

Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?

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So far we have explored the questions, “Does Life have a Purpose?” And “Is there a God?” In his book, Unimaginable – What Our World Would Be Like Without Christianity, Dr. Jeremiah Johnston summarizes what has occurred when nations have operated with atheistic worldviews. Listen to his conclusion,

“If there is no God . . . [then] there really is no humanity. [Because if there is no God, then] Humans are nothing more than two-legged animals, and morality is nothing more than the survival of the fittest. [Without God] we humans have no purpose . . . no meaning. We are nothing more than the chance product of a pitiless, indifferent universe. But is this true? On the contrary! We humans know deep in our souls that this is not true. We do in fact have meaning; we do have purpose.”

This brings us to our question for this morning. In a recent survey it was discovered that if people could ask God just one question – the question most chosen was: “Why does God allow pain and suffering?” If you are here this morning and you are smack in the middle of terrible pain and suffering, then please be assured that I am not going to offer you a nice, neat packaged answer – all tied up with a bow. There are no nice, neat packaged answers to pain and suffering – unless we have worked really hard to bring that pain and suffering upon ourselves. Years ago I saw sketched on a poster, a man on his knees, agonizing in prayer – crying out to God –saying, **“O Lord, please deliver me from this totally unnecessary and self-imposed trial.”** I have endured a few of those trials in my lifetime.

My first legitimate experience with sorrow and suffering, over which I had no control, was when my mother was diagnosed with fourth stage cancer, my sophomore year in high school. She was 38 years old. She died my senior year – two days after my 17th birthday.

I cannot say that I suffered greatly between my sophomore and senior year – because my dad, my two older brothers and me – all went into total denial, by convincing ourselves that God was going to heal her. After all, the God who created the heavens and earth – has the power to do that. And so during my sophomore and junior years – I came to know my mother better than ever before because she was often confined to bed, and we would talk at length after I came home from school. Those were good times. And because my mother deeply loved God, I just knew that God was going to heal her.

But ultimately cancer ended her physical life. And yes, it was devastating when God said no, to the most earnest, fervent prayers I had ever offered up to God. Upon her death, I finally understood what people meant when they said “I thought my heart was going to break.” I literally thought my physical heart was going to burst. And if a Christian had walked up to me at that time, and told me to “cheer up” because Romans 8:28 says God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him – I would have decked him. Praise God nobody did!

It has now been 50 years since my mother’s death, and I want to share some things I learned from that experience – and from the Bible – and from 67 years of life. The truths I want to share are not new, but they have

greatly helped me to deal with sorrow and suffering.

Let me start with a passage from I Samuel 30. David and his soldiers had been called away from their campsite in Ziklag and upon arriving back – they were all horrified to discover that their enemy, the Amalekites, had attacked and destroyed Ziklag. Their wives and children had been carried off to be slaves or worse. This is what we read in **I Samuel 30:4**, “Then David and the people who were with him raised their voices and wept – until they had no more strength to weep.”

Before my mother died, I had never seen grown men weep uncontrollably in my presence. But when my mother was in her last hours, I saw my dad, my uncles and my brothers weep with me until we could weep no more. **I believe tears are a God-given release for overwhelming sorrow.** However, there is still a decision we must make after the weeping is over. **I Samuel 30:6**, records a wrong decision and the right decision,

“And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him [that is the downside of being a leader], because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters [that is the wrong way to respond to sorrow. I have met bitter people in my life. It is never pretty – it is always sad]. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.”

David was sorrowful, but not bitter. He trusted **his God** in the midst of deep pain. David could do that because he had a personal relationship with God – and had learned to trust Him – even when everything seemed horribly wrong.

At the age of 17 – I had not learned to trust God as much as David

trusted God. And so let me share what helped get me through that time of sorrow. One source of strength was the love that my dad and mom had for God – and for each other – in the midst of her illness. I would often say to myself, “So this is what real love looks like.” My dad was gentle and kind to a very sick wife. My mother was grateful, joyful and almost always spurned self-pity.

I still remember groups of sad, concerned people from our town, coming to see my mother, with the hope of lifting her spirits and cheering her up. They would walk into her room nervous and scared, and leave with radiant smiles of joy. Why? Because her joy and peace in Christ was undeniable and contagious. And for me, that was a powerful witness to the reality of God in her life. Some people might say that my mother was just a strong person. It doesn't mean that **God** helped her. My rebuttal is that my mother was not a strong person. If I injured myself; especially if there was any significant amount of blood, she was helpless, and would invariably telephone my dad, who would leave work and come home to patch me up. **But** when my mom herself, was “terminally ill” – she was a rock of Gibraltar. That undeniable strength was proof to me that God's promise to followers of Christ is true. Listen to His promise recorded in **Hebrews 13:5-6**,

“‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’⁶ So we [believers] can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man [or cancer] do to me?’”

Cancer killed my mother's body, but it couldn't touch her soul. One of her favorite Scriptures verses during her illness came from the book of

Job, “Though He slay me, I will trust in Him.”

After my mom’s funeral, a lay elder in our church came to the house and gently shared a portion of Scripture that I found to be profoundly comforting. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul wrote in **II Corinthians 5:1-9**,

“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home [referring to our body] is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens . . . ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened – not that we would be unclothed [a spirit with no body], but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life . . . ⁶ So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord . . . ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.”

When I understood and believed this passage, I had to admit that my sorrow was for myself, not my mother. She was out of her pain and with Jesus and the angels and all the saints who had gone before her. I would miss her, but she was far better off with Jesus than with me.

What effect did my mother’s death have on me? Her love for God during her illness, caused me to realize that I needed to know God the way she knew God. So upon my graduation from highschool, I went to Bible College to learn more about God, so I too could love Him more. That decision changed the course of my life. In other words, Romans 8:28, is true. God really does work all things together for good to those who love Him and our called according to His purpose.

I realize that all of these truths I have shared so far can be comforting for Christians, but not for unbelievers. This is why as followers of Christ

we need to have a passion for helping unbelievers come to know Christ. And I praise God, that worldwide, there are about 70,000 people a day who are trusting in Christ as their Savior.

Let me change lanes and ask some questions that unbelievers are grappling with; questions which believers should be able to give a reasonable answer. The problem of pain has caused many people to doubt that there is a good God. And so let me ask your this question: Is pain synonymous with evil? No. As a matter of fact, someone who cannot feel physical pain has an extremely rare but dangerous condition. If you cannot feel pain, you may unknowingly rest your hand on a red-hot stove and not know until you smell your flesh burning. Ravi Zacharias knew a woman who prayed every night – asking God to please allow her son to feel pain. In this world – pain is necessary.

Let's think together about evil. In the early 1900s three civil leaders, Hitler, Stalin and Mao, were responsible for the deaths of over 100 million people. All of these men had developed ungodly worldviews shaped by atheistic philosophies. Question: Is God to blame for those 100 millions deaths? I would say no – especially because God has clearly told us the character qualities people should possess if they serve in civil government. Listen to God's counsel of **Exodus 18:21** [parallel passage in Deuteronomy 1:13-18], "But select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain." Hitler, Stalin and Mao, did not even come close to meeting those qualifications. And we the people of the United states, regularly vote into office – civil leaders

who do not meet those qualifications. And as a result, we have legal abortions for any and every reason and same sex marriages. That is on us, not God.

Let me share another great evil taking place right now. Over 45 million people worldwide are enslaved [almost four times the population of the state of Illinois]. 95% are women and children. 80% of these women and children are used in sexual exploitation. Human-trafficking is now a 150 billion dollar a year industry. God is apposed to both slavery and fornication. If we think rejecting God's Law is not a big deal, then we need to speak with these victims and see if they agree.

Another source of suffering that confounds and angers people – are human deaths and destruction of homes caused by tornadoes, earthquakes and other natural disasters. Why does God allow those things? This question is related to the issue of pain. I say that because science now tells us that lightening, wildfires, tornadoes, and earthquakes all provide **important needs** for life on earth. With that in mind, are earthquakes evil? If it causes a house to collapse and kill people – we say yes. Can dedicated people work together to build affordable houses that can withstand earthquakes and tornadoes without collapsing? People working together can do amazing things.

Let me go on the offense with this next question. How much suffering could be avoided if all people, in all the nations truly loved God and loved their neighbor as themselves? The answer is that there would be an immediate and breathtaking reduction of suffering – if people even came

close to obeying the two chief commandments.

But pastor Mark, why didn't God create people so that they have no choice but to love God and their neighbor? Couldn't God do that? Not everyone is going to like this answer, but I believe it is nevertheless true. If God created people who have no choice but to love, then the love we would demonstrate toward God and others – would be “a going through the motions” – robotic kind of love. **Love cannot be love, without the freedom not to love.** And so when God created people in His own image, who had the full ability to love, He had to give them the freedom not to love – if they so chose. **Ecclesiastes 7:29** declares, “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

But if God is all-powerful and all-knowing, can't He figure out a way to **make people do good** – without making them into robots? No. There are things God cannot do. For example, **God cannot tell wicked lies.** Why? Because He is absolutely holy. And you cannot be holy and a liar at the same time. Neither can God create robots who actually love Him. C.S. Lewis said, Nonsense is nonsense – even when we speak it of God.

And so the Bible tells us that God did not create evil, but He did create the possibility of evil by giving angels and people free moral wills. There were no good reasons why angels or mankind should have chosen not to love and obey God. But when they did choose not to – sin was sinned into existence.

Some people say – then God should have never created angels or man. From our very limited perspective, I can see why people would think that.

But God knows all the great things He is going to accomplish because He did create angels and mankind. You are going to have to listen carefully to what I say next. Someone philosophic has said that perfection and purpose correlate. An imperfect universe may still be considered perfect if it perfectly leads us to God's ultimate plan of a New Heaven and New Earth – where there will be no more sorrow, pain or death. And according to Revelation 21:1-4, the New Heaven and New Earth will last forever. That is where God is taking this temporary phase of the universe.

We were reminded last Sunday, that people know deep down inside that this universe did not come from nothing or by chance. It came from an all-powerful and all-knowing God. This brings us to the final dilemma concerning evil and suffering that we will talk about this morning. Since there is a God who is powerful enough to stop evil [to this we all agree], then it must mean that God does not care about evil or suffering.

Christians know this is not true, because the Bible tells us from Genesis through Revelation – that God is judging evil all the time. And His judgments have resulted in the deaths of a lot of wicked people. But another clear message from the Bible is that God would rather have wicked people repent of their sins – rather than to die in their sins. Listen to **John 3:16-17**,

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn [to sentence to death] the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The message of the gospel is that God the Son left the glory He had

shared with God the Father from all eternity past, and was willing to become fully man, without ceasing to be fully God. The Lord Jesus became the Second Adam, so He could undo the havoc wrecked by the first Adam. And the only way Christ could do that was by taking the guilt and penalty of all our sin upon Himself and paying it in full. The final word that Jesus spoke on the cross, was “tetelestai” which is translated, “It is finished.” Jesus did not breathe His last breath until He had completed everything He had become a man to accomplish.

There is also a financial meaning to the word “tetelestai”. In New Testament times, when someone went to prison for a debt they could not pay, family and friends were responsible to feed and cloth the prisoner and to work at paying off his debt. On the wall outside the prisoner’s door, was a document that listed his debt and the progress being made at paying off that debt. And when the last penny had been paid, the word “tetelestai” was written on that document – meaning PAID IN FULL. The person was then legally blameless in the eyes of the law. Friends, for God to send His One and Only Son into a fallen world to be our perfect sacrifice for sin – **cannot be interpreted to mean that God does not care.**

And so what do we do when deep suffering and sorrow enters into our lives? When I considered my mother’s suffering and death from cancer, I basically had three choices. **I could have bitterly said – there is no God.** But I couldn’t say that because my mom talked about God all the time. Her strength and peace in the midst of her suffering testified to me that

God was at work in her life. **Or I could have said there is a God, but He is a brute of a God, who doesn't care about our suffering.** But I believed the gospel, that God so loved the world, that He gave His One and Only Son to bear the penalty of our sin. Someone has rightly said – our God has wounds, and those wounds prove He cares. **My third choice was to admit that there is a God and He cares deeply about our suffering. But as God, He can see the beginning and the end, and therefore He alone fully understands the reason WHY suffering comes into our lives.** Fifty years ago, I chose to love God and trust Him with the “why” of my suffering. It has made a great difference in my life.

Let me show you this picture of a weaving. Can you all see that it is a beautiful crown? But let's look at the underside of this weaving. Let's now listen to this famous poem:

“My Life is but a weaving between my God and me;
I cannot choose the colors – He worketh steadily.
Oft times He weaveth sorrow – and I, in foolish pride,
forget He sees the upper, and I the under side.
Not til the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful in the Weaver's skillful hand,
as the threads of gold and silver – in the pattern He has planned.”

Let's pray.