

“Wonder Out Loud—Why Does God Allow Suffering?”

For the last few weeks we've been asking questions. The questions we might have been afraid to ask out loud. We're asking them! Because God invites us to ask, and God can handle all of our questions. It doesn't make God angry, or offended, or worried when we ask questions about faith, or God, or Jesus, or Christianity. Now, I know, last week I said we might be wrapping up this series, but there's one other question I want to address before then. It's one that hits several other questions that you've been asking. The overarching question today is, **“Why does God allow suffering?”** Why do bad things happen, especially to good people? I've thought that before, especially in light of the death of a good friend, especially in light of the deaths of the children of good friends. Why, God, do you allow this? It's broken my heart, it's made me question, it's made me doubt. Today I want to tell you how I've wrestled with this in my life and invite you to think about it too.

Because it's on your minds. One person wrote in a newspaper column, “The world is full of cruelty, evil and senseless pain. I find this logically impossible to reconcile with the notion of a divine power for good.” Another one wrote, “I want to believe so much and at times it seems that it is almost there. But I cannot reconcile the violence, earthquakes, hatred and all the other evils that are so prevalent in this world, with a loving God.”

Maybe because of something that's happened in your life, or as you've seen natural disasters and the suffering they've brought, you're wrestling with similar questions. For some of you suffering has been intensely personal. You have dealt with suffering so close to home that it almost shattered your faith or kept you from faith. This morning we want to deal with these questions. I'll do the best I can to show you how I've wrestled with this but you need to wrestle with it on your own.

This morning I hope to deal with this question in several ways. And I want to start by looking different kinds of suffering. I think it will be very helpful if we can differentiate between the types of suffering. And then ask the question, “What does God have to do with each of these types of suffering?”

Let's start with the type of suffering that's easiest for us to reconcile and deal with: **Self-inflicted suffering**. Most of us would agree that self-inflicted suffering is not something that we can turn to God about and raise a fist in the air and say, “Why did you do this to me?” But sometimes in the midst of circumstances we still feel that way.

That was the case for a man down in Dallas. He was a Christian. He had been a chain smoker for thirty years of his life. For most of his life he had smoked three or four packs of cigarettes a day. His doctors had told him, “You're going to have to quit smoking or you're going to tear up your health.” His wife had begged him, “Please stop smoking.” His children had pleaded with him, “Please, Dad, don't smoke anymore.” He started coughing and having other physical problems and had to go into the hospital and found out that he had lung cancer. His pastor was visiting him in the hospital and he said, “Pastor, I don't understand why God did this to me.”

Sometimes we choose to think that there are no consequences to our actions. But there are always consequences to our actions. God does not eliminate the consequences to our actions. And sometimes the consequences are painful and we suffer.

The good news is that God forgives our sins. God works with us through the difficult times. God cares for us and holds us and keeps us when we hurt. But he won't take away the consequences of our own actions. My guess is that most of us would agree on that. That there are a lot of decisions and things we do where we inflict suffering on ourselves. God's not responsible for those things.

But what about suffering related to poverty, particularly in the third world. I've had people say to me, thinking people, honest people who are looking for answers to the tough questions, “I want to believe in God and I want to believe in Jesus Christ, but I find it absolutely impossible to believe in a God who allows a third of the world's population, his children, to live in sub-poverty conditions—a God that allows tens of thousands of children to die each and every day from malnutrition and related diseases. I can't conceive a god who would treat his children that way.”

That is a very good question. I have to answer it with another question: "Is there enough food on this planet to feed every human being? Are there enough natural resources in this world to make sure that everyone can have clothing and a place to live?" If these resources exist, and the thinking person will know that they do, then the question is "Where's the problem?"

In business terms the problem is not in production, which is God's responsibility. The problem is in distribution, which is our responsibility. We can point our finger at God and ask, "Why did you let this happen?" And God simply asks us, "Why do **you** let this happen to my children? I provided enough for everybody in this world. Why do you let this happen to my children?"

The suffering of those who have little or nothing is our responsibility. God has provided for their needs. That is why the church is so important. When we gather together we have the chance to see outside our comfortable little worlds. That's part of my job. To challenge you, and to be challenged myself, to hear God's call to do something about the suffering and hunger and hopelessness around the world. That's why we are always collecting food. Always collecting clothing. Always collecting money to send to people in need. God has given many, many of us more than enough, it's our job to get that surplus to those in the corners of our city, and the far-off corners of the earth. We have been blessed to be a blessing to others. But the temptation is to keep our blessings all to ourselves.

Let's talk about **suffering as the result of natural disasters**. Does God cause hurricanes, and tsunamis, and earthquakes, and floods, and tornados? As a modern, scientifically-minded Christian, I believe that God created the earth as a living, moving, changing, dynamic thing. Tectonic plates move and there are earthquakes and tsunamis. Weather fronts collide and there are tornados, floods, hurricanes. Without these things our planet would cease to be alive. In the midst of a natural disaster it's very hard to see that the forces that caused it are the forces that bring life to our planet, but it's true.

Some say God uses natural disasters to punish people. But Jesus, God in human form, ate with sinners, he loved them, he taught them in their homes. He didn't destroy their homes and kill their children.

God designed the movements of nature into our system. And, yes, it's true that sometimes we get in the way of these things. Was it God's plan and intention that someone should lose their home that's built in a flood plain, or built on a fault line? No. But these things that happen are a part of the life of our world. Take them away and our earth would cease to be the life-giving place that God created it to be.

Now, let's deal with the question of **suffering inflicted on us by other people**. We can understand that we pay the consequences for our own actions, but there are times when someone else does something evil or wrong and someone like **us** pays the consequences. Or maybe a child pays the consequences. You hear and read about this every day. The child who grows up in a home where they are sexually or physically or emotionally abused or neglected. It was on the front page of *The Globe* last week. A child killed by an abusive parent. That child did nothing to deserve that, someone else inflicted the suffering on that child. How can God let that happen? Or on a larger scale when a Hitler or Stalin comes to power and millions are subjugated and suffer, and die. We say, "How could God allow something like that to happen?" "How could God allow the evil choices of one human being to bring suffering onto so many other people?"

To answer that question I need to ask another question, "What is God's alternative?" What's the alternative to a world where you are given the freedom to choose to do something evil to someone else and have them suffer the consequences? The alternative to that kind of world is a world where you have no choices. Where you only and always can do the right thing and you can never do the wrong thing. Where, when there's a decision to make and there are two choices and you're not sure which is right, you're only going to do the right thing; you'd never even know about the alternative. A world where we would be moral robots. That's what the world would be like if there was no possibility that you could do something that could harm someone else.

You see, God gives each of us a tremendous gift. We have been given minds of our own. God created us this way because he wanted us to choose to love him, because if love is not a choice then it is not love. Along with that ability to choose to love him or not, he gave us the capacity to choose right or wrong. So we have within our hands and our minds and our hearts the ability to bless others or to curse them; to do good to

others or to do evil to them. We have that ability, and we have a tremendous responsibility that that freedom of will and choice comes with.

Some would say that that's too much responsibility for us and God should have done something different; that we can't handle this much freedom! But God hasn't left us alone out there for us to just try and figure it out all by ourselves. God has said, "Here's how I want you to live. Here's how I would want you to exercise your freedom. Here's the way you should relate to one another." He has given us guidance, but we still have the choice of rejecting what God has said or doing what God has said. When we do it, great things happen and we bless others. When we reject it evil things happen and we end up destroying others. You have within you the freedom to choose, given by God, and the capacity to do good or evil, and it's up to you how you use that potential.

God doesn't want a parent to abuse and kill a child. God does not want someone to fly a jet fully loaded with fuel into a building filled with people. God doesn't want for a Hitler to take power. But the consequences of your freedom are that sometimes some people can do evil to others. God weeps when that happens. God grieves at that. The Bible says that God is angered by that. But that's a price of the freedom that we cherish. As you talk with people about suffering, the conversation may turn to this very question. Please, as God's ambassador, as his mouthpiece, please be prepared to respond with confidence.

Let's talk about tragic disasters of every kind. There are terrible tragedies that happen in our world. When you are affected by that, when it's a family member or somebody you love it hurts so bad and you begin asking those "Why?" questions. I've sat in the homes of people who are in the midst of those tragedies and those questions come and that's a bad time to try and answer them. Because your emotions are overwhelming your thoughts. At times of tragedy you can't really think with your head. That's why you need to know the answers before you face those tough "Why?" questions.

I did a funeral this week and on the way to the graveside I was talking with the funeral director. He told me about how they are preparing for the funerals of the family that was killed near 4th and Rangeline last week. Three people were killed. On that day a woman lost her father, her daughter, and her unborn grandbaby. It was an accident. I have a very hard time getting my brain around that. Why did it have to happen?

A friend of ours, Dana Kennedy, her brother, Ryan, was doing some home repair one day. He was drilling through a wall and his drill bit hit an electrical wire and the electricity went through his drill and into him and killed him instantly.

This past summer my step-father's grandson, Mike, was just getting off of work on a dredging barge in Oklahoma. The day was over and he'd taken off his safety gear when he noticed that their boat had come loose. Without thinking he jumped in to grab the rope. When he jumped in he hit his head on something and because he didn't have on his life vest, he drowned. He had a wife and a baby on the way. They found his body later that day.

I'm sure in the face of these tragic deaths people said all kinds of things like, "God needed them in heaven." But I think, "There are billions of people in heaven. Surely God could have done without these for now." Some people probably said, "God wanted to use their deaths to lead someone to Jesus." But I think, "God's got to have better evangelism strategies than that." Others probably said, "They must have had some sin that needed punishing." But if that were the case, if that's how God operated, none of us would be here. None of us!

Why did they have to die? I've wrestled, and wrestled, and wrestled with this one. And I've come to believe that maybe it's as simple as, when you get in your car and drive down any street, at any time, you take a risk that somebody who's not paying attention, or drunk, or texting, or whatever, may cross the center line and hit you. Or if you drill into an electrical wire, that electricity will come into your body and may stop your heart. Or if you jump in the water and hit your head you may drown.

It would be nice to think that God suspended the laws of nature for us all the time. But that's not how God works. Every once in a while for some peculiar reason that we can't understand God will. Praise God for those miracles. But the truth is that if you want to live a life that is risk free with no chance of ever getting hurt, don't leave your house. Just stay there. Don't live. Don't talk to anybody. Don't go riding bikes, or ride in

cars, or ride in an airplane. Don't do anything in life that is enjoyable or brings pleasure, because any of these things come with a certain degree of risk. This is the world God made.

In the face of suffering my experience has been that God says, "I love you and I will hold you when life hurts so bad that nobody else can hold you. I will keep you at times when your life is about to fall apart at the seams. I will take care of you and I will promise you that that this is not all there is to life and that there is something beyond this life. And I will be your hope."

There's nothing wrong with wishing that there would never be any suffering or tragedy in life. There is nothing wrong with trying to avoid it. But we're just fooling ourselves if we believe that God will stop all suffering.

You see, Jesus suffered. He was betrayed, beaten, tortured, crucified. When we hurt, when our bodies are sick or in pain, when people betray us, or evil destroys us, God knows what that's like because he has gone through it too. It's the simple truth that life hurts sometimes.

Some of you may not believe in God because of tragedy and suffering in the world. But let me tell you, I believe in God precisely because of what I've seen happen during tragedy and suffering. Because when I have sat there in the face of those things, over and over again I've seen God sustain people. They are able to go on because God was there. At the graveside of someone we love, I've seen God offer hope through the gift of life on the other side of the grave. We have the promise of life in heaven with God where there are no more tears, no more suffering, no more pain. Paul wrote, "**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us**" (Romans 8:18).

The Bible teaches us boldly that God can work good through all things, even personal tragedy. He doesn't make these things happen but by his power, and as we surrender ourselves to him he takes that suffering and makes us stronger, he takes our suffering and allows us to mature in our faith, he takes our suffering and through it he equips us to be more compassionate and caring and more able to be there for other people that he will put in our path that are suffering too.

And when we suffer we need to know that God more than compensates for what we go through. He makes us stronger in this life and gives us the promise of heaven where there is not more suffering, or pain, or tears. Paul wrote, "**For our ...momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all**" (2 Corinthians 4:17). As we choose to follow Christ, we begin to take a long-term view and understand the suffering of this life as so small compared to an eternity without it.

My hope for you isn't that you'll just understand the problem of suffering intellectually, but that you will find the hope that's only available through God. He will sustain you. And for today that is the good news of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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