

10-18-09

Where Is God When It Hurts? Part 2: Why?

Open

The way I heard the story, a pirate walks into a restaurant (probably a Long John Silver's)...and while he's eating—a fellow diner can't help but notice his peg leg...and the hook where his hand should be...and the patch that covers his eye. And the diner figures there must be some good stories behind injuries like that. So he introduces himself and sits down and asks the pirate about his adventures on the high sea. And finally...after they've been talking for awhile...he gets up the courage to ask:

"So...how'd you end up with the peg leg?"

- "Arrr," the pirate replies. "We was caught in a storm off the cape and a giant wave swept me overboard. Just as they were pullin' me out...a shark appeared and bit me leg off".

"That must've been awful!" the diner grimaced. "But what about the hook?"

- "Shiver me timbers," the pirate reflected. "We were boardin' a trader ship...pistols blastin' and swords swingin'. And in the mêlée...me hand got chopped off."

The diner winced and said, "I can't imagine what that must've been like! But how did you end up with that eye patch?"

- The pirate leaned in close and said, "A seagull dropping fell in me eye." Well at this, the diner scratched his head and said, "You lost your eye to a seagull dropping?" "Aye," said the pirate. "It was me first day the hook."

I suppose that when it's somebody else's misfortune (especially a pirate's) we can laugh. But let's face it: when we're the ones the receiving end of pain and suffering...then hurting is no laughing matter.

Transition

If you were here last week, you already know that we're taking some time this month to ask the question: Where is God when it hurts? We've already seen that there can be some "up-sides" to suffering: It can alert us to danger and protect us from additional harm. It can nurture godly qualities in our lives...and equip us to minister to others. But when we're dealing with suffering, those aren't the things that jump to mind, are they?

- No, when we're dealing with suffering, the thing we really want to know is: Why?
 - Why is this happening to me? Why am I hurting when others seem to go through life pain-free?
 - Why is God allowing me to suffer like this?

That's certainly what Job wanted to know. After tragedy struck him and his family...and even after his friends had come to console him...Job cried out to God, seeking answers. Listen to these verses from the 23rd chapter:

²"Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.

³If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling!

⁴I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

⁵I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me.

⁸But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him.

⁹When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns south, I catch no glimpse of him.

¹⁴He carries out his decree against me, and many such plans he still has in store.

¹⁵That is why I am terrified before him; when I think of all this, I fear him.

¹⁶God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me.

¹⁷Yet I am not silenced by the darkness—by the thick darkness that covers my face.

Job wanted to know: Why? Why have my wealth and possessions been taken from me? Why have my sons and daughters been destroyed? Why have my health and sense of well-being been shattered? And when we suffer...when unexpected tragedy and heartache come our way...we want to know “Why?” too.

- So this morning, I want us to consider some of the answers that the Bible offers to that question—not so we can point our fingers and pretend that we can explain why others are suffering—but so we can have some biblical landmarks for our own suffering...landmarks that can help us find our way when hurting shows up in our lives.
- And perhaps the first possibility we need to consider—the first answer to the question “Why?”—is that some suffering might be a punishment for sin.

Why? Suffering as Punishment for Sin

This is the answer that Job’s friends gave to him. When Job hollered out his tormented cry of “Why?” They were only too happy to explain: “Consider now,” they said, “who—being innocent—has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? Those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they perish; at the blast of his anger, they are no more.” (Job 4:7-9)

Now as you’re probably aware, there are plenty of passages in the Bible where suffering comes as a punishment for sin. In fact, the idea gets repeated so often that it almost comes across as a foundational principle of life with God: the righteous get blessed and the wicked suffer. And so—when we find ourselves on the receiving end of hurt—it probably makes sense to pause at least long enough to ask the question: Is there something in my life...some bad habit or mistake or sin... that lies at the root of this suffering?

- After all—in one way of looking at it—we deserve punishment. When tragedy strikes, we might tell ourselves that there couldn’t possibly be anything in our lives that would justify such pain. And yet, the Bible does say that all have sinned...and that the “wage of sin” is death. What’s more, scripture teaches that the Lord disciplines those he loves.ⁱ If we’re not disciplined—if we don’t get punished once in awhile—maybe we’re not his children at all.
- And so, when suffering comes, maybe it’s a good thing that our pain drives us to search our hearts...and confess our sins...and learn to lean (even more completely) on the grace of God.

And yet...if we’re going to explain our suffering as a judgment for sin...then (from our human perspective, at least) God appears to be a mighty unfair judge. Please understand; I’m not arguing against the principle: I believe that good does get rewarded and evil does get punished...if not in this world, then certainly in the world to come. But here and now—that principle doesn’t bear much resemblance to the reality we observe.

- Here and now (at least) evil doesn’t always get punished. As often as not, sinners get wealthy and powerful. They enjoy the good things that life has to offer. And on the flip side, it’s often the righteous who suffer. Good folks—who aren’t greedy...who don’t cheat... who give of themselves and who wouldn’t hurt a fly—quite often, they’re the ones who get cancer...or get injured...or suffer some terrible tragedy. What exactly is it that they’re being punished for?
- And even if we want to fall back and say, “Well again: we are all sinners,” still: if suffering comes as punishment for sin, there is a part of us (and I would say—a godly part of us) that cries out: “At least let the punishment fit the crime! Let there be some sense of justice and fairness in suffering.” Too often, the tragedies that strike people’s lives seem far out of proportion to any wrong they could have done.

Besides, as Philip Yancey observes: “There’s a big difference between the suffering most of us encounter...and the ‘suffering-as-punishment’ described in the Bible. There, punishment follows repeated warnings against specific behaviors. The people of Israel knew why there were being punished; the prophets had warned them...and so no one sat around afterward asking, “Why?” They knew very well why they were suffering.”ⁱⁱ

- Yancey goes on to ask, “Is that what happens to most of us today? Does personal suffering come packaged with a clear explanation from God? Frankly,” he writes, “I believe that unless God distinctly reveals otherwise, we would do better to look to other biblical models.”ⁱⁱⁱ
- So what might those other models be? Why do we suffer? Well...another answer to that question is that some suffering comes as a consequence of human freedom.

Why? Suffering as a Consequence of Freedom

Now I'll be honest: this gets really deep, really fast...because it forces us to wrestle with questions about God's sovereignty (on the one side) and human free will (on the other). Is God fully and completely 'in control' of the universe? If He is, then how can we have genuine freedom to begin with? And if we are truly free to choose, how far does that freedom go before God has to limit it...in order to make sure that His will prevails?

- Of course, the best and brightest minds of human history have struggled with those questions. So I'm not going to untangle the mystery in a few sentences one Sunday morning. But at the very least, let's try to agree on this:

When God created this world...and when He placed human beings within it...he gave us some choices...and some degree of freedom to make those choices. We can obey or disobey... follow His will or our will...we can choose life or choose death.

- And the consistent testimony of scripture and history...is that we have an uncanny knack for using our freedom to choose poorly. And even when our choices aren't necessarily sinful...even when we make a choice that doesn't break God's commands or disobey God's laws...still: all of those choices still have consequences...and some of those consequences hurt.

The apostle Paul put it like this in his letter to the church in Rome: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 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.” (Rom. 8:18-21)

- Now the good news in this passage...is that suffering doesn't get the last word. The good news is that God cares about suffering and one day will bring it to an end.
- But in the meantime, creation is 'subjected to frustration.' In the meantime, we suffer the consequences of our freedom and our choices...sometimes sinful choices...but just as often, totally innocent choices that have consequences we neither envisioned nor intended.

Now personally, I feel like this accounts for a whole lot more suffering than we might recognize at first.

I mean, look: a lot of tragedies take place that nobody 'chose' in any specific sense. People get cancer, even if they didn't choose to smoke or expose themselves to cancer-causing agents. People die in auto accidents, even if they didn't choose to get run into. Hurricanes and earthquakes destroy communities and destroy lives, even though nobody chose to be the victim of a natural disaster.

- And yet, place those examples of suffering in the broader context of human choice. We have chosen (none of us individually, but all of us together) to live our lives in ways that release chemicals into the air and into our food and water. We have chosen to get from one place to another on crowded roads in high-speed vehicles whose drivers may or may not give full attention to what they're doing. We have chosen to build communities on beachfront property where hurricanes strike...and on top of fault lines where earthquakes happen. And make no mistake; there are consequences to those choices...sometime tragic and heart-rending consequences.

But when we're suffering and asking, “Why?” even that answer doesn't satisfy the longing in our hearts... because all it really does is create new questions. Why doesn't God do something about those consequences?

If God is all-loving and all-powerful (as the Bible teaches He is)...why doesn't he destroy the cancer cells or create a safe space in the midst of the wreck or turn the course of the storm?

- And maybe just as frustrating: Why does God seem to do that in some cases, but not in others? Why do some tell miraculous stories of healing and survival while others tell tearful stories of pain and loss?

No, if we're going to find an answer to the question, "Why?" we're gonna have to keep looking...and another answer we might consider is the idea that suffering comes as a 'growth experience' of some kind.

Why? Suffering as a Growth Experience

Now if you were here last week, you might remember that we mentioned some 'up-sides' of suffering...and one of those was that it can produce godly qualities in our lives. Even when the pain and heartache we endure are terrible, they can actually help us build emotional and spiritual muscle (no pain, no gain after all)...and they can prepare us to be used by God in even greater ways (by increasing our reliance on Him and by making us aware of spiritual reserves we never knew we had).

- That's why the book of James says that we should "Consider it pure joy when we face trials...because we know that the testing of our faith produces perseverance. And perseverance must finish its work so that we will be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2-4)

Think about it like a life-saving operation of some kind.^{iv} When you go in for surgery, you might very well get tied to a table...have a mask secured over your mouth and nose...and end up with people standing around you—poking you with needles and cutting you with knives. And if someone who knew nothing about modern medicine walked into the operating room and saw that...they'd probably think you were being tortured. (Heck, even you might think you're being tortured.)

- But in reality, the doctors and nurses aren't trying to torment you. They're trying to heal you...to strengthen you...to make you better.
- And maybe our suffering works the same way. Maybe it looks horrible and painful and terrifying...but that's only because we don't know how to look at it. If we could see it from God's perspective, we'd see that God is using our pain to make us better.

Of course, like our other 'answers' for suffering, I suspect that most of us can see at least some truth in that explanation. After all, most of us have gone through painful experiences—only to emerge stronger and wiser and more 'full of faith' on the other side. And yet, there are limitations to that answer, too.

- For starters, some of the pain that we endure seems to have no possible relationship to any lesson it might teach us. How are we supposed to learn from suffering when we can't see a connection between the hurt and some potential lesson?
- What's more, even if we can find a lesson in our suffering, don't we often feel like God is using too much pain to get His point across? The Bible says that God is faithful...and won't let us be tempted beyond what we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13), but sometimes it feels like He's got waayy too much confidence in us.

Why? Suffering as Mystery

Maybe—in the end—the 'why' of suffering is a mystery. Maybe when we're hurting—and we can't find a sin for which we're being punished...nor can we understand why God won't protect us from the aches and pains of life...nor can we find a helpful lesson in the suffering that we bear...

- Maybe at times like that (when we—like Job—ask, "Why?") the only answer we can finally give...is that we can't understand why. God's ways are not our ways...and His thoughts are not our thoughts. Perhaps—when you get right down to it—suffering will always remain a riddle we can't solve.

That might seem a little frustrating at first. But it can be quite beautiful, too. I suspect we've all heard some version of a story that my reading suggests goes back to the playwright Thornton Wilder. In a book titled *The Eighth Day*, Wilder suggested:

“God has a pattern into which all of our lives fit. The pattern requires that some lives be twisted and knotted and cut short...while others extend to impressive lengths....not because one thread is more deserving than another, but simply because the pattern requires it. Looked at from underneath, from our vantage point, God's pattern seems arbitrary and without design, like the underside of a tapestry. But looked at from outside this life, from God's vantage point, every twist and knot has its place in a great design that adds up to a work of art.”^v

Maybe someday...in a world made new...we'll see the reason behind God's grand design. Like the old song says, “We'll understand it better by and by.” But for now, we can only wonder...and trust that—somehow—God is at work, even when we don't see how.

I've known plenty of folks who found great comfort in that idea. And especially for people of faith like us, there's something vital and worthwhile about learning to trust...that God is wiser and bigger and (ultimately) more loving than we could possibly imagine. But in the interest of 'intellectual honesty,' I do need to point out that people have problems with this answer, too.

- In a very popular book titled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner asks, “How seriously would we take a person who said, ‘I have faith in Adolph Hitler...I can't explain why he did the things he did, but I can't believe he would have done them without a good reason.’ Yet people try to justify the tragedies that God [allows to befall] innocent victims with almost these same words.”
- “Furthermore,” Kushner continues, “my religious commitment to the supreme value of an individual life makes it hard for me to accept an answer that is not scandalized by an innocent person's pain... (An answer) that condones pain because it supposedly contributes to an overall work of artistic value.”^{vi}

Is 'Why?' the Right Question?

So what are we to do? When suffering comes...and we find ourselves asking, “Why...?”

- But when we can't 'make sense' of our suffering: as a punishment for sin...or a consequence of human freedom...or an experience meant to teach us in some way...
- When we can't even settle our hearts by telling ourselves that suffering is a mystery that we'll only understand when we see it through heaven's eyes...
- What are we supposed to do with the 'why' of our suffering?

Well as we close this morning, let me suggest that scripture invites us to change our question. There's a brief but wonderful story told in the 9th chapter of John's gospel. Jesus and his disciples are traveling through some Judean village...and they see a man who's been blind from birth. And the disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned—this man or his parents—that he was born blind?”

- And Jesus responds, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned...but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” Jesus tells them, in other words, “‘Why?’ isn't the right question. The better question is: ‘To what end?’ or ‘For what purpose?’”

Don't get me wrong: Asking 'Why?' is natural...and in some ways, it can even be helpful. When we ask 'Why?' we discover sins we need to repent of, consequences we need to avoid and lessons we need to learn.

- But if we stop with the 'Why?' we can easily spend our lives looking backward...trying to figure out what happened...where things went wrong...who's to blame.

- But God's not so interested in looking back. He calls us to look ahead. He invites us to fix our eyes on Jesus—who's not some noble figure from the past—but who is a living and reigning Lord...a Comforter who's with us now in the power of His Spirit, and a Savior who promises that (one day) we will be like Him...for we shall see Him as he is (1 John 3:2).
- Why do we suffer? I don't know. All I really know is that we will. And so the real question becomes: How will we respond? What are we gonna do about it? And that's what we'll talk about next week.

Conclusion

This has been a challenging message to put together...mostly because I know there are plenty of folks in our church who are dealing with suffering...and who are probably asking, "Why?" And I'll be honest: I wish I had better answers to that question. But I do believe in my heart that it's not the 'why' that set us apart from the rest of the world. It's the 'Who.'

- And in this case, the 'Who' is a powerful, gracious, heavenly Father...and His Word promises that there is nothing—neither death nor life...neither things present nor things to come...neither height nor depth...nor anything else in all creation...that can separate us from His love.
- Won't you respond to His love today...so that he can give you the strength to respond to hurt in a way that makes you whole?

Our hymn of response is #369: O Jesus, I Have Promised. Please come as we sing.

ⁱ Hebrews 12:6.

ⁱⁱ Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Zondervan, 1990), p. 81.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Adapted from *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner (Avon Books, 1981), p. 21.

^v Ibid. p. 18.

^{vi} Ibid. p. 19.