

# YAMs

## Summer Midweek 2009



### Week Eight:

Why does God allow evil and suffering?



**covenant chapel**

**Question:** Why does God allow evil and suffering?

**SHORT ANSWER:**

We must begin answering this question with the agreement that God is both sovereign and good. This means that God is both in complete control of everything that happens, and that everything God does, he does for his greatest glory and our greatest good.

This means that any time we experience suffering, evil, pain, or “bad stuff” (as we often call it), we must admit that it too is under the realm of God’s sovereign goodness, and that he has some purpose in it. As an overriding principle, God allows suffering in our lives to test our faith, to refine us, and to push us more toward Christ. And evil exists to remind us that God is control of all things, and that we live in a broken, sinful world that needs God.

Finally, we must realize that any suffering, pain, or evil we encounter is a reflection of a far greater suffering, pain, and evil experienced by Christ on the cross, and as we remember the ultimate glory and good that came from his suffering, our own experience helps us better bless others, learn more about God, serve Christ and others, and worship more fully. Evil, suffering, and pain exist for God’s glory and our good.

**LONG ANSWER:**

**Laying a Foundation**

We’ve got to start this discussion by asking a couple “frame of reference” questions to lay a foundation: What would you define as “evil”? What would you define as “suffering”?

From this, there are two underlying problems when addressing these questions: First, most folks define “evil” and “suffering” as “something bad that happens to me” or “something I don’t like.” The problem with this is that it becomes very subjective; very “defined by me”; very individual and personal. Second, based on that definition, people seem to gravitate toward one extreme or the other – “either God is good but not sovereign, because a good God would never let something this horrible happen to me if he was truly in control” or “God must not be good because he is in control of everything, and he still let this horrible thing happen to me.” The problem with this is that both conclusions go against everything we know to be true of God, both biblically and often, experientially.

Among many other verses, the Bible clearly teaches that God is sovereign in all things, including... **the heavens and the earth** (Gen 1:1; 6:17; Deut 3:24; 10:14; Neh 9:6; 1Chron 29:11-12; Psalm 89:11; 103:19; 119:90-91; 124:8; Isa 45:18; Jer 27:5; 51:15; Acts 17:24; Col 1:16-17), **angels** (Exo 23:20; Psalm 68:17; 91:11; 104:4; Matt 26:53; Heb 1:14), **Satan and demons** [fallen angels] (Psalm 78:49; Job 1:12; 2:6; Matt 8:31-32; 25:41; 2Pet 2:4; Jude 1:6; Rev 12:7-9; 20:10), **nations and**

**leaders** (Gen 51:25, 32; Josh 11:20; Ezra 1:1; Psalm 66:7; 86:9; Jer 25:17; Dan 4:34-35; Rev 15:4), man (Gen 24:21; Gen 39:3; Exo 4:11; Psalm 33:8-11; Prov 16:9-11; Isa 14:24-27; Jer 10:23; Matt 5:45; Acts 2:22-28; Rom 9:18-21), and while this is the subject of another evening, **salvation**.

Likewise, here are a few of the many scriptures that point toward God's goodness, also in all things. **God himself is good** (Psalm 107:1; 31:19; Hosea 3:5); **God's attributes are good** (Gen 1:4-18; Exo 33:19; 34:5-7; 1Tim 4:4); **God's gifts to his children are good** (Rom 8:28; James 1:17; Psalm 84:11; 1Peter 1:16; Lev 11:44), and of course, **the gospel is the pinnacle of God's goodness** (Isa 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:6; Matt 5:43-45; Luke 1:19; 2:10; Acts 8:12; 13:32; 14:16-17; Heb 4:2-6)

It is clear that these points are major doctrines, found to be true throughout the Bible. Experientially, it's interesting to me that we have no problem with God – in fact, some of us don't even have much of a thought of God – until things are going horribly wrong. Then, we immediately turn to blaming him, cursing him, and rejecting him instead of remembering the good things he sovereignly puts in our lives every day, including nourishment, life, and the very breath and ability to speak with which we're blaming, cursing, and rejecting him! Ninety-plus percent of our experience, if we pause long enough to think about it, shows that God is good. Why would one instance or circumstance have the power or authority to negate both God's own word as well as the majority of our experience?

### **God Works ALL Things In His Sovereign Goodness, For His Glory**

So if God is both sovereign and good, that means that everything he does works w/in that framework. While it is true that God can do anything God wants, it equally true that God does not work outside or against his own character. Thus, as we affirm God as both sovereign and good, that means everything he does, he does within his sovereign goodness.

This is easy for us to consider in most situations. We really like verses like Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God *all things* work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" and Ephesians 1:11, which says we are saved "...according to the purpose of him who works *all things* according to the counsel of his will" (italics added). But it gets a little more sticky when we realize that just as God created heaven, so did God create hell (Matt 25:41). Just as God created the archangel Michael, so did God create Satan (Eph 3:9; Col 1:16; Rev 4:11). Just as God ordained Jesus' birth and incarnation, so did he ordain Jesus' death and crucifixion (Acts 2:23-24).

Why would God create a being who would constantly work against Godself? Why would God create a place of eternal torment? Why would God send his Son into the world to die? The answer is that God does all these things – and all

things God does! – for the same reasons that he created legions of angels who would work for his good; a place of eternal blessing; and the resurrection of Christ.

God does all things for God's glory.

The universe was created to display God's glory (Psa 19:1); the righteous wrath of God against sin displays God's glory (Rom 1:23); our sin displays our depravity in light of God's glory (Rom 3:23); God's ultimate judgment of mankind and angels will display his glory (Rev 20:7-10). God's glory – not our happiness; not our feeling good; not even our earthly pleasure – is God's ultimate goal. This has been so from the beginning of time and the start of the Bible, and has been, is, and will be throughout eternity.

To make sure we're on the same page...

- God is sovereign and good
- God does everything within his sovereign goodness
- God does everything for his glory, which is his ultimate goal

### **Looking at Suffering and Evil**

Back to the original question at hand then, we must understand any "suffering" or "evil" we encounter as part of God's sovereign good work in us. Again, "God works *all things* according to the counsel of his will" (Eph 1:11); "for those who love God *all things* work together for good" (Rom 8:28). "All things" means "all things." Not just the things we like; not just the things that feel good; not even the things which make us feel affirmed, loved, and happy. God works *ALL* things for his glory and our good. That means that when evil exists in the world, or when we see or experience suffering, instead of immediately rejecting God's goodness or God's sovereignty, we need to instead ask the question, "What is God doing in this?"

We don't do this because we don't like these things; we become uncomfortable with them, so we lump them together, declare them as "bad," and decide that God couldn't or wouldn't ever have anything to do with them. Again, let's look at this biblically and experientially, starting with the latter.

This past spring was the greatest time of suffering my wife and I have ever experienced. It felt like hell was breaking loose from every angle of our lives. To give a quick overview...

- I was in a car wreck, taken to the hospital in an ambulance.
- My car, bought new in Aug 2008, was totaled.
- My wrist was broken, and I had cuts and bruises across my body.
- I underwent surgery, and my wrist is still fairly immobile w/ a screw in it.

- The lady who hit my car claimed to have had a green light too, and since there were no witnesses, her insurance didn't cover any of my car/injuries/etc.
- We got bills from the afore-mentioned ambulance, ER, and surgery, which on top of a recent Italy trip, hit us fairly hard.
- I missed out on our Belize mission, which was headed to new levels & which I helped plan.
- Jess (planning to go part time at work this summer to enter grad school) found out she can only take 1 class per session this summer, but will most likely still be only part time at work.
- We got the final report of our investment losses from 2008, where we had invested significantly in great, well-advised places.... just before the market crashed.
- We found out we were misinformed about some medications Jess has been using, causing some concern and necessitating a change.
- And on top of all this, I was fired from my job, essentially because of a glorified interpersonal conflict between my boss and myself.
- With all these outward frustrations, we've both struggled with thoughts of anger, bitterness, betrayal, hurt, and great sadness.
- In these thoughts, we've begun - and stopped each time, thank God - going down various sinful "thought trails" as ways of release/coping.
- All this has led to the most difficult time we've ever known, for both of us individually and definitely for our marriage.

I don't mention this to seek pity or display our lives as the "pinnacle of suffering"; we know there is far more grievous suffering around the world, and maybe even in your life. But for us, it was a whirlwind 40 days, where we felt a great amount of suffering. We definitely cried with Christ, "let this cup pass from me"; we've learned beyond ever before what "not as I will, but as you will" means; for the first time, we're understanding what it means to be "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him..." and that "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..." (all said by Jesus & Paul).

### **Finding the Good in Suffering and Evil**

But even in our experiences; our subjective "suffering," there was objective good. I understand true brokenness deeper than ever before; we had been praying for God to give us clear direction whether we should stay at that job or move toward church-planting (we received a clear answer indeed!); through my less-than-functional wrist, I understand the "one body, many parts" imagery of the church better than ever before; and more than anything, I truly learned what it means that my sufficiency must be in Christ alone, because literally everything else can – and does – fade away. I really understand Jesus' words in Matthew 7:24-28, about relying on the rock rather than the sand, which gets blown away in a storm! And I'm sure God has more for us to learn, even still.

Beyond my own recent experience, and far more authoritative, look at what Scripture teaches about suffering:

- Suffering leads to God's blessing (Matthew 5:10-12)
- Suffering reminds us that we're not in our true home, and reminds us of Christ's suffering (John 15:18-20)
- Through suffering we enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:21-22)
- Suffering can't separate us from God's love (Romans 8:35-39)
- Suffering is natural part of life in this world, but will never overcome us (2Corinthians 4:8-11)
- Suffering reminds us that Christ is supreme (2Corinthians 12:10)
- Suffering is promised to Christians (2Timothy 3:12)
- Suffering tests and proves us, and is thus a cause of rejoicing (James 1:2-4; 1Peter 4:12-16)

As a good summary verse for the biblical teaching on suffering, look at Romans 5:3-5: More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." In a word, God allows suffering in our lives to refine us, to see where our trust and sufficiency lies, and to make us more like Jesus.

Finally, look at what scripture teaches about evil:

- God controls evil and even uses it to accomplish his purposes (Exodus 4:11; Deuteronomy 23:39; Isaiah 45:7; Amos 3:6)
- God is never blameworthy for evil (Job 1:22)
- The outcome of evil things done by humans is still for God's good (Genesis 50:20)
- The greatest sin ever committed, the death of Christ, was part of God's plan, and was used for his glory and our good (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28)
- Even still, sin (moral evil) is rebellion against God (Psalm 51:4), breaks God's law (James 2:10; Galatians 3:10), and brings guilty standing before God (Romans 3:23) – God's sovereignty over evil doesn't give us license to sin: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2)

Finally, evil reminds us that this world is broken and needs redemption; it makes us hope and yearn for eternity and perfection, where all pain, death, and evil will be no more. Whether death (the result of sin and a fallen world), discipline (the loving correction of a righteous God), war, disease, or injustice, evil can be dark shadows of a sinful world. But as a side note, we must be cautious to define something as "evil" or "bad" – just because we don't like it doesn't automatically mean it objectively receives one of these labels! We must first pause and ask what God is doing in the midst of any given situation. Biblical examples of things

we wouldn't necessarily like, but which God used for his purposes: the adventures of Joseph, the destruction of individuals and even cities as warnings of coming wrath, Jonah's run, Israel's exile, the scattering of Christians after Pentecost, and the eternal destruction of all who oppose God.

As good summary verses for the biblical teaching on evil, Genesis 50:20 is Joseph's confession, after being betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused by his boss' wife, and forgotten in jail, and after he rose to second-in-charge of Egypt and saved his family from famine: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." And Acts 2:23-24 is the teaching of God's sovereignty over Christ's death: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."

### **Reflecting Something Greater**

One final thing must be said about "suffering" and "evil." I've mentioned this throughout this explanation, but to say it clearly, our suffering; our pain; our encounters with evil is merely a reflection and light burden compared to the evil, suffering, and pain that Jesus experienced on the cross. In the words of John Piper, "Christ absorbed the wrath of God on our behalf – and he did it by suffering; Christ bore our sins and purchased our forgiveness – and he did it by suffering; Christ provided a perfect righteousness for us that becomes ours in suffering – and he did it by suffering; Christ defeated death – and he did it by suffering; Christ defeated death – and he did it by suffering death; He disarmed Satan – and he did it by suffering; Christ purchased perfect final healing for all his people – and he did it by suffering. Christ will bring us finally to God – and he will do it by his suffering" (The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God, October 9, 2005).

Whether emotionally, spiritually, physically beyond our imagination, or in other ways we don't even know, "the ultimate reason that suffering exists in the universe is so that Christ might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God by suffering in himself to overcome our suffering. The suffering of the utterly innocent and infinitely holy Son of God in the place of utterly undeserving sinners to bring us to everlasting joy is the greatest display of the glory of God's grace that ever was, or ever could be" (ibid).

Anything we face in this world (a) reflects this great pain in smaller degrees, (b) reminds us of the sacrifice of Christ's own suffering for God's glory and our good, (c) must be embraced as a continuation of God's work in our own lives, also for his glory and our good, and (d) renews our hope in God's promise – because just as Christ's suffering was only the foretaste for his resurrection and glorious eternity, so is ours a temporary condition, as we wait for our own resurrection and glorious eternity with God.

## **In Conclusion...**

Even some of the most horrendous things imaginable by man are used by God, for his glory and the good of his people. Suffering and evil are part of God's ordained plan, and are sovereignly used by him to accomplish some of his purposes.

On a practical, personal note, the book of 1 Peter is a great look at how our faith is increased as we encounter suffering and evil, as we understand how our own experience reflects Christ:

- Our experience allows us to bless others (ch. 3:8-17)
- Our experience causes us to learn more about God's truth (ch. 3:18-22)
- Our experience prepares us to serve Christ and others (ch. 4:1-11)
- Our experience leads us to more meaningful worship (ch. 4:12-19)

Bottom line: evil, suffering, and even things we don't like exist in our lives for God's glory & our good.

Without suffering, we wouldn't be tested, refined, proven, or as much like Christ. Without evil, we wouldn't fully understand God's goodness, glory, grace, and our need for redemption.

## **LEARN MORE**

### **From Books:**

- *Spectacular Sins* - John Piper
- *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* – John Piper and Justin Taylor
- *The Problem of Pain* - C.S. Lewis
- *How Long O Lord?* - D.A. Carson