

The Problem of Pain

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Today I'm going to humbly attempt to give some insight into one of life's most important and difficult questions: What do we do with pain? This is what C.S. Lewis famously called *The Problem of Pain*.

According to Lewis, "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness or power, or both. This is **the problem of pain**, in its simplest form."¹

If we are all being honest, we've asked the question, "If God were good, why does he allow _____" or "If God were all-powerful, why doesn't he _____" before, maybe many times. We live in a world plagued with disease, hunger, poverty, brokenness, premature death, doubt, fear, anger, hostility, depression, etc etc etc and here we are, worshipping a God who is good, loving, and who nothing is impossible for (Luke 1:37). How do we hold both of these realities together?

This task proves too difficult for many in the modern age. Tragedy often comes with the unsuspecting consequence of disbelief. Because we, as church leaders, shy away from difficult topics, our sheep are left wondering why with no direction. Today, I will not be attempting to explain why God does the things God does. I'm not God. Attempting to explain the reasoning behind why God does what He does is like trying to capture the ocean in a cup—you'll work really hard only to realize the ocean is just too vast to capture in such a small container.

Yet this is how it is supposed to be. God is the creator and we are the creatures. We aren't made to play the role of God, we're made to enjoy the order of God being God and us being image bearers of God. We are called to steward what we've been given, not control what we are given. Therefore, what I will attempt to do today is give you some ways to process pain so that the result is greater faith and trust in God and my prayer is that you leave with a little more perspective on God knowing exactly what he is doing.

First, I want to speak to the overall notion that things are "worst than ever" in our time. This simply is not the case. If you look at history in spans of centuries, this would most certainly be considered the BEST the world has ever been. Even in the past 100 years, look at where we've come. Some of our grandparents lived through 2 World Wars, the horrors of the Holocaust, the collapse of the economy, and more. Today, we have technology our ancestors never would have

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* from *The C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: New York, 2017), 560.

imagined, access to healthcare in many different ways and forms, and other than Russia, China, and North Korea, we have global peace at a level rarely seen throughout history. More people have heard the gospel today than at any time in history. We have people from all over the world that listen to our podcasts because of the advancement of technology that connects people around the globe. Everyone has easy and free access to the Bible and any historical Church content they want as long as they have an internet connection.

We have to continually put things into perspective, despite what we hear on TV. Things are getting good. It doesn't mean things are perfect—certainly, we have a long way to go. It does mean we need to thank God for the progress we have made.

Within this context, I want to speak to two things:

1. God's Goodness
2. God's Peace

First, what does it mean for God to be *good*?

Romans 8:26-39 NRSV

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Goodness is relative. Depending on who you are and where you are in any given situation, your idea of goodness will vary greatly. A drug addict would say it is good to have unlimited access to cocaine. However, the drug addict’s friends, who are not addicted to drugs and who see what the addict has become because of their drug addiction, would say unlimited access to cocaine is obviously not good.

Let me give you another example more relative to everyone in the room.

What my daughter, who is 6, thinks is good is often different than what I would define as good. Often, what I define as good she defines as bad, and vice versa. My daughter would say it is a very good thing to eat birthday cake and ice cream for every meal, every day. I would say that is a terrible thing. The difference? She isn’t mature enough to know what tastes good and feels good might not be what is, actually, good. She has no idea that eating cake and ice cream for every meal will end in a very premature death. But I know that. I know what she does not know. Therefore, I withhold “good things (in her mind)” from her to give her what is actually good—health and longer life.

My job, and my wife’s job, as parents is to make decisions based on what we know to be best for our daughter. Our daughter’s job is to trust that we know what we are doing. She doesn’t have to understand and much of the time she will not understand. Why? Because we are in our 30s and simply know more than she does. That shouldn’t cause anxiety or doubt to rise up in our daughter. She doesn’t doubt that we are her parents because she doesn’t control her life based on her idea of goodness. Us controlling her life based on what WE know to be good actually causes a greater trust and freedom to rise up within her because she knows she’s living out the greatest good of her life.

Lewis states, “When we want to be something other than the thing God wants us to be, we must be wanting what, in fact, will NOT make us happy.”²

We are not called to neatly define God’s own goodness and hold God’s goodness to our own standards. We are called to TRUST in the goodness of God even when we don’t

² Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 577.

understand. We don't have to understand. In fact, if we'll see it correctly, our lack of understanding can actually place us in a greater measure of trust and freedom because we can let go of trying to control what we can't control and simply live out our greatest good.

Another example is my own blood pressure issues which many of you have walked with me through since December. In December, I found out I had really high blood pressure. It was caused by a mixture of stress and unhealthy habits. Did I pray for God to immediately drop my blood pressure? Absolutely! Did he? No.

Does this mean God isn't good because he didn't answer my prayer like I wanted him to? Was this impossible for a God who nothing is impossible for? Or did he see something that I did not see?

Since the start of January, I've changed my habits. I've released stress, and handed off things at church that I didn't need to carry. I've changed my eating from fast-food and junk to healthy and clean foods. I've started taking vitamins and measuring what goes into my body.

Today, my blood pressure problem is completely healed. My prayers have been answered. Because God didn't just magically lower my blood pressure, I was forced to change things in my life that have now given me many more years than I would have had if I had continued my unhealthy habits.

My point? Seeing God move and work is not an issue of faith like many of the extreme sects of Pentecostalism would infer. God doesn't submit to our demands. We are called to submit to his. We approach God boldly but we approach boldly *as a child*. Therefore "SEEING" God move and work is an issue of **trust**. I make my petition known and then I observe God move and work in ways far greater than I could imagine when I requested his hand.

Romans 8:28

On a deeper level, we still grapple with the things we simply cannot understand or fathom. Though yes, trusting in God's goodness IS what we are called to do, that is really difficult at times. Unexpected deaths, doctor's reports, loss of jobs, failure of dreams, are all calls to trust in God's work in bringing all of it under the truth of His own goodness. But HOW.

How do we trust God's own goodness when we are hopeless?

Philippians 4:6-7 NRSV

6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 **And the peace of God**, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

St. Augustine once said, “God wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full—there’s nowhere for Him to put it.”

We are full of explanations we have concocted in our head as to why things happen, what the motive was behind why they happened, and how, at the end of the day, everything is probably out to harm us, especially God. Why? Because we don’t trust his own goodness. And why don’t we trust his own goodness? We don’t have his peace.

Peace here in Philippians 4:7 is the Greek word *eiréné* (i-ray’-nay). It has many meanings but it’s primary meaning is **one**.

It comes from the word *eiro* which means “to join or tie together into a whole.” This could literally mean *wholeness*. It is when all things are properly joined together.³

When we think of peace, we think of acceptance. I’ve accepted _____ therefore I am at peace with it. But peace here is speaking to something else. Peace here is speaking to a reality that comes from wholeness, specifically wholeness as a result of being joined as one. Joined to what? *Theos* or God. The Greek is *kai hē eirēnē tou Theou*. I would maybe say it like this:

“And the joining of God” though it is hard to give it a blanket English equivalent. Peace is a great translation too. The point is, Paul is writing to a church, in Phillipi, FROM prison. And he writes this as a vehicle to trust God when you don’t understand what God is doing (could Paul himself possibly be grappling with the fact that God called him and the life that followed looked like prison, stonings, beatings, and beheading?).

It is critical to see that Paul does NOT say to let our request be known and the revelation of why things are happening will replace your misunderstanding. Paul says God will give you something GREATER than understanding: peace.

According to Paul, it is superior to have a revelation of your oneness and wholeness in/with God, through Christ, than it is to have an understanding of why God does what he does.

This is a mystery that we should seek to live in but it is true.

³ HELPS Word Studies

Look at Church history. From the beginning of the church all the way up to recent history (some continuing to this day), Christians have faced extreme persecution. For example, during the reign of Nero Christians were nailed to crosses, burned alive, and more. Throughout the ages, Christians have faced death, torture, and murder for their beliefs in Jesus.

I would dare say none of them understood why. Yet they stood strong in their beliefs. Why? Because they had a revelation of their oneness with God in Christ.

Catholic author Tertullian, 30 years after the death of Justin Martyr, said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” He saw that as Christians were martyred the church actually grew and expanded.

I believe it was this peace that Paul encourages us to receive that caused them to stand strong in the face of great pain.

There is pain in the world and all of us will experience it. Maybe you are experiencing it now. We don't have all the answers to pain and many times, we'll never know *why*. But we do know that God is good, even when we can't understand his goodness, and the way we live in that goodness is a constant revelation of our joining with the Son, Jesus.

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁴

⁴ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 604.