

If God exists then why is there so much suffering?

Preached on Sunday, January 27, 2008

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Texts: Deut. 30:15-20 and Job 33:19-22

Theme: Suffering is not sent by God but is part of the design of God's creation. The fact that there is suffering does not disprove God's existence or prove that God is not doing God's job. It simply is the part of the price of living and God walks with us to redeem that suffering into something meaningful.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does suffering happen at all? Why would the Creator of the universe design a system with so much inherent evil? Why would this Creator allow hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, famines, and plagues to exist?

How can good, righteous people call upon God in prayer and not have God intervene on their behalf? This either means there is no God or that God is not doing God's job.

Or how about a question that is more personal and one that you have all asked at least one time or another in your life – if God is not going to answer my prayer for a healing miracle, then what is the use of prayer? This morning we are going to be dealing with questions like these and more as we deal with the larger question: If God exists then why is there so much suffering?

Let us pray...

Today I am going to be preaching the fifth sermon in the series "If God exists..." and I will have to say it has been a powerful series. I have one more sermon to preach and next Sunday will give you my best case for why I believe in God and why God is essential to my life. In the Leadership Council this past week someone asked if this series could be compiled on a CD and distributed and/or sold for those who would like to have it in one place. We are going to put that CD together as soon as possible and it could be a great way of reaching out to non-believers in our community.

Please get out your handouts for today and on the cover you will find a quote by Sam Harris from his book "A Letter to a Christian Nation." Let me read to you the full quote and I will queue you where the handout comes in.

"Examples of God's failure to protect humanity are everywhere to be seen. The city of New Orleans, for instance, was recently destroyed by a hurricane. More than a thousand people died; tens of thousands lost all their earthly possessions; and nearly a million were displaced. It is safe to say that almost every person living in New Orleans at the moment Hurricane Katrina struck shared your belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and compassionate God. (HANDOUT) But what was God doing while Katrina laid waste to their city? Surely He heard the prayers of those elderly men and women who fled the rising waters for the safety of their attics, only to be slowly drowned there. These were people of faith. These were good men and women who had prayed throughout their lives. Do you have the courage to admit the obvious? These poor people died talking to an imaginary friend."¹

Sam Harris and many of his other atheist friends contend that religion is a delusional salve that makes us feel better and tricks us into offering prayers to a non-existent deity. Or they say that suffering and tragedy proves that either God is cruel and punishing like a kid with a magnifying glass burning the legs off of ants or that God simply does not exist. If we believe in an all-loving, all-caring, all-knowing, all-powerful God then even one act of child rape, or even one person killed in a flood, or even one person killed because of ethnic cleansing (let alone six million) would prove God does not exist. So this morning I would like to deal with four questions that are on the front page of your handout.

- Where does suffering come from?
- Why does God allow it?
- Does God use suffering to correct, punish, or change us?
- Why doesn't God intervene when we ask/pray?

So let's start with where does suffering come from. This question is not new to us and has been asked throughout the Bible from the first book to the last. When Adam and Eve broke the rules of the Garden and were being escorted out, God informed them that their lives would be filled now with suffering and pain. When Israel would ignore God's laws and would worship at other altars they would suffer at the hands of the neighboring tribes and would call out to God for rescue. Later when the prosperity theology of the Old Testament started showing holes a story emerged that tried to answer the question why do bad things happen to good people. Our Disciple Bible class just finished that book of Job a couple weeks ago and we realize that when the book was complete and all the long winded friends had a chance to give their answers we are still no closer to understanding the mystery of suffering.

Suffering comes from a variety of places and the easiest to understand is the suffering that comes from our own mistakes. I put in a text from Deuteronomy where God gives humankind a choice between right and wrong, good and evil, and life and death and when we choose evil then we know death and suffering will come. Most of us understand there are consequences for our poor choices and even though we don't like the results at least we understand the formula. We understand that when we drink to excess and then drive and crash our car and are injured that we brought that on. But when that drunk driver hits a car filled with a young family that was simply guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time we have a hard time.

The second source of suffering is troubling because it is senseless and does not fit gently into an acts/consequence formula. We work feverishly to explain it but our attempts are sometimes more painful than the original suffering as evidenced by a close read of the friends in the Job story. This huge category of senseless suffering includes random acts of violence, illnesses that defy genetics or behavioral causes, mental and emotional snapping, and relationships that fail for no reason.

The third category of suffering would be natural disasters or as our insurance companies have labeled them, "acts of God." Due to our sophisticated global communication systems we are able to witness global disasters on a regular basis. Tsunamis that kill 300,000, hurricanes that kill 3,000 and leave thousands homeless, tornadoes ripping through subdivisions, floods destroying homes, ice storms and arctic cold fronts killing those unprepared are all part of the disasters we see on a daily basis and often wonder why God allows them to happen.

Which brings me to a possible fourth category – suffering that comes from God. There are many who believe that God sends suffering to punish, correct, and teach us life lessons. I am not going to climb into that bucket right now but will come back to it. I just wanted you to know that some believe there is a fourth and troubling category of suffering – I do not.

So let me move on to my second question, why does God allow suffering? If you were present for one of my first sermon in the series you will remember that I created a crude continuum of religious belief or non belief and started with atheism. I am going to use the same crude continuum and address this question of suffering. Atheists would say it is part of life and that you and I should not try to sugarcoat the reality of pain and suffering with promises of an afterlife or with the expectation of miraculous rescues.

I am going to jump over agnostics and go straight to deists who would say that God created the universe with all of its intricate laws, set things into motion, and left. God will not return to intervene, will not break the natural laws, and will let us deal with our own mistakes. Now there are some advantages to this position. It stops us from blaming God for all of our problems and helps us to assume responsibility for our actions but it also frees us from asking for God to intervene and rescue us with miracles.

There are some problems with this position as well. The biblical witness says just the opposite and we see God being deeply involved with God's people from start to finish. God calls Abraham and Sarah to take part in a special mission, chooses a tribe named Israel and watches over them for generations, and then in the ultimate act of intervention God steps onto this planet as Jesus Christ revealing God's will and working miracles.

Now I am going to jump even farther to a position that I did not use before but one that many of us are familiar with – hyper-Calvinism. A person in this position believes that God is in control of everything and that nothing happens without God knowing about it, approving it, and touching it. God is the master of history and is pushing a preordained plan. Now you may be saying to yourself right now that is not where you would be theologically but many of us have bought into this theology without realizing it. I see hyper-Calvinism all the time on the internet messages that make their rounds. I hear it when people justify suffering by saying, "It was the will of God," or "God did this to you to teach you a lesson," or "You know everything happens for a reason," or "God inflicted this or that pain upon you because God knew you could handle it."

Perhaps you heard the hyper-Calvinist reasons for Hurricane Katrina where a notable preacher and religious leader said God sent the hurricane to teach the people of New Orleans a lesson. One went so far as to say God sent the hurricane as punishment because actor and lesbian Ellen DeGeneris lived there. Needless to say there are some problems with this position.

So let me go back to middle ground in what I might call a moderate theistic position and I would agree with my deist sisters and brothers and state God created the universe with all the complicated and intricate natural laws but from time to time God intervenes. That intervention is not on the scale of the hyper-Calvinists but occasionally God intervenes with a miracle which we don't presume to understand. In this position we have a growing appreciation and respect for these natural laws and believe that they are morally blind. In other words God's natural laws hold true no matter if you are the most hideous sinner or the most righteous saint.

God does not cause pain and suffering but it is built into the system. Pain and suffering are part of the gift of free will. Rabbi Kushner in his classic book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," writes "Pain is the price we pay for being alive."² He goes on to say that we are the only species that can make sense of pain and we should not get stuck on the question where does our pain come from but we should be more concerned about how we can make something meaningful from our pain so it does not become empty and meaningless suffering. He repeats several times in the book that too often we get hung up on where or why our suffering comes and never move on to what we are going to do with our suffering now that it is here.

Which brings me to the beautiful part of this theological position – I believe that in this position God gives us the strength to carry on. Through prayer God enters into our journey and helps us redeem our suffering so that it becomes something of value.

We have two more questions to deal with so I want to push along. The next question is does God use suffering and pain to punish, teach, or correct us? In our scripture reading this morning I chose a quote from one of the friends of Job in which Elihu tells Job that "God disciplines people with pain on

their sickbeds and with ceaseless aching in their bones.”³ This passage illustrates the danger of proof texting because a few chapters later when God talks to Job, God sets the record straight and admonishes all the friends for their faulty wisdom.

I don't know about you but I have a hard time worshipping a God who inflicts more pain to those on their sickbed to teach them lessons. When people tell me that God gave them cancer I am haunted by the image of some sort of bent over deity running around with a sack load of tumors trying to make sure that he makes his quota for the day.

I agree with Rabbi Kushner, God is not in the business of handing out sickness, cancer, retardation, birth defects, or any other kind of suffering and pain for whatever reason. God did however set into motion a series of natural laws and when they are disrupted, broken, ignored, or rejected there are consequences. Does that make God unjust or uncaring? NO! Does it do away with God entirely? AGAIN NO!

Finally let me take the last question of why doesn't God intervene more often? I know that I will not have enough time to answer this question properly and I could and will preach a series on the efficacy of prayer but let me take a quick stab at this today because there is not a one of us sitting in this room who has not wrestled with this issue. How many here have ever told someone else you will pray for them? What do you mean by that? How do you pray? What do you pray for?

I will be painfully honest with you there are times that I feel like terribly deficient in my praying capabilities. I hear people weave beautiful prayers together and I listen to some who pray around people who are dying and ask for miracles and if I were in the miracle granting business I would stop everything and respond. There are times when someone asks me to pray for them that I silently ask the question do they want me to ask God for a miracle? Do they want me to ask God to temporarily suspend the natural laws for just this one person and not the rest of creation? I ask if I pray for a miracle and it doesn't happen then are they going to be angry at God? I wonder when they hear about someone else who prayed and had a child cured if they say to themselves we should have prayed harder, or we didn't say the right words, or God was angry with us and punished us.

When I pray that my wife gets a particular job do I presume to tell God that I know more and that we are more worthy of his favoritism? When I pray for someone to succeed in something does it deprive someone else of success? Have you ever wondered any of these questions but were never bold enough to ask them?

Let me tell you what I know about the mystery of prayer. First I have witnessed miracles but they are not as common as I would hope and pray for. Why God heals one person and does not heal another is mystery but if we ever came up with a formula it would reduce God to a cosmic vending machine. When miracles occur I simply stand in awe and thank God.

Second, often when we ask God to change the events of life what really happens is that we are changed. So many times I have come to God with a request (I really should be honest and say a plan that I want God to endorse) and as I lift it in prayer something happens. The priorities that formed the request change and new priorities emerge. If I linger long enough in God's presence I see a bigger picture filled with mercy, justice, forgiveness, and grace. I am the one changed most often in prayer.

My third insight piggybacks on the second that we often pray to God for situations or people to change. I believe this happens but often not the way we would like and that is why we need to be careful what we pray for because we might just get it. I believe God does indeed change people by influencing them, nudging them, stopping or preventing them, or surrounding them with people who

are able to break through the barriers and walls and reveal the truth. It is a slow process but God does indeed work in this way.

Fourth, prayer connects us immediately with others. Kushner writes, "Prayer, when it is offered in the right way, redeems people from isolation. It assures them they need not feel alone and abandoned. It lets them know they are part of a greater reality, with more depth, more hope, more courage, and more of a future than any individual can have by himself [or herself]."⁴

Fifth, prayer gives me the assurance that I am in journey and God is my companion. I realize that no matter what happens in this life I have an eternity to enjoy with my Creator and I might as well start enjoying it now. I place my worries (not my responsibilities) in God's hands and reclaim my joy and confidence in living obediently.

As I was preparing this sermon I received a call from a colleague. His wife was just diagnosed with breast cancer and his whole family is going through a time of testing and pain. Since I was writing about prayer at that moment I asked him what benefit he gets from prayer. He didn't waste a moment in his response. He said, "Prayer keeps me from going crazy and thinking that I am in this time of suffering alone. I will not try to manipulate God with words that I hope will bring about a miracle. If a miracle comes that would be great, but prayer allows me to feel surrounded by God's presence and the presence of others and not go mad."

¹ Sam Harris, "A Letter to a Christian Nation," Knopf Publishing, NY, NY 2007, p.50-54.

² Harold Kushner, "When Bad Things Happen To Good People," Avon Books, NY, NY. 1981 p.64.

³ Job 33:19 New Living Translation

⁴ Kushner, p.121