

Big Questions

4. Why is there Suffering?

October 9th, 2022

Welcome to Crossroads! My name is Andrew and I'm one of the pastors on staff. It's wonderful to be worshipping with you today!

Welcome to week 4 of our message series Big Questions. Over the last few weeks, we have been asking some of life's biggest questions and offering our best attempts at answering them.

Now, if you're a parent, answering questions isn't something new to you. I don't have kids yet, but I have been around kids enough to know that they ask a ton of questions.

And from what I've noticed, a go-to question that kids always have is the simple yet complex question; why? Here are some "why" questions I've gotten from kids before:

- "Why is your beard red but your hair is brown?" Hmm, that's a good one.
- "Why does your breath smell like that? That's called coffee breath! You'll understand when you're in college."

And as a pastor, I've gotten a lot of questions within the context of church. This is my favorite:

- "Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?" I thought, "How can I explain atonement theory to this six-year-old future theologian?"

Kids love asking the question, "Why?" And that's a good thing! Kids are naturally curious. With their questions, they're trying to wrap their mind around this vast, confusing world and find their place within it. And when you think about it, are we adults really that different? You and I, even as adults, still ask the question, "Why?" As human beings, we are unique among everything else on the earth in that we are meaning-makers. We love to find the reasons behind what we see around us and what we experience in life. It's an innate quality and our curiosity has caused us to advance as a species. But it's not just the good things we want to find reasons for. It's also the difficult things in life; the things that seem so unfair, so unjust.

And that leads us to our Big Question for today.

Why is there suffering?

That's a universal question; people from all walks of life throughout the ages have asked this. We all experience suffering and pain of some kind.

- We lose loved ones and we grieve
- We experience financial insecurity
- We receive a diagnosis, come down with illness or suffer an injury and our life is changed forever.

And we see the suffering of other people around the world. Just last week, we saw a natural disaster rip through the state of Florida. Homes, towns and families were destroyed. People lost their lives. Many in Florida are experiencing suffering first-hand. In places like Afghanistan and Syria, many are suffering under the hand of oppression, abuse, food insecurity and political and economic turmoil. Suffering is unavoidable – no one gets to opt out. We feel it in our own lives, we see it across the globe, and we get to the point that our discontentment grows into the aching cry of, “Why?” If there really is a God and if God is really good, why is there suffering? It is the oldest question of all. And it’s not an easy question to answer.

In fact, John Stott, one of the most distinguished Bible teachers of the last three generations, said this: "The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith and has 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." – John Stott

On one hand, followers of Jesus profess belief in a God of love and compassion. The Bible reveals that God is all knowing, all-powerful and full of grace and mercy. Yet suffering exists. If God is truly all powerful, why doesn’t he stop suffering once and for all? If God is truly all love, how could he allow people to suffer? The ‘why’ behind suffering is a question that theologians and everyday followers of Jesus alike have been asking for millennia. It’s also a prominent argument against the existence of God. So in order for us to be committed and faithful followers of Jesus, this is a question we must take seriously. And it’s a question that I believe, if answered well, can help us to see God’s character and faithfulness in an incredibly compelling way. I think a good place to start is by looking at a few attempts to answer the suffering question; some suggested by people wrestling with this problem. And we’ll look at what the Bible says about them.

Potential explanations for suffering

1. It is God’s will

The reasoning is pretty straight-forward and goes like this: God is all-powerful, so everything that happens in the world is what he wants to happen. Since people suffer, suffering must be his will. The problem is that we get a clear picture of God’s will in the Bible and it is not suffering. God’s original will for the world and for humanity is found in the first couple pages of the Bible. **Genesis 1:1, In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. v. 27, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. v. 31, God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.** God designed all things to be good in the beginning. There was a perfect unity between what God had created and God himself. That’s the way he wanted it. He didn’t create suffering. So when did suffering enter the world? When humanity chose to rebel against God. When Adam and Eve decided that their own way of living was better than what God envisioned. In almost an instant, God’s creation was corrupted. Evil entered into the world. And that created suffering.

Sometimes we suffer because someone sins against us and hurts us. By definition sin is not God's will. Murder, stealing, lying, unfaithfulness hurt people, but they are not God's will. Of course, suffering may also be caused by things that have no apparent ties to another person's decisions. Things like natural disasters and cancer can't be directly attributed to someone else's sin. Still that's not God's will. In the beginning there were no hurricanes or plagues. And you may say, "Well, suffering still happens, and God's not stopping it, so doesn't that mean it's his will?" Not exactly. Suffering sprang from the evil that was ushered into creation by humanity's decision to turn away from God. For example, if God were to stop all murders, he would have to prevent people from pulling the trigger on the gun, or make all bullets stray from the target. Or to stop child abuse he'd have to stop the arm of the abuser from being able to hurt the child. The world would be a very different place, and people would not have a choice of whether to follow God's ways or not. Part of God's good design for humanity is free will. This was so we wouldn't be coerced into relationship with him. Because there is free will, love is the motivating factor behind us having relationship with God – not obligation, coercion, or force... which would be oppression. So for suffering to not exist, God would have to eliminate all free will from the world. And that's something he's not willing to do. Why? Because he wants our full hearts. So is it God's will that we suffer? Most likely, no.

2. I caused my suffering

Have you ever wondered, "What have I done to deserve this?" When we ask that question we're assuming bad things happened because I did something wrong, and either God is punishing me or the natural result of my behavior is suffering. The truth is, sometimes we do cause our own suffering. For example, if someone drives drunk and crashes, they can't blame anyone else for their pain; it was self-inflicted. If I don't study and flunk out of school, I can't blame God. But that is not always the case. First-century Jewish Pharisees believed that all suffering came from what we did wrong. In John 9, Jesus tells us that isn't so. **vv. 1-3 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." ⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ⁷ "Go," he told him, "Wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.** In verse 3, Jesus squashes the idea that this man's sin or his family's sin caused the suffering he was experiencing. Instead, Jesus flips the perception of how God works in suffering. Many would have believed that God's work was *causing* the suffering as some sort of punishment. But notice how Jesus points to the "work of God" not as the suffering itself, but the *healing* from the suffering. In Jesus' mind, this man's suffering had nothing to do with his behavior or anyone else's. It's tough to say that God uses suffering as punishment. There's much more evidence in the Bible that points to the fact that he is quick to forgive and show mercy through Jesus. His heart is not to inflict punishment while we are on the earth. However, that isn't to say that when we live outside of God's will for our lives, against the way he created life to be, we won't suffer the natural consequences of brokenness, pain and discomfort. In

the wise words of C.S. Lewis, “You can’t go against the grain of the universe and not expect to get splinters.” So, do we cause our own suffering? Oftentimes, no; but other times, it’s possible.

3. Everything happens for a reason

Maybe there will be a good reason for the suffering. Maybe there’s good that will come out of it? I believe that in some and perhaps many cases that can be true. The Bible actually talks quite a lot about the goodness that may come out of suffering. A well-known example is found in **Romans 5:5 we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope.** Here, the apostle Paul makes it clear that suffering can shape our souls in a way that produces intangible qualities such as perseverance, character and hope. We have all also heard of stories of people who go on to do incredible things because of the suffering they endured. Personally, I know of a woman who lost her husband to a chronic disease some time ago. Of course, she experienced a tremendous amount of grief and heartache. But out of that experience, she received a new calling. She now senses her purpose in life is to help others in the same position she was in. All those things are good, no doubt. But still, there are others who experience suffering who would say that no observable goodness came out of it. So, is goodness a sufficient reason for suffering? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

So, how far have we gotten in answering the question, “Why is there suffering?” Not very far. Of the common answers we looked at, none really provide a solid explanation that we can bank our lives on. Here’s the Bible’s answer to why we suffer; we cannot not know. Consider the Biblical character Job. Job was a righteous man who God viewed as a faithful servant. But then, through no fault of his own, Job experienced inconceivable suffering. In one day Job lost his family, his house, all his possessions. And if that wasn’t enough, a few days later he was stricken with a horrible skin disease that covered his whole body in painful sores. Job was suffering. And even *that* is an understatement. Of course, Job wanted to know why. So he asked God a series of questions. Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this? But God didn’t tell him why. Not out of ignorance, not out of carelessness – instead, God just helps Job to see that neither he, nor anyone else, has the ability to comprehend the mind of God. Job agrees; **Job 42:2-3 “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You [God] asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.** The cosmic dynamic of God’s goodness and the world’s suffering is something that we may never understand fully. And that’s okay. According to God himself, that’s how it’s supposed to be. But we’re not leaving the issue there. Because while we can’t say with certainty why there is suffering in the world, there are a couple of things we *do* know with certainty.

God himself knows what it’s like to suffer

You heard that right. God didn't leave humanity and the world alone in our suffering. Instead, he willingly subjected himself to the same suffering in order that he may redeem it. How would God be able to redeem us, save us, set us free, if he had not a clue what our experience was like in a world full of suffering? Let me ask you this. Imagine you're starting a business and someone came up to you saying, "I have no experience whatsoever in business startups – but I'm here to guide you through it!" What would you say? You'd say, "Thanks, but no thanks!" And an even bigger investment than a business start-up is our life itself. How could I invest my life in a God who has no clue what I've been through? The God I want to follow has seen *my* stuff, knows *my* pain, has experienced the suffering of *this* world. And in Jesus, I have exactly that. Listen to Paul's poetic description of what Jesus did. **Philippians 2:6-8** Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross!

Jesus came to the earth from the glory of heaven and subjected himself to suffering. He suffered relationally, feeling grief when his friend died and when another friend betrayed him. He suffered emotionally; the stress of his impending imprisonment and death caused him to sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. He suffered physically. He was beaten, tortured, flogged, starved and finally crucified. We don't know why suffering exists in the world, but we can be sure that God doesn't shy away from it. Not only does God acknowledge the reality of the suffering of his people; he stepped into it in order that we may have a relationship with him. The next time you feel alone in your suffering or wonder, "Why is this happening to me?" remember you're not alone. Jesus understands and will guide you through it.

We know God will work good even out of bad

Something else we know for certain about suffering is God will work for our good even out of bad. Yes, we experience suffering in life. But that doesn't mean that God isn't at work within it. **Romans. 8:28** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Notice how this verse doesn't say "in *some* things" or "in *positive* things." No, Paul makes it clear. He says, in *all* things God works for the good of those who love him. And that includes the moments of your life that are full of suffering. No matter what life brings, God is working within it to bring about goodness.

Jiu-jitsu is the martial art specialty that is known for its unique fighting style. Punching and kicking are never used. Instead fighters learn how to leverage their positioning, grip and body weight to grapple their opponents to the ground and force them to submit. A good fighter knows one of the best things to use against an opponent is the opponent's own force, taking their attack and turning it into an advantage. God can do the same thing with the evil and suffering in your life. He has the power to redeem and renew the parts of you that have been crushed by the suffering you experience. And with him, when you lean on him and rely on him, he will guide you to a

place of inner flourishing, full of joy, hope, and a peace that surpasses all understanding. Do you believe that? Do you believe that God will use what was meant for evil in your life and turn it into something beautiful? You can trust him for that. Hold him to his promise and see how he moves.

Why is there suffering? We can't fully be sure. But when it comes to suffering, here's one thing that the God of the Bible offers in abundance, more so than any other worldview: hope. The God that we follow is the exclusive God who rose from the dead, meaning that we believe that there is a power of goodness and love that transcends even death itself. That's hope. We believe that suffering doesn't separate us from a far-off god, but that our suffering brings us into a deeper harmony with the God who experienced suffering himself. That's hope. And we believe in a future where God will wipe every tear from our eyes, pain and suffering will be no more, and heaven and earth – God and people – will dwell in perfect unity together. That's hope. We may not have all the answers now, but we have the important ones: our God is good. Suffering will end. And there is reason to hope.