

WHY DO YOU LET BAD THINGS HAPPEN?

WHY Series (Part 2) | Text: Mark 14:32-36

A taxi swerves out of control, leaving a brilliant young woman brain-damaged for life. A couple joyfully awaits the birth of their daughter only to discover that the baby has a fatal defect. A mother of three small children goes in for a routine operation and dies on the table. A young man accepts the hospitality of a stranger and is beaten to death for his trust. The tests come back and it's cancer. A fire devastates a family's home. Five children learn that daddy won't be coming home, ever again, because he's been killed by bank robbers. A beloved grandfather puts a gun to his head and fires.

These are just some of the tragedies that have touched my life. I'm sure you could spin tales from your own experience. Each day, all across our planet, a million scenarios like these unfold, giving rise to the question: "**WHY God?**" You're supposed to be all-loving and all-powerful, so... "**Why, do you let bad things happen?**" In the words of the prophet Job – the biblical poster child for a person who has seen way too much suffering: "**Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the schemes of the wicked?**" (Job 10:1-3) Please explain yourself, God.

The Causes of Suffering

We want to believe in a good and powerful God, so we reach for reasons that will somehow make sense of all the terrible things we see happening in our world or coming at us. And, for some of us, it helps to think about the CAUSES of suffering. The Bible does suggest three principal causes for the pain and losses of life.

For one thing, Scripture teaches that God has created an ordered Universe ruled by an awesome interlocking, multi-dimensional matrix of physical laws and forces. It is the dynamic outworking of these principles and patterns that produces and sustains life as we know it. Yet there are certain unavoidable consequences to the outworking of those laws too. For example, the law of gravity that allows us to live without fear that we'll suddenly fall off the face of the planet into space, is the very same one that will bring a plane crashing to the ground if its engines fail. The laws of combustion mean that we grill a steak or have our home grilled by a forest fire. We can't have the predominant blessings of the first without the occasional banes of the other.

Scripture also teaches that the universe is ruled by certain moral laws, every bit as consistent as the physical ones, and all predicated on the wonderful capacity of human beings to make choices. If we choose – for example -- to support, encourage, and sacrifice for one another, many kinds of suffering diminish. If, on the other hand, we choose to cheat, batter, or ignore the needs of one another, loneliness, violence, and misery escalate. We might like to blame God for abused or starving children. But much

of the suffering of this world is the direct or indirect result of humanity's violation of God's clear moral imperative to "love our neighbor as ourselves." How much suffering would disappear overnight, if we learned to love one another?

Thirdly, and while we enter into a mysterious metaphysical realm here, the course of life is powerfully affected by spiritual law as well. The Bible teaches that when human beings rebelled against God's spiritual authority at the beginning, the creation cracked. What was whole or holy became broken or sinful. And because there is some deep connection between energy and matter, the damage done to the human soul permeated human flesh as well. Sin externalized itself physically in the form of disease and defects, and ultimately death itself.

Are you with me, so far? The lousy events of life don't in any way demonstrate a lack of love or power on the part of God. On the contrary, the Bible teaches that suffering is caused by the outworking of physical law, the violation of moral law, and the breaking of spiritual law -- and all of those laws are, fundamentally, gracious gifts of a good God.

Benefits of Suffering

As reasonable as that may be, it's not particularly comforting, is it? Even if the laws that govern the universe are the sanest, kindest ones possible, I still want to believe that a loving God has built into even the necessary downsides of life in such a world some kind of silver lining. This leads some of us to what I might call *the Benefits Approach* to suffering. We make better sense of the pain we encounter by trying to see the positive effects that such suffering can potentially have. Can you think of any?

I have found that suffering CAN serve as the holy hammer that shatters our self-centeredness. A dear friend named Judy said to me a few weeks before cancer took her life. "You know, Dan," she said, "when I first got sick, all I could think was 'Why me?' 'Why should this happen to me?' But then one day it hit me. I thought to myself, 'Why NOT me?' 'Why should I be exempt from this?' I realize now that I'm not the center of the universe -- an important piece, yes, -- but not the center. That discovery" said Judy, "did two incredible things for me. It made me start to seek after the One who truly IS the Center. And it made me start looking at other people as every bit as important in the big picture as I am. It took cancer, to teach me that."

When someone comes to that sort of place, they also often find, SECONDLY, that suffering CAN be the path to a greater intimacy with God and others. It takes the shedding of blood -- literally or figuratively -- to become blood brothers or sisters with someone. There's nothing like those times of foxhole fear to move us beyond mere cordial acquaintance with others and into genuine community. It is when we're carrying our crosses that we begin to relate to the One who carried His. Suffering can be a terrible barrier for some people. For others, however, it becomes a bridge into a relationship with God and others that can be reached by no other route.

Let me suggest a THIRD potential benefit as well. Suffering can also be the wake-up call we need to take sin and evil seriously. As C.S. Lewis once wrote: *"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: [Suffering] is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*¹ In times of ease, I just don't hear God's call to self-examination and repentance all that well. When life around me is calm, I tend to become very blasé about the reality of evil and very lax about trying to combat it in my life or the wider world. How about you?

Having said all this, it takes a special kind of person to perceive the benefits of suffering while they are in the midst of it. I read of an organization that offered a \$5,000 reward for each wolf captured alive. The ad turned two fellows by the name of Sam and Jed into instant bounty hunters. Day and night they searched the mountains and forests hunting for their valuable prey. Exhausted one night, they fell asleep with visions of new 4X4's dancing in their heads. Hours later, Sam suddenly woke up to see some 50 bare-fanged wolves, surrounding the campsite. "Wake up, Jed! We're rich!"

Only a very seasoned-spirit or a very stupid one sees the lousy situations of life in such a positive light. Which is why -- if you're trying to be comforting to someone in the midst of suffering – don't try to point out either the *causes* or the *benefits* of their pain. You will come across to them more like an unsympathetic wolf than a caring friend. God won't like it either. In the story of Job, God says to the so-called friends who blithely suggest that they know *WHY* Job is suffering so: **"My wrath is kindled against you... for you have not spoken of me what is right" (Job 42:7).**

What I've learned the hard way over the course of many years in pastoral work is that, in the midst of suffering, most people aren't looking for the WHY of pain. What we need most is an answer to the HOW question. When my capacity for reasoning is blinded by grief and loss, how do I go on? The good news I want to share with you before we close today is that this is precisely where the Bible puts its emphasis.

The Christian Response to Suffering

At the start of Holy Week, Jesus crested the Mount of Olives. With eyes that perceived more than the city of Jerusalem itself, Jesus saw the pitiable ignorance of a world that would crucify its Creator. He saw the confused thrashings of a race capable of all the behaviors we see in every news cycle. He saw the giant agony of every grieving heart, every lost soul, every tormented mind, every failing body. And seeing this, the Bible says, Jesus broke down and wept (Luke 19:41). In doing that, Jesus demonstrated that God is not a distant Teflon deity. As Isaiah reminds us: **"He is acquainted with suffering and familiar with pain" (Isa 53:3).** And that, it seems to me, should help guide our FIRST response to the pains we endure. At the moment of misery, when you feel alone, picture the tear-stained face of Jesus. Know that God suffers with you. He

feels the agony with you. He would take your place upon a cross and take the cup of suffering from you, if there was another way.

Then, let this be your SECOND response to suffering: Dare to ask for another human being's companionship in a period of pain. I know that's hard for some of us to do. We feel that we're supposed to be able to handle pain on our own. But I've always been impressed by the fact that when the Son of God faced his own dark night of the soul in the Garden of Gethsemane, he chose not to do it alone. Instead he literally begged his disciples to keep watch and pray with him through the long night. I have to ask: If God himself could express such vulnerability, why can't we? Who could you ask to watch and pray with you as you struggle through some Gethsemane in your life? Who needs you to be that companion for them right now?

You know, there's a THIRD thing about Christ's response to suffering that strikes me. It's when Jesus says: "Thank you, Father, for this opportunity to have my character stretched on the cross." Or "Praise you, God, that even though I'm about to be crucified, I have many reasons for joy." Actually, Jesus never said such things. Those benefits certainly existed; but when Jesus faced suffering, he sweated blood and cried out to his Father from the depths of his soul. **"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me" (Mark 14:36).** Do you know you have the freedom to do likewise? It's the THIRD dimension of a helpful response to pain. Cry out to God. Be authentic. Express emotion. Raise your questions. Every hero of the faith from Job to Jesus did this. God can handle it.

But also notice how Jesus finished his prayer. Jesus essentially said: "If I can't take a pass on this cup of suffering can't be passed Father, then grant that somehow in my drinking of it, Thy will be done" (Mark 14:36). This is the FOURTH and final part of a Christian response to personal pain. Even if offered through clenched teeth, we need to learn to believe in the ultimate redemptive purpose of God. Clothed in sackcloth and ashes, even Job somehow managed to say to God: **"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).** Author Phillip Yancey once described this perspective in these words: *"Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse."*

One day it is going to all make sense. As Helmut Thielecke writes: *"Someday the mystery of suffering, the mystery of madhouses, mass graves, the mystery of widows and orphans will be illuminated. Someday we shall learn all the answers. Someday the paralyzing contradiction between justice, on the one hand, and life's blind game of chance, on the other, will be reconciled. Someday the tension between rich and poor, between the sunny side of life and the gloomy zones of horror, will be equalized."* In the meantime, we must cling stubbornly, no matter how dark it may get, *"to the hope and light of this final fulfillment."*²

My colleague, Bob Geelhoed, used to say in the midst of his battle with cancer: "I know I shall be healed – whether in this life or the next." And then, quoting his favorite poet, George MacDonald, Bob would say: "*I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his [or her] condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good.*"³

And this you can trust, if you know Jesus. God is good.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p.81.

² Helmut Thielecke, *The Waiting Father*, pp. 182-83.

³ George MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 1858.