



REALLY?

Untruths Uncovered

Many untrue things are said about God, Jesus, the Bible and the Church. Let's expose some false narratives as we walk toward Easter this year. We are not trying to win arguments, but to begin conversations with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Each week's sermon will provide a thoughtful question, so you can start a conversation with a skeptic or non-believer. Ultimately, Easter morning declares the greatest news. Everyone said Jesus was dead, and that death would hold Him forever. Really? Guess what—Jesus is alive again!

REALLY?• Hebrews 12:1-12• Tom Pipkin • March 18, 2018

Each week during this season of Lent, we are looking at the tough questions that are often brought up to challenge the Christian faith. This week's question has to do with the problem of suffering. This is an especially difficult problem for Christians to address because it isn't just theoretical, or even philosophical. No – it's personal. Of all the questions we've been asking this month, this is the one we feel the most deeply. In my ministry I have visited with families who have lost loved ones to all kinds of unexplained, undeserved calamities. Young vibrant people with brain tumors, babies who died in their sleep, whole families killed in automobile accidents, the unexpected suicides of recent high school graduates who had their whole lives before them. The brokenness of reputable church members who succumbed to drug addiction, adultery, embezzlement, criminal behavior – leaving their families in shattered devastation. And I've had my own experiences of failure, injustice, pain and loss.

We experience hardships, we hear about oppression, we are victimized by acts of evil; we watch the nightly news bracing ourselves for the next account of wickedness running rampant in our world. Will there be another mass shooting? Another natural disaster taking the lives of thousands? Another roadblock to unity in our country and our world? One piece of bad news after another. We feel sick. We feel abandoned. We feel at a loss for any good explanation. But there is a good reason that we feel this way – this reason, I would argue, actually points us – not away from God, but to Him.

So the argument, which is used against Christianity over this issue, often attributed to Scottish philosopher, David Hume, basically boils down to this: "If God allows evil and suffering to continue because he can't stop it, then he might be good, but he is not all-powerful. On the other hand, if God allows evil and suffering to continue but chooses not to stop it, even though he could, then he might be all-powerful, but he is not good." Either way, the good, all-powerful God of the Bible couldn't exist. This is a pretty formidable argument. How do we address it, both personally and biblically?

Let's consider the Bible. In the very first pages, God is introduced as the one who created this beautiful world. He is presented as a God who is good and just, loving and joyful. And yet, things barely get started when we find evil and suffering are already a part of human existence. And then throughout Scripture we find various authors, poets and prophets, writing about the tensions and disconnect between the goodness of God and their experience of evil in the world. Mark Clark, in his book, *The Problem of God* points out that: "The whole Bible cares deeply about injustice and suffering. It's the story of how evil has affected us: Adam and Eve's fall, Cain's murder of Abel, Noah's flood, the tower of

Babel, the patriarch's sins, Egypt's oppression of Israel, David's psalms of lament, Israel's exile, the killing and torture of the prophets and God's people, and the long, lonely wait for the Messiah – it goes on relentlessly."

But here's the thing. The Bible doesn't avoid the question, as some religions do. No, it faces the question head on and gives the most unexpected and glorious answer. Now let's think about this. The problem of suffering isn't just a problem for Christians to solve, is it? No, every perspective, every worldview, has to give its answer to the question of suffering. So if you are a skeptic, an atheist, an agnostic, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist... what is your answer? New Age philosophies try to explain it away by denying that evil even exists. Hinduism says that suffering results from Karma – claiming that suffering is just something you deserve. Atheists argue that because evil and suffering exists in the universe, God does not. But this line of thought doesn't prove anything. It especially falls short when you consider the possibility that a good, all-knowing, all-powerful God might just have His reasons for not stepping in and fixing things the way we would like Him to.

Could it be that God might be up to something else – perhaps something even better? You see, we can't just assume that every case of evil is one that God could go in and violate our free will and just stop, without, at the same time, preventing an even greater good. If God always responded to the things that we experience as evil in the way that we each wanted Him to, where would that leave us? What effect would that have on human history? Could God's seemingly compassionate preventative actions actually bring about an even greater evil, or a lesser good, than if He stays His hand? Who are we to say?

Do you remember the encounter that Jesus had with a certain man who had been born blind? We find this in John 9:2-3. Do remember the question Jesus' disciples asked?

"His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

And then Jesus healed the man. The man's blindness was not the result of His sin or the sin of his parents. God's glory, His power, His greater good... was displayed in this man's healing – having an impact on the disciples; the onlookers; the man, himself; generations of Christians who have read this and even you and me today.

Another important way to approach this question is to consider the possibility that, rather than the existence of evil and suffering disproving God, it actually proves God. The very notion of evil and injustice is actually powerful evidence for God's existence. Do remember

the letter that Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote while he was suffering in a jail in Birmingham, Alabama? In his letter, Dr. King said: "The only way to know whether a human law is unjust is if there is a divine, higher law from God." He said if there was no divine higher law, there would be no way of knowing whether a particular human law was just or not. If there is no God, a person might say, "Well that law is unjust," but that would be only according to their own human standards. Why should their standards be privileged over anybody else's? But let's take that a step further. If there is no God, then how can we say that any historical event is unjust? Think about it. What is more natural? If there isn't anything but nature, then there is nothing more natural than violence. It's how you and I got here... according to that viewpoint – natural selection, right? The strong eat the weak. So if there is no God and all we have is nature, what's wrong with violence? It's perfectly natural!

Somebody who really understood that was Jean Paul Sartre. In his signature essay on existentialism, he wrote this: "If God does not exist, there is no longer any possibility of an 'a priori good' existing. It is nowhere written that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now on a plane where there are only human beings." Dostoevsky wrote, "If God did not exist, everything is permitted. That is right. If God does not exist, we have neither behind us, nor before us, a luminous realm of values nor any means of justification of any behavior whatsoever."

Do you hear what they are saying? If there is no God, we might have feelings that this is wrong or that is unjust, but that's all it is – a personal feeling. If there is no God, on what possible basis could you object to the idea that in the natural order of things violence is unnatural? So you see, if you don't believe in God, dealing with suffering and evil is as big of a problem, if not a bigger problem, than if you do believe.

C.S. Lewis described how he had originally rejected the idea of God because of the cruelty of life. Then he came to realize that evil was even more problematic for his new atheism. In the end, he realized that suffering provided a better argument for God's existence than one against it. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis wrote: "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of "just" and "unjust"?... What was I comparing the universe with when I called it unjust? Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple."

So if we've established some solid reasons for believing that God exists and that He is indeed good, and that His lack of intervention in world events, as well as personal tragedy, can be addressed from a theologically sound position, what could be some reasons, on a personal level that God would allow suffering in our lives?

Our passage in Hebrews speaks directly to this. In the first few verses we discover Jesus as our model for suffering and the means for enduring suffering. Let's look again at the beginning of chapter 12: "And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Jesus endured the cross. He endured torture and ridicule and pain at the hands of wicked people who hated Him and certainly wanted Him dead. Like a pioneer, Jesus goes before us to show us how to live a life of faith that is focused on the greater good of God. As the perfecter of our faith, Jesus was the means by which such a faith... such a way of life could even become possible for us. You and I must run the race that is marked out before us, with all of its triumphs and joys and with all of its failures and pain. We can only run this race if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

Secondly, we are told to look at hardship and suffering as a part of how God disciplines us. Let's look again at verses 5–8, starting in the middle of verse 5:

"...do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined - and everyone undergoes discipline - then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all."

Not all suffering is discipline, but without experiencing God's discipline in our lives, you and I would miss out on what God really wants for us in life. Any parent here can relate to the importance of disciplining your children if you want them to turn out well. Let me ask you... "Why do we discipline our children?" One reason to discipline our children is to keep them safe, right? We say, "Billy, don't run with scissors... you could hurt yourself." Billy, of course reaches for the scissors and starts running. What do we do? Well, we might try again and just give the command again. The Bible is full of examples of how God gave us commands. But sooner or later, you have to discipline Billy. There is a consequence for Billy's actions. And my guess is that the consequence feels a lot like suffering...to Billy.

Another reason to discipline our children is to shape them in ways that will build in them the abilities to be good people who know their Creator and follow His will for their lives. This can't be done without discipline. Again, as we read in Hebrews 12, picking up in verse 9:

"Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much

more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Our heavenly Father wants to produce in us an amazing harvest of righteousness and peace. I find this passage helpful in my own wrestling with this question about suffering. Could it be that sometimes God allows for bad things to happen to good people in order for those people to become even better, stronger, more grateful, more faithful people? Of course, this is not an answer to give to someone who is in the midst of pain and suffering. I would never go into a hospital room and tell someone that all of their pain and misery was for their own good. I would never stand before you and try to explain away the tragedies and atrocities of life with a trite notion. No, pain is real. Suffering is real. Evil is real. Maybe it isn't until many years later that we might possibly see just a glimpse of a reason for it, and perhaps begin to find some redemptive connections between our suffering and God's discipline. Can we begin to look at pain and suffering as opportunities rather than problems?

Now you might be here this morning, listening carefully and you might still be saying to yourself, "So what? So what if suffering doesn't debunk God? Suffering still stinks! This doesn't get God off the hook!" Listen now, God actually came to earth to deliberately put himself on the hook for human suffering. No other philosophy or religion makes that claim. In Jesus Christ, God experienced the greatest depths of pain. Therefore, though Christianity might not provide the reason for each experience of pain, it does provide deep resources for facing suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair.

So let's encourage each other when we go through difficulty and suffering by reminding each other that Jesus is with us through it all. And remember that His suffering and our own suffering are only part of the story. It didn't end with His suffering and death and it won't end with yours either. Just after the climax of the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam Gamgee discovers that his friend Gandalf was not dead (as he thought) but alive. He cries "I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself! Is everything sad going to come untrue?" On the other side of death, Jesus is alive! On the other side of your pain and struggle, Jesus promises you a new life as well... when everything sad will indeed become untrue! And that is great news! It's the best news that any of us could ever hear. Amen.

STUDY GUIDE

REALLY? • Hebrews 12:1-13

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read our passage for the week, Hebrews 12:1-13. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Read it one more time. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- What do you notice about our passage? What stands out to you? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- Re-read verse 2. What does it mean to keep our eyes on Jesus, especially in the context of His experience of the cross? How does keeping our eyes on Jesus help us in times of suffering? What is of practical help in keeping your eyes on Jesus?
- If someone said, "Suffering disproves the existence of God," what would you say in response?
- What does it mean that God disciplines and corrects His children? How have you experienced this discipline?

Going Deeper:

What is a word, phrase or thought from today's passage or from our time together that God seems to be lifting up as significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

Throughout our sermon series, we will look at questions to ask a skeptic or non-believer as a conversation starter. We raise these questions not to start an argument, but to spur meaningful conversation. Try it out this week and ask someone the following questions: Do you think God is inherently good? Why do you think people go through difficult times?

IN: Connect With the Family of God

Scripture calls us to mourn with those who mourn. Pray that God would give you the strength and courage to weep with those who weep. Ask God to reveal to you who He has placed around you to care for and offer the gift of your presence in the midst of pain.