

SIT. BARTHOLOMEW’S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

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Scripture: Gen. 1&3

“Why Pain and Suffering?” (part 1)

THE QUESTION THAT NEVER GOES AWAY

Some years ago public-opinion pollster George Barna did a national survey asking people the question, “If you could ask God only one question and you knew He would give you the answer, what would you ask?” The top response was “*Why is there pain and suffering in the world?*”

It’s a good question. One we have all undoubtedly asked at one time or another. Whether it be the terrorist attack on 9/11 or a natural disaster like the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, or facing a chronic or terminal illness or the loss of a loved one, we all, at times, wonder why?

And if you believe in a loving God, it is sometimes hard to reconcile our suffering and all the pain that we see, with God’s goodness and His love. Thus, the true question that keeps popping up, is “***If God is so good, why is there so much pain and suffering in our world?***”

People have been trying to answer that question from the beginning of time. It is a question that never loses its relevance. One ancient philosopher’s (Epicurus) observation still rings true for many today: “*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, and does not want to, he is wicked. But if God both can and wants to abolish evil, then how comes evil in the world?*”

Writer, Charles Templeton, began his retreat from faith after see the *Life* magazine photo of an African mother holding her child who had died because of a simple lack of rain. In his book, *Farewell to God*, he highlights a number of tragedies from ancient and modern history, and then writes, “*A loving God could not possibly be the author of the horrors we have been describing – horrors that continue every day, have continued since time began, and will continue as long as life exists. It is an inconceivable tale of suffering and death, and because the tale is fact – is, in truth, the history of the world – it is obvious that there cannot be a loving God.*”

And so as long as there is pain and suffering on this earth, there will always be the question, “Why?” And it is a question that the Church has addressed and attempted to answer and rightfully so. John Stott, contemporary evangelical and Anglican theologian, admits, “*The fact of suffering undoubtedly, constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God’s justice and love.*”

And sometimes the Church and Christians in general have not done a good job in addressing or handling the problem. They either resign it to fate - they say, “Well, it must be God’s will,” or they think it is God’s punishment, or they ignore the suffering around them until it hits home and then they don’t know what to do. The truth is there are answers to this question and problem, answers that are both meaningful and helpful for dealing with the pain in our lives.

FINDING SOME ANSWERS

Now if we believe God created all things then it would only stand to reason that He in some way has something to do with pain and suffering. It is His creation, and a wonderful creation at that. And so it also only stands to reason that we need to go to God to find out the answer to this perplexing problem. And that’s what we’ll be doing, going to God’s Word. And we’re going to find that the Bible has much to say about pain and suffering. Indeed, every single saint listed in the Bible went through some pain and suffering. Think about, for a moment all the heroes of the faith. We all have heard of Job. But Job wasn’t the only one who suffered - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Hosea to name only a few. The twelve apostles of Jesus, the Apostle Paul, Stephen, the first martyr recorded in the Book of Acts. The saints throughout history have experienced pain and suffering, often times more so than the average person. No one is immune.

Now before we go to God’s Word it is important to note there are two main philosophical approaches in the Church today to the problem of pain and suffering. The first approach has been the traditional view, articulated by such notable saints as St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Paul Bunyan and John Donne. This view understands pain and suffering as part of God’s purpose and plan. Such men did not try to question God’s actions but seek to justify the way of God to man.

The other view, more often found today, is that the amount of evil and suffering in the world cannot be matched by the traditional view of a good and loving God. As Philip Yancey noted in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, God is bumped from a “friend of the court” position to the box reserved for the defendant. Where God is queried, “How can you possibly justify yourself, God?”

Of course, I believe the traditional understanding is not only faithful to the Word of God but it addresses the problem of pain and suffering adequately. And yet, even if one can make a philosophical case for pain and give a rather logical explanation for it, when you’re hurting, the philosophical isn’t going to cut it. There needs to be a practical aspect to it, if it indeed is to be relevant. The Word of God provides both the philosophical and the practical reasons.

PAIN AND MODERN DAY SOCIETY

Webster’s Dictionary defines “pain” as “*a state of physical or mental lack of well-being or physical or mental uneasiness that ranges from mild discomfort or dull distress to acute often unbearable agony, may be generalized or localized, and is the consequence of being injured or hurt physically or mentally or of some derangement of or lack of equilibrium in the physical or mental functions.*” And “suffering” as “*The endurance of or submission to affliction, pain and loss.*”

I think Webster does a good job describing such hurt. With such descriptions you can see why people want to avoid pain and suffering at all costs. And we live in a culture that treats pain and suffering as if it is the one thing that cannot be tolerated. We live in the “aspirin age.” If you have a headache, take two aspirin. If you’ve had a rough day at work, have a martini. We are taught to avoid or deaden our pain. But it isn’t only an avoidance of things that make us uncomfortable, how many times have you heard that we shouldn’t make judgments of right and wrong, because that’s forcing our morality on others? The aversion to pain in our society also includes not making anyone uncomfortable, more commonly called being tolerant. And while we should be tolerant and respectful of other people and their opinions, this does not mean that we

should be silent and passive if it means standing up for what is good and right.

I find it ironic that those who are most critical of pain and suffering and God’s role in such things are those who have lived in the age of modern convenience. From their climate controlled offices with large medicine cabinets they rail at God for the seeming injustices of our world. You would not hear such cynical talk from the likes of Luther and Calvin who were persecuted for their reforms, or Donne and Bunyan, who wrote their greatest works respectively while in jail and in plague quarantine. They all lived before the age of penicillin and Novocain.

Pain and suffering we will find do have a remarkable value and place in our world. But before we look at the blessings that can come in the pain of our world, let us turn to the Bible to find out why and how this problem began. We will never be able to understand or appreciate the role of pain and suffering in our lives until we first look at the One who gave us the capacity to experience pain and suffering in the first place, and why such pain and suffering is even part of life. The only way to begin to understand the reason and purpose of pain and suffering is by going back to the beginning, when this planet earth of ours was created. Please turn with me now to **Genesis 1-3**.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING (Gen. 1-3)

1) A Perfect World (Gen. 1:26-31)

God created Adam and Eve perfectly. He made them in His image, He gave them everything they needed, He gave them each other to enjoy, and made them perfectly free to receive and give back God’s love. They were the epitome of God’s creation. In order to maintain their relationship with God, they simply had to refrain from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (**read Gen. 2:16-17**). And though we do not know what this tree looked like or what was its purpose in the garden, we do know that it was something to be avoided at all costs.

2) A Tragic Choice (Gen. 3:1-6)

Man’s desire plus Satan’s deception led to man’s disobedience. But man’s eating from the tree was more than a simple act of disobedience. Recall Satan said, “*You shall be like God.*” Herein lies the key to understanding the gravity of Adam and Eve’s disobedience. They in essence were demonstrating that in their heart they felt they really did not need God for life, fulfillment and happiness.

How did Adam and Eve give in? (**read Gen. 3:6**) “*And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food (lust of the flesh), pleasing to the eyes (lust of the eyes), and to make one wise (pride of life), she took the fruit of the tree and ate, and gave it to her husband and he ate.*” By eating of the tree Adam and Eve were saying that they did not need God to sustain them, to satisfy them, or to lead them. They did not need God for life, happiness, or fulfillment. In short, they thought they could take God’s place. Such a decision was not only disobedient, it was deadly since it was cutting them off from the very One who made them and sustained them. As a result of this disobedience, God’s judgment fell upon them, Satan and the earth. Let’s look at what these consequences were and still are:

3) A Severe Judgment (Gen. 3:7-24)

- a) Upon man and woman: fear, shame, inadequacy and insecurity. They hid in the garden and sought to cover themselves. They knew they had done wrong and now fear, shame, and anxiety had entered the human experience.
- b) Upon woman: pain in childbirth; subordination to man. Women have been abused by men since the Fall.
- c) Upon Satan – the serpent’s fatal head wound is a hidden reference to the fact that God’s Son would come in human flesh (Eve’s seed) and defeat and eventually destroy Satan.
- d) Upon man: wearisome toil, aimlessness. Work would no longer be a joy but a burden.
- e) Upon nature: thorns and thistles. The whole earth is subject now to earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and natural cataclysmic calamities.
- f) Upon the animal kingdom – represented by the serpent crawling upon its belly – conflict (“survival of the fittest”)
- g) Upon the earth and all its inhabitants – death and decay – separation from God. The light and goodness of God were removed from Adam and Eve and all of creation – symbolized by the flaming sword keeping Adam and Eve from the tree of life.

Some may say well why didn’t God just change His mind or forgive them right then and there. If He did, then the whole thing would be a farce. He would not be true to His character, His Word, or to Himself. God is foremost a Holy God. He is a God of justice and truth. He cannot lie. Therefore, there will always be consequences for wrongdoing. In addition, if we are to be free to love God, we must be free to not love God, to reject God; otherwise there would be no freedom. Adam and Eve choose not to love and therefore they had to suffer the consequences. And we suffer the consequences today.

And will continue to suffer the consequences until we are set free from this bondage. In **Romans 8:20**, Paul calls this the bondage to decay. Peter says in **I Peter 3:10-12** that eventually the world will not just decay but will burn up. The earth is winding down to its end, and everything in it. But the good news is that God does not give up on His creation. He did not give up on Adam and Eve and He does not give up on us. Next week, we will see how pain and suffering serve not only to demonstrate God’s unhappiness with mankind’s rebellion, but how God uses them as a means of protection and an agent for good. Let us pray...