesis 3:19). At this point, Eve had to start suffering pain in childbirth. And these curses continue today. Even today (as a general rule), work is not pleasant and women continue to experience pain in childbirth, and so in this sense, all of us suffer (to some degree) because of the sin first committed by Adam – we are not guilty of Adam's sin, but we suffer because of it.

Beyond this, we could also point to the Great Flood in the days of Noah. We could spend several weeks just on this, but it seems as if the flood in some way permanently altered our world, especially our weather patterns. We have evidence from long ago that the earth seems to have been covered in thick vegetation, a tropical paradise. We know from Genesis 2:6 that ***"a mist used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground,"*** but until the Great Flood, it seems that the earth had never seen rain. At the flood, though, water came from everywhere – from above and also from below. At that point, we seem to have lost the water canopy that protected us from the sun. Again, there is much we could talk about here, but it seems that many of our modern weather patterns (and even seismic events) can be traced back to the change that took place as a result of the sin we read about leading up to the Great Flood in Genesis 6 – hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, blizzards, heat waves, even volcanoes and earthquakes/tsunamis. So, we at least have the possibility here of bad things happening to innocent people – not because of God, but due to the ongoing consequences of sin from previous generations.

IV. There is a fourth category to consider, and that is: Sometimes people suffer as the result of VIOLATING NATURAL LAW.

And again, in a sense, this could go with that category of "personal wrong choices," and really, the word "violating" might be a little strong here, because we are not really talking necessarily about doing something wrong. There is no moral element here. Some have compared living in this world to the idea of following the rules in a game of football. As the guy with the ball gets pushed closer and closer to the edge of the field, he might wish that the boundary could suddenly move over a yard or two so that he could continue to move forward. However, the rules of the game say that the line is fixed and cannot move. If the boundaries were always moving at the whim of either team, the game itself would be impossible. In a similar way, the rules of nature must also be consistent.

The same fires that heat our homes can sometimes get out of control and destroy human life.

For years, we have used wind to generate electricity, and yet wind can also do tremendous damage. The same winds that bring moisture for our crops also bring tornadoes from time to time.

We think about gravity. Is gravity good or bad? Well, usually it is very good! Without gravity, we would be flung into outer space.

And yet when an airplane fails, it falls because of gravity. Let us not, then, blame the crash on God. The plane falls because of a law that we usually appreciate. I guess in a way, we might say that we violate the law of gravity by flying – not really, in a sense we work with the laws of nature to fly a plane – but the point is: The laws of nature are consistent. Let us not, then, blame God when something goes wrong. If God were to constantly move that boundary line, if God were to randomly suspend gravity or the effects of wind or fire here and there, we would be living in utter chaos. There are consequences, then, to living in a world of natural law. There are benefits, but there are also consequences.

V. **There is one more category I need to add here at the end, and that is: SOMETIMES WE JUST DON'T KNOW.**

We think back to Job as we looked at that passage earlier this morning. In the middle of it, Job had no idea why he was suffering. In reality, Satan was causing all of that pain, and yet as far as we know, Job never figured it out. He learned some lessons from what he suffered (and we will look at some of those lessons next Sunday, if the Lord wills), but the point is: As he was going through it, Job never did understand why he suffered as he did.

When we suffer, it may be because of a personal choice, it may be because of something done by someone else, it may be because of something done in the past, it may be the result of Adam's sin, or the flood, or natural law, or we may never know.

And then, connected to this, we also have the possibility of random chance. Sometimes bad things just happen, and sometimes they really do happen for no reason at all. We think of what King Solomon observed in Ecclesiastes 9:11 where he said, ***"I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all."*** Solomon knew that even those who are the most gifted and talented do not always come out on top. There are times, then, when stuff just happens. By the way, I found the picture up here by searching Google for a "random" picture, and this is definitely "random." But the point is (as Solomon said): The race is not always to the swift.

Conclusion:

There is so much more we could consider, but the point is: When bad things happen, let us not start by blaming God. Let us not assume that God is too weak to stop what we are going through. Let us not assume that God is sending some torment our way because he enjoys seeing us suffer. Instead, let us be open to some possibilities. Next week, if the Lord wills, I want us to think about some of the possible benefits of suffering, and then if we need to, we will continue the following week by looking at some practical ways to support those who are going through difficult times.

As we close, we want to invite everyone here to obey the gospel if you have not done so already. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he came back from the dead. We obey the

gospel by believing in Jesus as the Son of God, by turning away from sin, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. We are raised up out of the water to live the Christian life. If you have any questions, we invite you to study with us. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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