

QUESTION 7: “HOW CAN AN ALL-POWERFUL GOD ALLOW PAIN AND SUFFERING?” (Genesis 50:15-20)

6.23.19

INTRODUCTION

We did this a few weeks ago with another question in our series, so I am going to do it again: How many of you have ever been asked the question, “How can an all-powerful God allow pain and suffering?” [WAIT FOR SHOW OF HANDS]. OK; now let’s make it a bit more personal: How many of you have asked that question? [WAIT FOR SHOW OF HANDS]. Where were you, God, when my best friend was struck by cancer? Where were you, God, when I lost my job? Where were you, God, when the weather wouldn’t dry out? Where were you, God, when my marriage hit the skids? Where were you, God?

This question — often framed under the phrase “the problem of evil” — is one of the most difficult, and yet incredibly important, questions we could look at. How a person looks at God can often hinge on the outcome of this question. It can also be one of the most profoundly difficult questions we ever have to answer because it is often asked in moments of anger, betrayal, confusion, frustration or pain. It is also not a question dependent on scope: Whether it’s coming from somebody who still struggles with the agony of family members who died along with the six million other victims in Hitler’s death camps, or the dad besides himself with grief wondering why his son had to be driving through the intersection at the exact same time as the drunk driver who ran the traffic light, the question still resonates with its seeming randomness and mystery. Why did this have to happen? Where were you, God? You could have stopped it; you could have changed it. Where were you?

We are going to be looking at that question tonight. We are going to look at it from the standpoint of what the Bible tells us, what we can know, about God’s love, about God’s plans and purposes, and about Who we can trust our lives to. And we’re going to begin by telling the story of one of the OT’s great heroes of the faith — Jacob’s son Joseph.

TEXT (Genesis 50:15-20)

When we first meet Joseph in Genesis 37, he is the child of privilege, living with “favored” son status in the home of Jacob. He seems to have a bit of an ego problem as he insists on sharing with his older brothers some strange dreams that seem to indicate that, one day, they will bow before him, like servants before a ruler. On top of that, his father has gifted him with a special robe, seemingly to set him apart from everybody else. But from there, things drastically change:

- 1) He quickly goes from privilege to prisoner as his brothers sell him to some slave-traders on their way to Egypt.
- 2) He is falsely accused of sexual assault by the wife of his Egyptian master and sent to prison.
- 3) God gives him interpretations of the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners, but he is forgotten when one of them is set free, and continues to languish in prison for another two years due to those false charges.

Eventually, he rises from prisoner to ruler of Egypt, saving the people from famine due to his God-given administrative and ruling skills. Over the course of time, he is reconciled with his brothers, and his entire family, including his father Jacob, moves to Egypt to be under his care. They remained there, and eventually their father Jacob died there — which brings us to today’s text:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father (Jacob) was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them —
Genesis 50:15-20.

This question about trying to understand what God is doing has been a dilemma since ancient times; the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC), who was alive during the time of Alexander the Great, is reported to have tried to apply the logics of his philosophy to the problem:

Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot;

Or He can, but does not want to;

Or He cannot and does not want to.

If He wants to but cannot, He is impotent.

If He can but does not want to, He is wicked.

But if God both can and wants to abolish evil, then how come evil is in the world?

A more contemporary sequence that takes a more skeptical view of God goes something like this:

- 1) A God who is all-powerful would be able to prevent evil in the world.
- 2) A God who is all-good would want to prevent evil in the world.
- 3) Evil exists in the world.
- 4) Therefore, an all-powerful and all-good God cannot exist.

So, is that reasoning valid? Is that line of thought correct? Let's see if we can find some ways to answer that proposition — and possibly the nonbeliever who is challenging us with that idea.

Can We Deny Evil? I came across this little limerick, courtesy of a 19th century English author named Edward Lear, that goes like this:

A certain faith-healer of Deal
Asserted: "Pain is not real."
"Then pray tell me why,"
Came the patient's reply,
"When I sit on a pin
And puncture my skin,
Do I hate what I fancy I feel?"

We can't deny that evil exists, or that it is somehow less than it truly is, or that it is probably "all in your head." Evil, with all its pain and suffering, is undeniably real.

Can We Say That Maybe God Is Less Powerful Than We Thought? There is a school of thought in the world called "open theology" — an idea completely contrary to the teachings of Scripture — which suggests that God doesn't really know how things are going to turn out. The sickness and evil and cruelty we see in the world, God sees it too, but he simply can't do anything about it. You see, he created human beings with free will, so how could he know how all those

choices they'd make would turn out? He created the world with certain rules, and he is powerless to change the outcomes of those rules. This is a position taken by Rabbi Harold Kushner in a book he wrote called, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. In response to Kushner's argument, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel bluntly replied: "If that's who God is, why doesn't he resign and let someone more competent take his place?"

Can We Say That Maybe God Is Less Good Than We Thought? This idea suggests that, while God is truly all-powerful, he rules with an iron fist while remaining distant and detached from his creation. Whatever happens happens — so just buck up and deal with it.

So, are any of those options correct? Is evil a fallacy, or somehow not as bad as we think? No. Is God less powerful than we thought? No. Is God less good than we thought? Again, no. OK, then how do we respond to these ideas? With the Bible — like this:

Evil is far worse than we imagined. We see evil and its effects all around us — sometimes because of us. But whether it is the attacks of 9/11 or bullying in school or cheating on income taxes or whatever, we all have a gut reaction to evil when we see it or perceive it. In fact, that often common reaction to evil that reflects through the populace is in itself a marker that God really does exist. If there is no God, why should there be a reaction to evil? If there is no God, then how can there be a standard for evil, or even a concept of it?

The fact is, while we see the outward manifestations of evil, God sees something much worse — the entity from which all evil springs: Satan. He is the adversary of God, the one who dreams up evil in an attempt to somehow derail God's good purposes in the world. There is a spiritual war of good vs. evil of which we can scarcely imagine — and it shows in two general ways: moral evil and natural evil:

- 1) Moral evil is that which comes from our fallen nature — murder, hatred, stealing, jealousy, lust and so on — that we see in ourselves and in our world every day. As Jesus said to a crowd gathered around him: ***"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. . . . A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him"*** — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:33, 35.*
- 2) Natural evil is that which occurs in nature (i.e., storms and earthquakes). While natural, they are a direct result of a fallen world, a world that fell when man fell. In other words, sin offended God so completely that not only was mankind's spiritual life shattered, but so was the well-being of the universe in which mankind lived. So man is affected by natural disaster due to the spiritual disaster of his own choices. When sin came into the world, God said: ***"Cursed is the ground because of you"*** — *God speaking, Genesis 3:17a.* Paul makes clear the outcome of this in his letter to the Roman church: ***For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time*** — *Paul, Romans 8:19-22.* The weather patterns we see today are the result, the logical outcome, of man's sin and its impact on nature itself.

The evil we see in the world, and everything attached to it, is at its most basic a conscious rejection of God's goodness; it is a rebellion against God's rule. Remember what God took note

of upon the completion of his creation? **God saw all that he had made, and it was very good — Genesis 1:31a.** That’s how God designed the world, to be very good. But evil invaded. Evil is not normal; on the contrary, it is abnormal, a perversion, just like a cancer in the human body or a parasite in otherwise pure drinking water. As Paul wrote to the church at Rome: **[S]in entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned — Paul, Romans 5:12.** Sin became our natural state. Because of that, we lost any right we would have to God’s goodness. Why should we somehow be entitled to goodness from God when we live in rebellion against God? Sin separated us from the right to claim God’s goodness for ourselves. In fact, whether we ever want to admit it or not, sin is at the very root of who we are. Russian Nobel-winning author Alexandr Solzhenitsyn expressed it this way: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it was necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them . . . [But] Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line of separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either — but right through every heart — and through all human hearts.”

But then something extraordinary happened: By rights, if God is all-powerful and pure goodness, then he had the ability, and some might even say the right, to just have done with us — end of story. Except that, as God saw it, sin was not going to be the end of his story.

God is far more loving than we could have ever imagined. In the greatest display of love, grace and mercy in the history of his creation, God sought us out to save us both from the evil in this world and the evil within ourselves. He did this by means of his Son, Jesus Christ. As Paul told it (and I love how the New American Standard phrases it): **[Christ Jesus], although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross — Paul, Philippians 2:6-8 (NASB).** By emptying himself of all he could rightfully claim as God’s Son in heaven, Jesus Christ in his incarnation on earth:

- 1) Became a completely human being, living in a fallen world.
- 2) Shared in the pains and sufferings associated with life in a fallen world: **He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain — Isaiah 53:3a.**
- 3) Became the object of human hate and evil.

In fact, it is the cross of crucifixion, holding God’s own Son, that tells us that God loves us, that God indeed is good — good beyond our ability to comprehend.

How is it that the gospel of John describes the incarnation? **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us — John 1:14a.** In other words, Jesus is the expressing of God as a human being. To experience Jesus — to see him, to hear him — was to experience the Father himself.

Now join that experience to that of seeing Jesus on the cross. But don’t miss the meaning: this is not just a suffering of God the Son but of God the Father. Through the incarnation, God directly experiences the cost of evil, the cost of sin, by means of the unfathomable agony of crucifixion. On that cross, God experiences as fully human the total and complete cost of all the sin of the world. It was a price that God in his perfect justice demanded, and it was a price that God in his perfect love was willing to pay. As British theologian John Stott observes in his book, *The Cross Of Christ*: “If God had sent a man to us, like one of the prophets, we would have been grateful.

If he had sent an angel, like the one who appeared to Mary, we would have counted it a great privilege. But in sending Jesus Christ, the Son of God, he did neither. He gave himself.”

And what he endured on our behalf:

- 1) He endured physical suffering: flogged by a whip, beaten like an animal, slapped and punched, and made to wear a crown of thorns, and then the crucifixion itself — nailed to a cross through his wrists and feet, needing to push himself up and down on the cross simply to inhale and exhale.
- 2) He endured emotional suffering: betrayed by two of his closest followers (Judas and Peter), deserted by the rest of his followers, mocked without mercy by the crowds who gathered to watch him die, and shamed beyond reason by enduring the cross while naked, all his wounds and agony exposed for all to see.
- 3) He endured spiritual suffering:
 - a) On him was laid the sins of the entire world:
 - i) ***[T]he Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all — Isaiah 53:6b.***
 - ii) ***God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God — Paul, II Corinthians 5:21.***
 - b) The sins of the entire world separated Jesus from the eternal fellowship he had always known and enjoyed with the Father: ***About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lena sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”) — Matthew 27:46 (quoting from Psalm 22:1).***

All this he endured for our salvation, that we could be extended a gift of grace — the undeserved favor of being offered the opportunity to be seen by God with the same sinless perfection lived out by Jesus Christ. And he endured this not with a view of what we could become, but with a view and knowledge of exactly what we were; Paul said it best: ***You see, at just the right time, while we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners (while we were God’s enemies — Paul, Romans 5:10a), Christ died for us — Paul, Romans 5:8.*** In fact, according to Isaiah, in writing 700 years before the event, the commitment to our salvation was so complete that he said: ***[T]he Lord was pleased to crush him (Jesus), putting him to grief — Isaiah 53:10a (NASB).*** As pastor and author Bill Kynes concludes in his book, *7 Pressing Questions: Addressing Critical Challenges to Christian Faith*, “Never was there a greater miscarriage of justice; never was there such undeserved misfortune; never had anyone so good suffered so much. Yet it was God himself who endured that injustice, that misfortune, that undeserved suffering. Is this the kind of God whom we dare accuse of neglect and indifference?” **BOTTOM LINE:** God allowed himself to be murdered by his own creation in order to save it. What the cross shows us is that God, far from being distant and detached from us, actually came alongside us by entering into the experience of being a human being in a fallen world. The author of Hebrews said it like this, that Jesus had to be made just like us, ***fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted — Hebrews 2:17b-18.*** Therefore, knowing this, he concludes: ***[W]e do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — Hebrews 4:15.*** In other words, God is not a God who exists apart from us. In Jesus Christ, he became us.

God is far greater than we could ever imagine. That is the great lesson Job learned, as God came to him in the midst of his suffering, and in the midst of his doubts and questions, with these words: *“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? . . . Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place . . . What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? . . . Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God’s dominion over the earth?”* — *God speaking, Job 38:4a, 12, 33.*

The fact is, God has a viewpoint, a vantage point, of which we have no knowledge; we can’t even begin to approach his greatness. As he himself said: *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”* — *God speaking, Isaiah 55:8-9.* And certainly the apostle Paul, for all the brilliance of his mind, was left overwhelmed when considering the greatness of God: *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!* — *Paul, Romans 11:33.* If those Scriptures are even beginning to capture the essence of the greatness of our God, then isn’t it possible that all of God’s actions, even those that are accompanied by pain and suffering, and maybe even evil, somehow, far beyond our feeble abilities to comprehend, all fit together into some great and wonderful divine plan? How can we think that God’s plans for us somehow need to be understood by us? How can we judge an infinite God from our finite points of view? How can we think we could ever even begin to know all that God knows? As British writer Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) noted: “If God were small enough to be understood, he wouldn’t be big enough to be worshipped.”

That’s why God claims complete ownership of what for us is pain and suffering; that is to say, he doesn’t create evil, but he uses the results of evil for his divine purposes. As he spoke through the prophet Isaiah: *“I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things”* — *God speaking, Isaiah 45:7.* As the Scriptures tell us in the book of Proverbs: *The Lord works out everything to its proper end — even the wicked for the day of disaster — Proverbs 16:4.* But how can God say that? How can he even claim ownership of the “bad stuff?” Paul gives us the answer: *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* — *Paul, Romans 8:28.* That’s the key: God is the one who defines what is “good.” It is what he sees as driving forward his plans and purposes for his honor and glory, for the benefit of his kids — their growth and spiritual maturing — that declares what he calls “good.” As Isaiah pointed out: *Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand* — *Isaiah 64:8.*

And if we need a further picture of God’s all-powerful goodness, we need look no further than in the resurrection of Jesus Christ to see that God has won. Evil, pain and suffering, such an integral part of this world, one day WILL be gone — and in that happening, God will all at once confirm his power, his goodness and his love. As John wrote in the last book of the Bible: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”* — *Revelation 21:1, 3-4.* An all-powerful, all-good God will accomplish this. God’s victory over Satan, sin, evil, death, pain and suffering is assured. As Joshua noted at the end of his life: *“You know with all your*

heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed — *Joshua 23:14b*. That is a God we can trust.

Which brings out the most important question: No matter what circumstances God allows to come our way, do we trust him? Do we trust God, even when the moment hurts? Do we trust that God is seeking to accomplish something in our lives for our good, whether we see it or not? Let's go back to our text from the tail end of Genesis. Joseph's brothers are in a panic because dear old Dad died. And with Dad dead and gone, what if Joseph decides there's really nothing standing in the way of his taking vengeance and a half on those guys? After all, they really had hurt him. That was nobody's imagination. Yet what does Joseph say after he learns of their fears? ***"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"*** — *Joseph, Genesis 50:20*. That is a trust statement, but it is a trust statement born in understanding that, to truly live a life in the ***peace of God, which transcends all understanding*** — *Paul, Philippians 4:7a*, you let God impose the definitions — what is good, what is important, what is his purpose, and so on — you let God lead the path, you let God fight the battles, and you . . . rest in his hammock. We trust him for everything in this life because he gave us this life in the first place. How can we not let him define what our life is meant to be?

It also should serve to remind us, as the Bible has shown us so many times before, that this life is not all there is. Christians have an eternity to look forward to where evil, pain and suffering will not exist. But we will exist, in the presence of God and his Son, forever and ever. It is because of what we have to look forward to that we can deal with the evil that exists here as something that has already been conquered, something over which we have already experienced complete and total victory.

We can trust him — because in the cross he made our pains and sufferings his. As Paul said so well: ***What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*** — *Paul, Romans 8:31-32*. He understands pain and suffering; he understands evil better than we could ever imagine. And God has promised, and Christ's resurrection has proven, that Satan will not get the last word. God will. He already has.

CONCLUSION

So after all that we've talked about, what are we left with? As Christians, we are left with a God who loves us so much, he will do anything and everything to bring us into closer relationship with him — to build our love, to build our trust, to build our dependence on him, and to point out whatever it might be that is preventing closer fellowship with him. As the apostle Paul said so well in his letter to the church in Ephesus: ***I kneel before the Father [and] pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power . . . to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God*** — *Paul, Ephesians 3:14b, 16-19*. In other words, if pain and suffering come into our lives, they come as a part of God's plan for us, within our relationship with him. Ask him to point out what it is he wants you to see. He'll show you. These

experiences are not meant to discourage us, but deeply encourage us; as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: *No temptation (testing) has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted (tested) beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it — Paul, I Corinthians 10:13.* And at the bottom of all that is that the God of the entire universe desires that our relationship with him becomes closer and closer, in fact, become the very best it can be. He knows that the best thing that can ever happen in our lives this side of heaven is, like the hymn writer said, “just a closer walk with Thee.”

And especially for those of us who have friends and loved ones outside the Kingdom, we have a God who will use anything and everything to bring them to the end of themselves — to humble them, to leave them empty, to make the things of this world seem pretty unimportant, to realize the depth of the sin in which they continue to live. Maybe God will allow pain or suffering in our lives that will intersect us with them. Our pain and suffering may be God’s pulpit for a nonbeliever to learn from. Pain and suffering, all the consequences of the evil that has infiltrated this world ever since that moment of Adam and Eve’s fall back there in the Garden, can be used mightily by God to accomplish some God-sized results. As British theologian and author C.S. Lewis famously wrote in his classic book, *The Problem Of Pain*: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

So will evil, pain and suffering have opportunity to find us? Probably. Will the pain be real, the suffering be real, the evil be real? Yes. But God is real too — and ready with a plan that can make every moment of our lives “good.” Do we trust that he can do that? Do we trust that, with God, all things are good? Do we trust him so much that we give him our lives to do whatever, whenever, however he wants with us, because we can absolutely trust the end result will guaranteed be something fabulous in his sight? Let’s pray!