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Romans 8:18-21, 26-28

Why is There So Much Suffering in the World?

Suffering comes. It comes in a multitude of ways. I don't want it to come. You don't want it to come. Nobody wants it to come.

But I've noticed that suffering doesn't seem to consult with us or make an appointment for its arrival.

It doesn't ask our preferences. It just shows up and messes up our lives, our futures, our dreams, our desires, our goals.

Suffering comes. Suffering doesn't care if you are rich or poor, young or old, wise or foolish, neat or sloppy.

Suffering comes regardless of your race, creed, color, or preference in political parties.

There is no question in my mind that if I had the ability to have each of you stop by my office after worship and asked you the question, "Tell me, how have you suffered in your life," there are very few who would not have a story to tell.

And I'll bet those stories would be filled with heartbreak and disappointment, discouragement and loss.

Several years ago, George Barna did a survey on this topic: "If you could ask God one question, what would it be?"

The number one response was, "Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?" Which is our question for God this morning.

I am not surprised, because this is one of the oldest questions in the world.

Little wonder that Jesus warned His followers: "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Great! ☹️

Throughout history, humankind has searched for the words which would explain or minimize the presence of suffering.

In the Ancient Near East, 3-4,000 year old Mesopotamian and Akkadian stories provided explanations for why bad things happened in their world.

Simply put, there are good gods, and there are bad gods. Good gods do good things in our world, and bad gods are responsible for bad things.

In Eastern theology, particularly in Confucianism, this idea is incorporated into the "yin and yang."

Just as life presents us with polar opposites that are interconnected (think "light and dark" or "hot and cold"), so too do we experience "good and bad."

This question of why suffering was also asked in the Old Testament by Job and the writers of the Psalms.

And it was especially relevant during the 20th century, where we witnessed two World Wars, the Holocaust, genocides in the Soviet Union, China, and Rwanda, devastating famines in Africa, the killing fields of Cambodia, and the emergence of AIDS.

And the 21st Century hasn't started any better. There was 9/11, the Syrian slaughters, ISIS, and murders in our own back yard, and on and on and on.

But why? The only answer I can honestly give consists of three short words – "I don't know."

I cannot stand in the shoes of God and give a complete answer to that question. I don't have God's mind. I don't see with God's eyes.

In 1st Corinthians 13:12 Paul writes, "Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity.

"All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely."

Someday we'll see with clarity, but for now things are foggy. We can't understand everything from our finite perspective.

And frankly, people suffering from tragedy don't need a big theological treatise; any intellectual response would seem trite and inadequate.

The truth is, suffering comes to all God's people--and when it arrives, many will try to encourage and support the sufferer with words like:

"You will only be given as much suffering as your faith can deal with."

But, I've definitely known people who quietly mutter in response, "If that's so, I think I'm going to ask for a weaker faith, then I won't have to suffer so much."

If we're only given as much as we can handle – what does that say about those who feel so overwhelmed they take their own life?

I've also heard the suggestion, that if you're suffering you've got to get on a spiritual muscle building program so your faith will be strong enough and then when it's strong enough, your pain will disappear.

I have some trouble with that one, too. So does the Bible. If faith is the way to banish suffering, how come the apostles, with their great faiths, suffered terrible violent deaths?

How come all of history's spiritual heroes of faith experienced suffering, often great suffering, in their lives?

No, God doesn't promise his people freedom from suffering.

I mean even Jesus suffered, right? He knew hunger. He knew bereavement, weeping at the grave of his good friend Lazarus.

He knew physical pain as he was whipped, beaten and crucified.

And he knew spiritual, emotional pain as he cried out from the cross, quoting Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" – a Psalm that later reiterates faith in God, even though circumstances are dire.

As we read in our Old Testament text from Isaiah, he joined us. He became one of us. He walked where we walk. He lived where we live. He joined us in our sorrows. He joined us in our pain. He entered our humiliation. He suffered what we suffer.

I know that among street philosophers it is a commonly held concept to think of God as being some sort of celestial Santa Claus.

You know what I mean: people think God is making a list, checking it twice, going to find out who's naughty or nice.

And then when God checks that list and finds someone who is naughty, who has committed a sin, they believe God gleefully doles out some divine punishment from his great big bag of suffering.

A little bit of misery follows a little bitty sin; a giant transgression will generate a sea of suffering.

That is why, when a tornado touches a town, those whose houses have been reduced to kindling quickly run over their list of sins that would cause God to be displeased with them, and hurl such cataclysmic and catastrophic sufferings upon them.

At the same time, those who have been spared give thanks that God has found them worthy of being ignored, at least this time around.

When an illness comes, the patient wants to know, "Why me?"

When one of our children goes wrong, parents ask, "What did we do?"

A flat tire? God must have discovered something dark in your past.

Bad weather on vacation? You must have stolen some paper clips from the office.

Did you drop your toast upon the newly waxed kitchen floor, and it landed jelly side down? Obviously, God is displeased.

It is normal and logical for us to believe that the world makes sense. It is reasonable for us to expect that bad people will be punished and good folks will be rewarded.

Tragically, our own experience says that is not always the case.

South American drug lords live out their lives quite comfortably, while the judges and police that try to catch them are murdered.

The mother of three is killed in an auto accident, while the drunk who caused the accident walks away without a scratch.

What possible sense can we make of life, if the bad seem to be immune from punishment, and the innocent are condemned to suffer for their goodness?

It makes no sense.

Then there are those people who say, "Everything happens for a reason". It was God's will; but again, I don't agree.

When an earthquake hit Haiti in 2010 and killed 160,000 people, was that God's will? No!

When a tsunami hit the Indian Ocean in 2004 and killed 280,000 people, was that God's will? No!

Does everything happen for a reason? No. But I do believe that in everything that happens, God works for the good of those who love him, as we read in this morning's scripture (Romans 8:28).

When life is hard, God is at work. When suffering comes, as it will come to us all, God is at work.

When there seem to be no answers to our questions God is always at work.

Unfortunately, so much of the world's suffering results from the sinful action or inaction of ourselves and others.

For example, people look at a famine and wonder where God is, but the world produces enough food for each person to have 3,000 calories a day.

It's our own irresponsibility and self-centeredness that prevents people from getting fed.

In other words: look at your hand. You can choose to use that hand to hold a gun and shoot someone, or you can use it to feed hungry people. It's your choice.

But it's unfair to shoot someone and then blame God for the existence of evil and suffering.

We must get deeply involved in situations of suffering. We must not ever point a finger, saying:

"It's their fault. They brought it upon themselves. They declared war. They drank too much. They took drugs. They had an affair. They blew all their money."

God does not treat us like that, and the scriptures clearly tells us to get involved.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan two religious men walked on by with their noses in the air; whereas a Samaritan, with some strange religious views did the right thing and was shown to be the true neighbor.

We are called to do no less.

And while suffering abounds ... when it happens to us we should remember what Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

Because tragedy happened to you, it gives you a greater sense of oneness with others who experience tragedy. You can feel for them in that suffering situation.

Henry Nouwen wrote a book about just that called, "The Wounded Healer."

Part of what he is saying in his book is that when we suffer, we get to decide whether to turn bitter or turn to God for peace and courage.

We've all seen examples of how the same suffering that causes one person to turn bitter, to reject God, to become hard and angry and sullen...

...can cause another person to turn *to* God, to become gentler and more loving and more tender, willing to reach out to compassionately help other people who are in pain.

Some who lose a child to a drunk driver turn inward in chronic rage and never-ending despair; another turns outward to help others by founding Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

A lot of times you'll hear people say: "If God has the power to eradicate evil and suffering, then why doesn't He do it?"

And part of the answer is that just because he hasn't done it yet doesn't mean he won't do it.

For those of you who like to read books - what if you read only half of say a John Grisham novel and then slammed it down and said:

"Well, Grisham did a terrible job with that book. There are too many loose ends with the plot. He didn't resolve all the issues with the characters."

He'd probably reply, "Hey - you only read half my book!"

And the Bible says that the story of this world isn't over yet.

It says the day will come when sickness and pain *will* be eradicated. That day will come, but just not yet.

I certainly don't want to minimize the pain and suffering we are going through now, but it helps if we take a long-term perspective.

The Apostle Paul, wrote the following to the church in Corinth:

"For our light and momentary troubles" — wait a second: light and momentary troubles?

Five different times his back was shredded when he was flogged 39 lashes with a whip; three times he was beaten to a bloody pulp by rods.

But he says, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

Paul also, writing to the Romans, said: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

God promises a time when there will be no more crying, no more tears, no more pain and suffering, when we will be reunited with God in perfect harmony, forever.

I invite you to remember the words of First Corinthians 2:9 "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

It reminds me of the true story about the young man who had fallen down a flight of stairs as a baby and shattered his back.

He had been in and out of hospitals his whole life — and yet he made the astounding comment that he thinks God is fair.

Someone asked him, "How old are you?"

The boy said, "Seventeen."

He was asked, "How many years have you spend in hospitals?"

The boy said, "Thirteen years."

To which he was asked, "And you think that is fair?"

And the boy replied: "Well, God has all eternity to make it up to me."

That's faith, isn't it?

In the end, two things, are sure. One, in this world, Jesus tells us we will have trials and tribulations. And two, Jesus promises that, in him, we can have peace, because he has overcome the world.

So, here's my promise to you: when tragedy strikes, as it will; when suffering comes, as it will; when you're wrestling with pain, as you will – and when you make the choice to run into His arms, here's what you're going to discover:

You'll find peace to deal with the present, you'll find courage to deal with your future, and you'll find the incredible promise of eternal life in heaven.

Amen!