

“Conversations with an Atheist—God and Suffering.”

One young man said this, “You know, it’s hard for me to believe in God when I see a lot of suffering in the world. I mean, you’ve got disease, natural disasters, tragedies happening all around us. If there was a loving God, I don’t think he would allow tsunami’s, holocausts, and diseases. Christians praise God for the blessings in life, but if God gets credit for the blessings, shouldn’t he also take the blame for the tragedies. Here’s what I think: Either God doesn’t care, or he doesn’t exist.”

I would guess that quite a few of us have thought that same thing. Anybody who looks at the magnitude of suffering on our planet, anybody who has walked through a really dark place where God didn’t seem to be present at all, is going to have these kinds of questions.

You might find this strange, but we find these thoughts in the Bible itself. The writers of scripture wrestle with the problem of why bad things happen to good people, why there is such suffering.

Sometimes we think that the Bible is full of promises that only good things are going to happen to people who follow God, then we’re crushed and disappointed when it doesn’t happen that way. But really the Bible is filled with stories of people trying to figure out how to reconcile the God they believe in with the world they’re experiencing. Lots of the Old Testament is like that.

Over a third of the Psalms are laments, or complaints. Like Psalm 22, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?” (Psalm 22:1, NIV)**. There are so many of these honest cries from the writers of scripture and they’re a part of the Biblical witness.

Jesus said, **“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NIV)**. The Bible doesn’t say that life is always going to be perfect. The Bible is the testimony of people struggling with their faith in the face of a world that at times is filled with suffering. And the biblical answer isn’t that God causes all this pain, or that God is going to take it all away. The biblical answer is that God walks with us, God sustains us, carries us and promises to redeem the pain that happens to us.

But even with all that in mind we still struggle with the question, “How can we make sense of a good and loving God in a world that’s filled with suffering?” For many people, certainly atheists, and even for believers, this can be a struggle. Christians in general, and the Bible affirm, that God is good, God is loving, God is merciful, God is kind, God is just, and God is all-knowing and all-powerful. So with a God like that, how can we explain pain and suffering, tragedy and injustice?

Now, I’m not going to spoon feed you an answer to these questions in a 30 minute message. Theologians have wrestled with this question for centuries. There’s not a quick and easy answer, but I want to give you some important things to think about as you roll this question around in your mind.

The first thing I want to say is that the atheists’ answer is not the only answer to the question of suffering. The atheist says, “Look at the terrible things that happen in this world. Isn’t that proof that there is no God? If there was a just and loving God, surely that God would stop all these things from happening.” But that is not the only possible answer to give to the question of suffering.

I also want to say that some of the answers given by some Christians are just inadequate. And maybe we need to give a better answer than we often give, especially when we talk to people who are going through suffering. And listen, when it comes to understanding suffering, it’s really a good thing to think about that before you start to suffer. When you’re walking through suffering, that’s a bad time try to figure out what you believe about it. So I really want us to think about this in advance.

Let’s take a little time and look at a few different kinds of suffering and how we understand them and how it’s awful easy, when we suffer, to immediately blame God for that. We don’t’ always do that, but it’s easy to do.

One way people experience suffering is through natural disasters. We think about tornadoes, tsunamis, earthquakes that become deadly. Innocent lives lost. The insurance industry used to call these acts of God. Acts of God! That assumes that God is the one bringing on tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods. But is that really the case? I can understand that being the view a thousand years ago or a few hundred years ago, when people didn’t know what caused things like tsunamis.

But today we understand the forces that make these things happen. We understand that there's lava, or magma circulating under the crust of the earth. It heats and cools and circulates and as it moves, it moves the plates of the crust of the earth. If that didn't happen, our planet would be ripped apart. If that didn't happen our planet wouldn't look anything like it does. As those plates shift and collide, that results in the formation of mountain ranges, that's how the continents were formed. All the land on our planet is a result of this process. We also know that when those plates shift huge amounts of energy are released. And sometimes when that energy is released there is a tremendous earthquake and if that happens under the sea the release of that energy gets transferred into a wave--a gigantic, powerful wave that can sweep across the land. And if there are any human beings in the path of that, they are going to die.

Now we can explain how that happens. Is that an act of God, or was that simply how our planet was designed? Designed in such a way that it would stay together and not explode and be ripped apart? And if we didn't have the processes of the earth like this would life even be able to be sustained on this planet? We recognize that God wasn't the one who brought that tsunami. But when we see the images and destruction, we can't help but say, "God why did you let this happen?"

We understand **illness** better today than ever. We understand cancer. That cancer begins when a strand of DNA mutates. That happens all the time in your body and mine, but usually our bodies eliminate that mutation and we don't even know it was ever there. But if our body doesn't eliminate it soon enough, that mutation replicates, and cells reproduce and a tumor forms. We understand that process and even why it happens sometimes. So we try to reduce cancer causing agents from our lives, we try to stop smoking and doing other things that might cause cells to mutate into cancer. And in the process we learn how to fight off cancer. Is it an act of God when somebody gets cancer or is it just a part of what happens in our bodies?

We recognize that when DNA mutates that's part of the reason why human beings look different from each other. The diversity among human beings, and life itself on our planet, is part of that process. It's also part of what has made the human race so resilient, so strong, so adaptable. But sometimes it goes wrong. We understand this today. And yet when we have cancer we look at God say, "Why God did you do this to me?"

We understand how **people do evil things to others**. I hear stories all the time of how parents or relatives or others berated, degraded or abused children, and those children grow up and suffer all kinds of issues because of those terrible experiences. They didn't choose to be treated that way. They were a victim of someone else's evil choices. We read daily about violent crimes. Do we believe that God is making one person murder or abuse another? Or is that something that happens in world where God has given human beings freedom to choose.

When we look in the Bible, we see that God has taken a great risk in giving us freedom. He didn't create us to be robots. No, he created us to be able to choose for ourselves right from wrong—we're free moral agents. We can choose to follow God or we can choose to reject God. And God's desire is that we follow him; that we do great good instead of great harm, but God took the risk of giving us the ability to choose.

What about accidents? We understand the causes of accidents. We know sometimes people will drive carelessly, or drive drunk, and sometimes they'll cause an accident and people are hurt or killed. Sometimes the things that we find fun and exhilarating are also dangerous like snow skiing. It's been several years since I went snow skiing, but I love to do it. It is the most fun thing I know to do. And I like to go fast. But my choice to go fast has the potential for harmful consequences. **We** do these things, but in the aftermath of an accident we can sit there and say, "God why did you do this?"

A pastor that I know, Adam Hamilton, tells about how he got a call one night when he was in college saying that two of his closest friends had just been killed. They were two brothers, Danny and Gary. Danny was the best man at Adam's wedding. Gary was his youth minister. He was a young man who had helped Adam make some very important decisions about his life and his faith. Suddenly these two friends, these brothers, were gone.

Here's how it happened. Gary and Danny worked for a roofing company. One day were delivering some shingles to a house. They had a boom truck and pulled up to the house. The roofers were there waiting for the shingles. When they drove up Danny stepped on to the back of the truck and was operating the controls to lift the boom up to the roof. But he didn't see the power lines up above, and when the boom

touched one of those power lines the electricity came through the boom and when right through Danny throwing him from the truck and killing him instantly.

Gary, his big brother, ran over to him and tried to resuscitate him, but as he was he noticed three roofers stuck to the truck being electrocuted. He ran over to them and pried them off the truck with a two by four. He saved their lives, but as soon as he pried them off the electricity came through him and killed him instantly.

At the visitation the night before the funeral groups of friends were gathered around. There were people there who cared a lot about Danny and Gary. Both of their bodies were lying there in their caskets together in the same room. Gary had his Bible wrapped in his hands.

Adam listened to the people there. One group of folks had speculated that there must have been some secret sin in their lives and so God's judgment came on them for that sin. But if that were the way God worked, none of us would be here today.

Another minister said, "Well, God needed them in heaven." That may be comforting for some people, but Adam thought to himself: "God must have billions of people in heaven, why did he need Danny and Gary?"

The preacher at the memorial service decided that Danny and Gary died so that someone at the memorial service would come to Christ, so they offered an altar call and said, "If you don't know Christ, Danny and Gary died just so you could come to Christ at this time." You know, God has to have a more effective form of evangelism than that.

Adam struggled with all this for a year. He struggled to understand the justice of God. He asked the questions: Why did God let this happen? Why did God take my friends? After a year he figured out an answer. He figured out that Danny died because when you take a metal boom and you touch it to a power line there's enough electricity to kill somebody and you die. And that when you stand there and you see three people being electrocuted on the truck and you take a piece of wood and you try and pry them off that truck and you finally get them free the electricity that was going through their bodies goes through yours and you're going to die.

Do I believe that God killed those two young men? No. But do I believe that when they died they entered that place that Jesus said he goes and prepares for us? Yes. Do I believe that God was with them as that event occurred? Yes. Do I believe that the Holy Spirit sustained and comforted their mom and dad, and their whole family? Absolutely. Do I believe that from that tragedy God took those events and used them to do good things in the lives of others? Yes. Somehow God used that tragedy to do good, but did God kill those two young men? No.

But that leads to a big question. "Then what does God do?" If God isn't out there constantly protecting us from harm, if God isn't out there constantly working to punish us or save and protect us, then what does God do? Some people say God is in control of everything. That when something bad happens, some tragedy, that God did, we just might not understand why. But if God does everything then we're not really free. Our ability to choose is just an illusion. That makes us puppets with the illusion of freedom. And I don't think that's what the Old Testament or the New Testament tells us.

Other people say that God is real, but detached. God created everything and then just stepped back. He's there but chooses not to interfere with our lives. But that's not what we see in scriptures. The Bible tells us that God guides us, God carries us, God sustains us, God is our hope and our help.

So when it comes to looking at how God works in our lives there are several important things to look at. First, God works in our world, but not primarily through suspending the laws of nature that God himself made. That's what we want sometimes. We want God to intervene. So that person talking on their cell phone, driving down the interstate, who is not paying attention and veering into my lane, I want God step in and move their car back into their lane. We hope that. We pray for that. But we know it doesn't always happen that way.

Sometimes, yes, God intervenes, but most of the time God does not suspend the laws he created. If God did that all the time the world would be radically unpredictable, erratic, unstable. Instead God works through people and by influencing us.

Now, I do believe that God can, and occasionally does, intervene, and step in, and suspend the laws of nature he created. I believe God does do that, I've experienced that myself, and maybe you have too.

I'm not known for being the best driver in the world. A couple of years ago Janet, Zoe and I were coming back from Janet's parents. We're driving down a rural highway in my SUV. We rounded a corner at 60

mph and there was a gigantic dump truck stopped on the highway. I was going to hit at full speed. It was one of those split second things. There was no shoulder on this highway, just deep ditches. I swerved into the ditch at full speed, cruised through the ditch for several hundred yards. As we went into the ditch I hit my head on the window so hard it broke my sunglasses. We cruised through the ditch at full speed, popped out the other side onto the road. Without a scratch. If we had been any further ahead or behind that exact spot in the road we would have hit several road signs, or other mailboxes. It was like other hands took the wheel of the SUV and steered us perfectly around everything and popped us out the other side. We all could easily have been severely injured or killed.

How do I explain that? I really believe that God guided us through that and protected us. Do I think God always does that? No. For some reason I can only guess at, there was a reason, a purpose, something God had for us to do. God said, "I'm not letting that happen today. I'm not letting you check out just yet. I've got a purpose for you."

So yes, God can miraculously intervene and sometimes he does. We see that regularly. When I'm with somebody in the hospital, or have a prayer request come through, I pray. I pray for a grand slam miracle of healing for lots of people. And sometimes we see that. I have prayed for people and get the report back that their cancer is healed, gone, miracle. Or a baby still in her mother's womb who has a cyst on her brain and isn't expected to live, and if she does will be severely brain damaged. We prayed, and at the next doctor visit there was no sign of the cyst whatsoever. She's running around here today! I've prayed for miracles like that thousands of times, and maybe a dozen times I've actually seen it happen. Now, there's been a lot of healing. But just a few, what I'd call, out of the park miracles. Those times when doctors scratch their heads and say, "Wow!" So I know it can happen, but most of the time it doesn't happen that way.

So my prayers are not only for God to miraculously heal, but I also pray, "Lord, I know that's not how you normally operate, so I pray that you would use the doctors, and nurses, and medicines and technologies as your tools to bring healing." I pray, "God, no matter what happens, please sustain this person, carry them, give them comfort and hope and surround them with people who love them. Hold them near to you."

So yes, sometimes God miraculously intervenes, but by and large, the universe is set up with God's laws and God does not intervene, instead, God influences. God influences by speaking to our hearts, by guiding if we'll listen. The more in touch we are with God, and the more were open to the work of the Holy Spirit, the more we sense God's guiding hand in the decisions we make; in the things that we do, even in where we go. Part of our task is to be awake enough to notice when God is speaking to us and trying to guide us.

Those times when you just have a feeling that you should call somebody, or go visit somebody-- somebody's name just pops into your head. When that happens to me, I've come to know that God is influencing me, nudging me. I can choose not to do anything about that, but God leaves that choice to me. I strive to listen for those promptings; I strive to be sensitive to those nudges. And there are countless times when I've made that phone call, or that visit, or said that word of encouragement, or that word of challenge, or the word of accountability, and the person I've said it too has said, "I can't believe you just called. I needed that so much."

God works if we just listen. He prompts our hearts. He brings people into our paths that will encourage us, or challenge us. We have to be open, be awake, be listening, and be available to God. And that's part of what I want to encourage you to do. I see this happen almost every single day. Someone is in the hospital, or going through a crisis, or grieving a death, and God surrounds them with the love and care when they most needed it.

Let me wrap this up by saying that I believe that God's perspective on our suffering and on our death is different than our perspective. For me, the universe revolves around me. I know it doesn't, but sometimes I tend to think it does. I have this plan for my life and that plan is that my wife, Janet and I will live to be 100 (she'll be 101). We'll be in perfect shape for the shape we're in, independent, still driving our own cars, and that night we'll hold hands and kiss each other goodnight, tell each other, "I love you," just like we do every night, but that morning we'll wake up together in the kingdom of heaven. That's my plan, that's what I hope. But I also realize that there are no guarantees.

I've often told people, "If I die tomorrow in an accident or of a heart attack or falling out of my attic carrying down boxes of Christmas ornaments, I don't want anybody to grieve. I've had 41 amazing years. I thank God for all the gifts and blessings and experiences. How could I ask for anything more than that?"

Life is a gift, no matter how long it is. And God's perspective is this: He knows that even if we live to be 100 that's a blink of an eye compared to eternity. He knows what stands on the other side of this life and if we just understood we would find that death really is a celebration. And when God looks at tragedy and suffering, he sees it in light of the total experience.

God sees death differently than we do. Our task is to trust God and say, "My life is yours as long as I have life. When I go through suffering, teach me; use it as an opportunity to serve you more faithfully. And in all things I entrust my life to you." Some people in the midst of suffering and tragedy turn away from God. But some people, in the face of suffering and tragedy say, "This is precisely why God is here. He did not cause this, but he promises to sustain me. He is my hope and my ever present help in time of need."

The scriptures tell us that, even though others may intend harm for us, God somehow bends that and brings about good. Paul put it this way, "**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose**" (Romans 8:28, NIV) And nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

The Psalmist says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me." And John in the book of Revelation ends the entire Bible with the affirmation that in the end there will be no more suffering or sorrow, no more pain, no more death.

Atheism is not the answer to the problem of suffering. It doesn't change the equation. Suffering happens whether you're an atheist or a believer. But if you're an atheist, you've just taken away the one source of hope and strength. Please don't do that. God is your help, and your hope in time of need. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources in this message.