

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Why Does God Allow Pain and Evil?
I Peter 1:3-12**

Let's dive right into it. This is a question that nobody gets to escape, that presses in on us, that I've got to tell you, is especially difficult for people who say they have faith in a God who is good and who loves them. As I said, it was the second most popular question. Here was the most striking formation of that question: *My 65-year-old brother was just diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. It's already in his liver and lymph nodes. How do I answer my extended family's question, where is God now? How do I share my belief in the goodness and hope of God?*

I'm going to be flicking back and forth between two postures today. Sometimes I'll sound like a pastor, the theologian, and other times I hope I'll sound like a friend. I've had the privilege this last year of walking with two friends through cancer's journey. It's different when your heart is engaged, when you see your good friend die or when you're sitting next to your brother-in-law and you're struggling with life answers, not just philosophy. What strikes me this time around in our series about questions are two things. The first is that we hope this series has shown you, and our visitors, that God loves questions. It is not a sign of doubt to have questions. It is a sign of growth. God is not afraid of our questions even when they are yelled out.

Then, almost every week when we heard the questions about the goodness of God, or is there just one way to God, or can you trust the Bible, we asked this: Is there a question underneath that question? Is there another question that is really more consuming to that person and they are starting the conversation with us by asking, "You know, you Christians believe in a good God but how can God let this happen?" I think this is very true of pain and suffering. What is the *real* question being asked? When you are in this conversation, what is the real question that somebody is asking?

The first question I thought somebody was really asking is, "I thought that God was all-powerful. Why didn't my faith protect me? Why didn't her faith make her better again?" Or, "I thought God was good?" When some people say philosophically "I can't believe in a good God and a bad world," what they are really saying is, "I thought God was good. I did my part. I'm not perfect, but I'm a lot better than most and I try to be good. Why would God allow this to happen to me or this innocent child?" I've got to tell you though, as I've walked with my friends, that underneath the question about the goodness of God and the reality of pain and suffering is, I think, a third thing, and I think unless we name it that it hurts us. I think we are afraid. I think we are afraid of what we are going to find out about God. I think we are afraid that the same pain and suffering is going to come to us. "How will we deal with it when it is our turn?"

I think that often those are the real questions being asked and unless we answer them, the head may say yes but the heart will still say *no*. It's tough, frankly, to talk about suffering to non-

sufferers as well as to people who are in the midst of pain in the same conversation. People may use philosophical questions even when they are hurt, "Why do You allow such things, God?" but their real concern is survival. How do you survive? How can you get through whatever it is without losing everything, the best parts of yourself, the faith in the God you thought you loved? To speak philosophically or theologically to these folks whose hearts are bleeding can almost seem cruel. And yet at the same time, the experience of pain almost inevitably leads to the big questions about God and the nature of things that cannot be ignored. If you have a real faith, you need to grapple with the issues of pain and suffering.

So let's get the theological and philosophical stuff, not out of the way, but let's start there. There are three classic answers that Christians have used to talk about why a good God would allow pain and suffering in this world. The first is probably the most common in the twentieth century and that is that the universe that includes the idea of free choice or free will has to offer the possibility of consequences. In other words, "If I give you free will so that you will freely choose to love Me, I as God am also creating a universe where you can choose to not love Me, where you can choose to do the wrong thing, where you can choose to walk away, and that has consequences, some of which are terrible." When we allow for free choice, we allow a person to drink too much and to get drunk and kill a child in the car ride on the way home. It is the way that the universe is wired. That same freedom that allows the alcoholic to repent of their addiction and come to God freely allowed that child to die.

The second classic answer is that evil exists in this world. Right from the beginning, probably the only thing you could empirically point to in the world is that evil exists. We know there is good, but evil abounds, and pain and suffering and death are the expressions of the battle between evil and good. We are in some ways caught in the crossfire. We have no idea who is winning the cosmic battle around us any more than somebody on the beaches of Normandy, with all the shelling going on around them, knew whether the invasion was a success or not, but they knew that there was evil.

The third classic answer theologians have offered is the Book of Job. They pick up the Book of Job and see that at the end of it, the problem of evil is addressed by saying "Where were you when I created the world? Can you tell Me how I made the thunderbolt to throw down from heaven? You're too small to understand." That doesn't sound arrogant if you are God. It's like asking a three-year-old how to fix a nuclear fission reactor except that that's probably unfair to the three-year-old. The three-year-old is probably a lot closer than we are to understanding the mind of God. The answer in the Book of Job is that God knows what God is doing. Be quiet and trust God. So those are the three classic answers. Free choice allows bad consequences. The presence of evil in our world means that until evil is kicked out, bad things will happen even with a good God around and, frankly, you are too small to understand. Learn to trust and believe that God is there.

I am coming to believe the answer of Job. I am coming to believe that I am too small to understand. I think that's the right answer but I've got to tell you, it is not enough for me. Job is not enough for me. I started life as a pastor over thirty years ago and if there is one thing I have seen, it is that questions of pain and suffering and prayer that is answered with *no* and death and dying have pushed many people from God. They can't believe in a God of goodness and the death of their child so I think that the answer of Job is not enough. We need a pastoral theology. How can a just, good, loving God allow that? But may I tell you what else I've seen in those thirty years? The thing that's surprising maybe is that I've learned that just as many

people find God, or find God in a deeper way, through the affliction and suffering they have endured. Often that pain and even that guilt or shame, that fear, draws them closer to God than they ever knew.

When pain and suffering come upon us, we finally see that not only are we not in control of our lives, but that we never were. We never were in control of our lives. We can kid ourselves when things are going our way, but when the current goes the other way, C. S. Lewis was right. He said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain." He said that suffering and suffering alone plants the flag of truth; you are not the center of the universe, within the fortress of a rebel soul.

I have seen that as a pastor, but when someone is in pain, they very often do not hear God well. Simone Weil was a poet who tried to be a Christian as well. She wrote that suffering makes God appear to be absent. I think she was right. When I am crying in pain, I am rarely crying to God "Oh, praise You!" That's what the psalmist experienced. The most famous Psalm in the Book is Psalm 23.

¹The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

Do you know what Psalm 22 is? Psalm 22 starts out,

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

² My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

Right next to faith is despair. It's only later in Psalm 34 that David looks back and concludes,

¹⁸ The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Which season are you in right now? Are you sensing that the Lord is your Shepherd? Are you saying, "God, where are You?" Are you tentatively believing that the Lord is close to the brokenhearted? That's why I love the Bible. As I've read the story of the Bible over and over, I've felt like I didn't discover so much as it struck me that the Bible is about suffering as much as it is about anything. The great theme of the Bible itself is how God brings fullness of joy, not in spite of, but through suffering, just as Jesus saved us, not in spite of dying, but because of what He endured on the cross. The Bible is about suffering, and towering as a high point over the whole of Scripture is Jesus Christ. The first time Jesus is introduced in the Old Testament, He is called a Man of Sorrows. Jesus is the Suffering Servant. He understands suffering.

This is the answer of the early followers of Jesus. They didn't deny pain existed. They swallowed it up in a bigger story. Pentecost is a perfect time to hear how they dealt with suffering. This is from 1st Peter, chapter 1.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection

In other words, He had to die first.

of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The apostle Peter knew Jesus maybe better than anybody else. Those are his words to the first followers. The central image of suffering in the Bible is a fiery furnace. Fire is, of course, all about torment and pain and suffering. I see fire and I want to run away from fire because it is danger and pain. But the Biblical understanding of a furnace the way Peter is describing it is more what we would call a forge. The Bible talks about the shaping that happens. Things put into a forge can be shaped or refined or purified and even made beautiful, more than they were before. It does not say “Oh, it hurts. Do it again.” It says that this suffering is not the end. This is a radical view of suffering that if faced and endured with trust, that’s what faith is. It can in the end make us better, stronger, and more filled with greatness and joy. Suffering can refine us rather than destroy us because God Himself walks with us in the fire.

There is nothing more important for you to learn in your life than how to maintain a life of faith in the midst of painful adversity so when pain comes, you are prepared. Americans are not very prepared for pain. I was reading a scholar of ancient northern European history. I wasn’t reading it for long. This scholar observed how unnerving it is for modern readers to see how much more unafraid people fifteen hundred years ago were in the face of loss, violence, suffering, and death. Another said that while we are taken aback by the cruelty and brutality we see in our ancestors, they would, if they could see us, be equally shocked by our softness, worldliness, the way we love this world, and our timidity about faith.

Dr. Paul Brandt was a pioneering orthopedic surgeon who specialized in treating cases of leprosy around the world. Coming to America he said, "In the United States . . . I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it."

Most American adults, especially younger Americans, are practical Deists. Remember the Deists? They’re the ones who see God as a being who created the world and set it spinning into the universe and said, “It will be good.” They see God as a being whose job it is to meet their needs. The implicit but strong assumption of young adults is that God owes everyone but the most villainous, the really worst of the worst, who get what they deserve, but God owes everyone else a comfortable life. That is a road to disillusionment. Life is nasty, hard, and

always feels too short. The presumption that we are entitled to happiness dooms people because they have no resources when things go wrong, and things *will* go wrong.

I've gotten to the place where as both pastor and friend who walks with the suffering that I think there is no fully satisfying answer about pain and suffering and God. There is no perfect answer that shows why God is justified in allowing evil. I struggle with that. Now, I do believe that the Christian story of the resurrection and the renewal of the world comes the closest to any explanation, but it's still not perfect for me. I believe, we believe, in good and in evil. We point to the resurrection of the body, which means that we don't just receive consolation for the life that will end, but a new body. And not just a new body, a body like we always wanted, like we dreamed of but never received. Faith promises a glorious, perfect, unimaginably rich life in a renewed material world and often, not always, but often those who follow Jesus see how even bad things work out together for the good of people who love God. Not always, but often.

I don't think this is a perfect answer, but I do, on my guessing days, wonder if possibly the eventual glory and joy that Peter is talking about could actually be greater *because* of pain than if we had never suffered at all. In other words, could it possibly be that God is doing something even better because we are going through pain than we would experience otherwise? Back to that image of fire as a forge. Could the fire of the forge be creating something that never would have happened if we didn't go through it? What if that future world will somehow be greater because it was broken and then repaired? Then evil wouldn't just be an obstacle to our happiness or our beauty. It will have actually made things better. That's God! God might make it so that evil will accomplish the exact opposite of what evil intended.

How could that possibly be? Again, I am sort of just guessing here, but my experience says that we know that only if there is danger can there be courage. Think about that. Only if there is hardship can there be sacrifice. And apart from sin and evil and pain, we would never have seen the courage of God or the astonishing extent of His love, laying aside His glory in heaven and coming to earth and saying "Move over; let me see what this feels like." That's why the answer of the Book of Job, that God knows what He is doing so be quiet and trust Him, is right but it's not enough. It's not enough because by itself, it leaves me cold, and so the New Testament gives us more with which to face suffering. It says even when we turned from God, God didn't turn from us. He came after us. Of all the world's religions, only Christianity teaches that God came to earth in Jesus Christ and became subject to suffering and death itself. Through Jesus, the terrible apartness, the terrible distance from God, throwing thunderbolts from heaven, is erased.

When you look at Jesus, suffering changes. Tim Keller says it this way. "We do not know the reason God allows evil and suffering to continue, or why it is so random, but now at least we know what the reason is not. It cannot be that God does not love us. It cannot be that he does not care. He is so committed to our ultimate happiness that he was willing to plunge into the greatest depths of suffering himself."

God understands suffering. God has been there. God assures us of a plan to eventually wipe every tear from every eye. "Trust Me, I'm with you. Trust Me, it will get better. Trust me, I know how you feel." There is the answer. Some might say that's only half of an answer, but it's the half of an answer we need. In the end, what I need is somebody I can trust instead of somebody who gives me an answer for pain that continues. Three-year-olds cannot understand much of why their parents allow and do not allow what they do. They are incapable of understanding

their parents' reasons, "No. Not now. Put that back. Wait. Put that down." But even though they do not understand their parents' reasons, they are capable of knowing their parents' love and trusting them and living lives of security. That is what they really need.

The difference between God and human beings is infinitely greater than the difference between a parent and a three-year-old, but the message is the same. "If I know to my bones that you love me, I can be secure." The death and resurrection of Jesus creates a people who have a unique, sometimes powerful ability to diminish the evil that is in our own hearts. We believe that evil starts inside us and we ask God for His help. Then we turn to a world that is suffering and we fight that evil. We endure that evil and we find community in society, all because the Son of God entered into suffering with us. He turns evil on its head and will end evil and suffering and death for good.

The Bible says that Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus says that we are to be the light of the world. If you know that you are in His love and nothing can take you away and nothing can snatch you out of His hand, that He is taking you to the house of God and the future He has for you, then Jesus can be a light for you in a dark, dark place. When all the other lights go out, His love for you right now and His unstoppable hope for the future *is* light in the darkness and that's how we find our way.

There are different ways to live life. Blasé Pascal, the Frenchman, said that at the end, he didn't want the cold logic of philosophy or the unreasonable tyranny of emotions. He said they give some light to the mind and some comfort, but nothing in the end. He said what he wanted were the reasons of the heart. God is slowly giving me reasons of the heart about suffering and pain. I believe that the light that comes to us, the reasons of the heart, affects our attitudes and our actions in suffering and with those who suffer.

Over time I've realized that God doesn't really mind whether I have strong faith or weak faith on Tuesdays or Thursdays. My faith changes, but God does not change. This is the real miracle, that you and I live and survive in the fiery furnace with the provision of God, not that God ultimately rescues us from the furnace, but that God is with us and shaping us and will be with us to the end and through the end whether we feel it or not.

On the question of why God allows pain and suffering, I don't know whether that's your pain and suffering or the pain and suffering of somebody you know and love, but my hope is that I can become like the friends of Job. Do you remember Job's friends? They accuse him of all kinds of bad things, but the very first thing that Job's friends do is they come and sit with their friend who is suffering. They just sit with him for seven days and seven nights in the dust and in the rain. They just reach out to him. They touch him. They hold him and they shut up. They listen to their friend Job. That's the kind of friend I want to be to those who are suffering, because I believe that as we sit together, as we take one another's hand, we are given the privilege of being light to the world and hope in the darkness, not because of us, but because of the one who came for us.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You are with us even when we struggle like three-year-olds to explain the depths of life. We don't know why, we don't know when it will get better, but like a three-year-old with a parent, we are coming to know who You are through Jesus. Jesus shows us someone who suffered and held onto hope, who comes back for us and will walk with us every step of the way. We ask this morning that You would bring trust to

the doubting, not surety, but trust. We ask that You would bring relief to the pain-filled and I ask, dear God, that You would give unquenchable hope to those of us who lift up Your Name. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we praise You. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.