

Doubt: Dark Side of Faith
The Question of Evil
July 15, 2012

PRELUDE – Your Grace is Enough

Worship Song – Your Love Never Fails

Feature Song – “Dear God” (XTC)

Wow, what a musical contrast ... from “Your Love Never Fails” – a testimony that no matter what happens, we believe that a loving God will never fail us, to “Dear God” – an accusation that God is *always* letting humanity down.

The wars He brings, the babies He
drowns.

Those lost at sea and never found,
And it's the same the whole world
'round.ⁱ

Some of you may remember that song if you were into punk rock in the late 1980s and early 90s or if you were a Sarah McLaughlin fan when she released a version of it in the mid-90s. In any case, since that time, "Dear God" has actually become something of a cult classic among atheists because it communicates in crystal clear terms what seems to be the most damaging argument against Christianity's claim of an all-powerful and loving God: *the existence of evil and suffering in this world ... and, more specifically, the fact that this God allows it to continue unabated on His watch: why, since He is all powerful, doesn't He intervene and put a stop to it?*

Of course, you don't have to be an atheist to wonder about such things. A couple of weeks ago when I invited you all to write down your personal doubt list – the issues that plague you (or the people you care

about), that you continually seem to bump up against, that you question with respect to the claims of the Bible and Christianity – this was the number one issue that emerged. Of course, it was expressed in many different ways, but this was the issue: the existence of evil.

For example, here are some of the things you all wrote:

- Why does it seem like there is more evil than good?
- If God knew that free will would cause such pain and tragedy, why did He follow thru with creation? It seems as if all of the human race was doomed from the beginning.
- Why do babies die?
- What about the little girl locked in a closet? (that was in the news a couple weeks ago)

- If God created everything, why does He allow Satan to have so much free reign?
- Why hasn't God fixed politics? Ended wars?
- Why does God allow trials if He knows it will turn people away from Him?
- Why hasn't Jesus returned yet (to set all things right)?

Those were some of the more generic, philosophical questions. Here are some with a more personal take:

- Where was God when I was breaking?
- Why didn't God save my marriage when it would have been such a testimony to others?
- Why doesn't God provide for me financially?

- Where was God when my uncle molested me?
- If He loves us why let us endure this kind of life?

Pretty heavy stuff, huh? It was hard to read the details on some of those cards.

So, we have our work cut out for us this morning. If God is in control, if God is loving, then why do evil and suffering exist and why hasn't He put an end to it?

Common Answers

Now, obviously, that's a two-part question and the issues are tightly-connected but, for purposes of discussion, I'm going to break it apart and deal with them one at a time.

As to the first part – "why does evil (and suffering) exist if there is a loving God in

control of everything?” – there are as many ways to try and answer that question as there are to express it. And I know because, in 18 years of preaching and teaching, I’ve attempted to give most of those answers at one time or another, or in one form or another!

And this morning I’ll give you a quick overview of the five most common ways to answer this question, beginning with the one that’s probably given more than any other, which is that ...

1. Evil and suffering exist in this world because the world is cursed with sin.

“The wages of sin is death,” Paul writes in the book of Romans. God promised, in the book of Genesis, that death would follow disobedience to what He had commanded Adam and Eve. And Paul, in Romans, even goes so far to say that not only is death an

issue for humans (and by death, he doesn't mean just physical death but destruction and decay), he also says the entire creation has been subjected to this curse, so bad things happen in the creation because of sin. He actually uses the metaphor of groaning, he says, when these things happen it's like the creation is *groaning* for God to redeem it, renew it and restore it because, this is not how it was meant to be. Evil and suffering exist because of the curse of sin in this world.

Another answer to the question that's given almost as frequently is that ...

2. Evil and suffering exist because humans have free will.

God created us that way. He gave us the ability to decide on our courses of action which means, obviously, that we have the ability to go counter to what God would want

us to do. To go counter to what God says: "This is how I made you to live." And we do. We go counter all the time. The Bible calls that sin, and sin produces a curse, and all of us are sinners in some way or another. More often than we realize, we do what is evil in some form or another, maybe not extreme, but in some form or another there's evil that comes out of us. And because the evil comes out of us, it serves to propagate evil and it produces suffering at some level or another, not only for ourselves but for the people around us.

Of course, that also brings up the question of why God created us with free will if He knew in advance that we would abuse the privilege. I wish I knew for sure the answer to this question. The only suggestion that makes sense to me is that we would not be creatures created in his image without free will, and the Bible tells us that God wanted

people in His image - He didn't want robots. And then for some reason, apparently, God decided that having to redeem a fallen creation was better than not having a creation at all. And just to be clear that's total speculation on my part – nowhere in the Bible does God give us that answer.

I should also add that the existence of free will opens the door to the possibility of accidents in this world. Not only can humans choose to do things that are righteous or choose to do things that are sinful, we have the freedom, in the way God has made this world and the way He's made us, to do things that are unsafe and unwise. We can put ourselves and others in danger and because of that, bad things and suffering are a possibility.

Another answer that's given almost as often as the "free will" answer is that ...

3. Evil and suffering exist because of God's higher purposes (which, unfortunately, because we're human beings and we're limited in time and space, we cannot fully discern).

See, the way this goes is if God is in control of everything, then "everything must happen for a reason." And that means God must have a reason for everything that happens, including evil of the most despicable kind. And there are a lot of Christians who believe that to be true. In fact, there's a whole branch of Christian theology that sees that as a good thing; that somehow *that* even brings glory to God.

Now, other believers would read that same Bible passage and go, "I'm not sure I can go with that interpretation." Instead, they would say they are more comfortable with the idea that God doesn't cause evil, He merely *allows* it to exist for some purpose that we

cannot fully understand in our limited reasoning.

Other people would choke at that and say, "well, I have a hard time reconciling a God who is good somehow signing off on the work of a mass murderer." So, they would say that God being in control of what happens means that while He respects the free will he has given humans he is constantly working behind the scenes to subvert the evil that's being produced. (In case you're wondering, this is the position I'm personally most comfortable with although there are still some problems, theologically, with that as well).

So, are you keeping track of the answers so far? We've got a sin-cursed world that's part of the problem, we've got free will that's part of the problem and we've got God's higher purposes as answers to the problem of evil

and suffering.

A fourth response, though, is to say that ...

4. Evil and suffering exist because of “spiritual warfare.”

The Bible is very clear that, in the same way God is a personal being, there is also a personal being who is kind of in charge of evil. His name is Satan, and he's a real being. He has an army of demonic angels who are battling God for control of this world. You see it in the Bible, in the very first pages of Genesis, and you see it all through the ministry of Jesus as he casts out demons and battles with Satan. And it's even there in the book of Revelation when God draws it all to a close. There's another battle.

There is a spiritual war going on and whenever there is war, there are always casualties, right? There is always collateral

damage. In fact, one of the most vivid illustrations of this is found in the book of Job, which we'll talk about next week because Job is actually a special case of this evil and suffering question and that is, "why do bad things happen to good people and vice versa?" I mean, if God is going to continue to allow evil and suffering, the least He can do is to make sure it goes to the right people, right? You know, bad people ought to suffer while good people ought to prosper. And, that's what we're going to talk about next week.

One more answer that is given in response to our question this week is that ...

5. Evil and suffering exist because of God's discipline for sinful behavior.

Sometimes the bad things that happen in our lives, sometimes the suffering that happens in our lives is because God sends it

upon us in response to our disobedience. And that's not the same as saying that God caused Hitler to pull off the Holocaust to discipline the Jews. The purpose in God's discipline is always redemptive; it's not destructive though it may destroy things in our lives and it may be very painful. But, it's never intended to destroy us. It's always designed to maybe break us but to renew us in the process.

OK, those are the five most common answers that Christianity often gives in response to the problem of evil and suffering. Have you heard these before? Anybody heard these before? (Shake your head and let me know you're still awake.) I bet you've even said some of those to other people, haven't you? You've probably quoted three or four of those in one form or

another to people who are wondering, “what the heck is going on in my life?”

And, here’s the thing about all of these answers: *They’re in the Bible. You can find support for them in the Bible.* They’re all there.

But the problem, at least in my experience, is that they are speculative in nature.

And what I mean by that is, unless God pulls back the curtain between the natural physical world and the spiritual world and gives you a special revelation into what’s going on behind the scenes, *it’s almost impossible to determine which of those causes or combination of causes is behind any given situation in your life or in the world at large.*

- Why are so many of the people right now in Syria being brutally murdered

by their own government? What's really going on there?

- Why did so many young boys have to suffer the horrible abuse from that guy in Pennsylvania, you know, that Penn State guy, Jerry Sandusky? And why did Joe Paterno and others cover it up?
- Closer to home, I look at my own parents and I ask, "why, since the day they moved from NC to VA about 10 years ago, have they struggled over and over again, with health and finances?" It's just been one constant stream of crisis in their lives, and I don't get it.
- Why did we have to do a funeral yesterday for a guy in this church who died from cancer earlier this month? Why are others among us suffering from the same disease right now?

Of those five biblical answers I listed out that

we *could* give in those situations, which *should* we give? Which *would* we give?

Beats me. I have some hunches, to be honest with you, but nothing I would bet my life on.

And that's exactly the problem. See, we want the list of answers and then we're going to bet our lives on those answers, but 99% of the time we don't really know for sure which one or which combinations.

And even if we *did* know for sure - if God did pull back the curtain and let us see - what good would that do? For example, what good would it do if an angel appeared to you in a dream and told you that ...

- The reason you are sick doesn't have anything to do with spiritual warfare. It's because you eat too much and you

don't exercise and you don't get enough sleep. Plain and simple, it's free will on your part, repeatedly expressed in foolish choices. Sorry.

- The reason your wife left you isn't because of God's discipline on you. It's because she is a free moral agent, she was deceived by Satan and that's what she chose to do. Sorry.
- The reason your house was flattened by a tornado but not your neighbors wasn't that you were singled out by Satan. It's that you live a sin-cursed world where everyone is subject to random acts of senseless destruction. Sorry.
- The reason your kid was killed in that car crash wasn't because there was some higher purpose like "God needed another angel in heaven." (I want to throw up whenever I hear that.) It was simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and accidents

happen. Sorry.

- The reason your husband was shipped off to Afghanistan is because the supernatural forces of evil have so corrupted human relationships and governmental systems at the highest levels that wars and conflicts will never cease until Jesus returns. Sorry.

Do you see what I'm getting at? Having the answer, even the right answer, to the question of evil and suffering in a specific situation – if we had it – doesn't really help us deal with the pain of it, especially when it's personal. I mean, it might satisfy some intellectual curiosity. And I've seen this over and over. People have this intellectual curiosity – it's all hypothetical, it's out there, "so, why are all the people in Syria going through that right now? Maybe God is ...". But then when it happens to us, it's a whole different ball game. Those answers don't

carry anything. They don't deal with the pain.

The same thing is true when it comes to that second part of the question. Remember, it's a two part question, *why does evil exist* and then, *why doesn't God intervene to stop it?*

What if an angel came to you and said,

- Well, it's because God had a higher purpose. That's why He didn't intervene.
- God didn't intervene because He felt like it would be good for you to let the consequences of your sin play out in your life.
- God didn't intervene because that's just how it is in spiritual warfare, God's going to win the war but we lose some battles along the way.

Does knowing that kind of stuff truly help? Maybe it does, a little. It might satisfy your head but not your heart. Those answers, for most people in the throes of it, do not produce hope.

Not Answers But a Person

So, now what are we supposed to do? Just throw up our hands in despair? Not exactly. What we need to do – what is more helpful than this kind of speculation – is to change the question from “why” to “who;” to change the focus from *answers* to a *person* – and that person is Jesus of Nazareth.

I say that because last week I talked about how so many of us try to build our faith on some combination of the Bible, our theology (our interpretation of the Bible), our personal life experience and the influence of other Christians. We memorize a few Bible verses,

we hear our favorite preachers explain how it all fits together, we experience God working in our lives in some way, we hear the testimony of other believers and all of that together shapes what we believe. But the problem is if any of those things fail in some way, we lose our faith.

I think the same thing is true when you consider answers to the question of evil and suffering.

Each of those answers we looked at goes into the structure of “why evil and suffering exist in spite of the fact that God is good and all-powerful.”

But if you lose faith in just one of those answers, the whole thing comes toppling down.

And I have to tell you that I've seen this happen to people. I've seen people who, when they face a tragedy, say something

like, “My faith in God is so strong, I just trust that everything happens for a reason” (meaning that God has his higher purpose – he caused it or he personally gave the OK for it to happen). And they really do mean it at that point. They’re sincere.

But as time goes on, over and over I’ve seen this, they start to question that reason. “So, God, what reason could you possibly have for ‘blessing’ my kid with this particular disease? For ‘allowing’ so many people in this world to be enslaved to dictators and political and economic systems that give them no chance of gaining freedom or wealth in this life? For ‘rewarding’ my longsuffering godly mother with a long and humiliating decline into Alzheimer’s? I’m sorry, God, but I just don’t get it.” And their entire faith collapses because that one card was pulled out of the deck.

You know people like that; you've seen it. Unfortunately, some of you are about to *become* people like that.

That's why we talked last week about the idea of thinking of our faith in terms of concentric circles with Jesus in the middle.

We said that things like experience, theology and the Bible all contribute to our faith but not in an equal manner. Our experience is less important than our theology because our understanding of our experience might be wrong. But our theology might also be off, too, so it's less important than the Bible itself. But there are some things in the Bible that are hard to understand and so even *it* is not at the core.

What's at the core of a faith that isn't shaken and abandoned when everything else fails or doesn't make sense to us isn't an

experience or a philosophy or even the revelation from God we call the Bible.

It's a person. It's Jesus.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews put it like this:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being ... Hebrews 1:1-2 (NIV)

See, scriptures, theology, personal experience all give us the kinds of answers to the question of evil and suffering we've looked at this morning. And they can be helpful but ultimately, faith, in the middle of

all that, has to rest on the person of Jesus.

That's why the Apostles – the first Christian missionaries that Jesus himself commissioned to spread the Gospel – didn't go round preaching, "Hey, if you want to know why evil and suffering exist and, more specifically, why it exists in *your* life right now, we can help you find answers." No, that's not what they said.

What they said was, "evil and suffering exist for many reasons. And it's sad, it's tragic and it's painful. *But the most important thing for you to know – the thing for you to put at the absolute center of your faith, at the absolute center of your very life – is that God has done something about it and will continue to do something about it in the person of His Son, Jesus."*

And this, friends, is what we need to hold

onto more than anything else when we try to make sense of the evil and suffering in this world.

“Well, OK, Rick, I think I see what you’re saying, but what is it that God has done and will continue to do in the person of His Son, Jesus?”

To answer that, I want to read you a passage from a letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians. I actually read part of this last week, so I’m sure you’ll recognize it. It’s from 1 Corinthians chapter 15 beginning in verse 1. Paul writes ...

Let me now remind you, dear brothers and sisters, of the Good News I preached to you before. You welcomed it then, and you still stand firm in it. It is this Good News that saves you if you continue to believe the message I told you—

unless, of course, you believed something that was never true in the first place.

I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all ... I also saw him. 1

Corinthians 1:1-8 (NIV)

Now the reason Paul was writing this part of the letter is that some people were going around and saying that there wasn't a

resurrection ... to which he responded (in verse 14):

If Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave.

And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

We talked about that last week.

But Paul continues and this is getting to what I want you to see today.

He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.

So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life.

But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back. 1 Corinthians 15:23 (NIV)

After that the end will come,

when he will turn the Kingdom over to God the Father, having destroyed every ruler and authority and power.

Here, he is talking about evil.

For Christ must reign until he humbles all his enemies beneath his feet. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. 1 Corinthians 15:14-26 (NIV)

Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled:

"Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?"

*But thank God! He gives us
victory over sin and death
through our Lord Jesus Christ.
1 Corinthians 15:54-56 (NIV)*

Now, that's a lot of scripture and I wanted to read all of it to you so you could get the full effect. But here is what Paul is saying in essence:

In the resurrection of Jesus, God defeated the power of evil. But, at the return of Jesus, God will remove the presence of evil.

It's so important to understand this. In fact, would you all mind if we read that aloud together. It's that important. Let's read it together.

Get that into your head and get that into your heart and it will make all the difference in how you process the evil and suffering in this world.

But why? Because if you think of all the senseless suffering that has ever existed, can you think of anything more unexplainable or senseless than the Son of God being nailed to a Roman cross? It's incomprehensible. And in that one event you can find almost every one of the causes of evil we discussed earlier.

But that's never the point. Paul doesn't go there. The point is that in the resurrection Jesus overcame the evil. And God began the renewal of all things literally in his body. Which is why, when you read the stories of the Gospel, when Jesus appears after his resurrection, he is in a physical body and they recognize him, but they kind of don't recognize him. He can eat, but he can also walk through walls. His body has fundamentally changed into the new creation that God is going to restore. And

that's why Paul says, Jesus is the first of a harvest that's coming to everyone who believes in him and follows Him.

In other words, because it happened to Jesus, you and I can be assured it will happen to us, too, if we believe in Him (as Paul said at the beginning of the passage) which is why this incredible promise about what is coming is found in the book of Revelation. It says:

God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. *Revelation*
21:4 (NIV)

And I will tell you that for me, personally, I've thought about this question. I've had to - it's part of my job. But, even if it wasn't, this is

the kind of thing you wonder. And I've studied this and I've given you those five answers and there are more and if we had time we could go into it. And, I get this intellectually, but personally, in my heart, what I come back to over and over again is this truth – that, in Jesus, God has done something about evil and suffering and He will continue to do something about it. And this is such good news to me and I hope it is to you, too, because I'm not smart enough to figure it all out. I'm not wise enough to completely unravel the paradox of a good and powerful God and the existence of evil and suffering at the same time. But I don't have to be. All I need to do is to trust a person – where he has been and where he is going and where he is taking me and anybody else who wants to go with him.

I like how Greg Boyd expresses this. He says this so well. He writes:

To hold to faith during difficult times, we must remind ourselves over and over again of where God is taking us. Regardless of cancer, disease, war, famine, and depression, we have a God who is lovingly guiding us to the promised land of a new heaven and new earth where no more tears will fall. We must imagine what that looks like when we stare at the ugliness of this world. Instead of imagining what the future looks like *because* of the ugliness, we imagine what the world will [one day] look like in *spite* of the ugliness.

We [must] imagine the world as God says it will be. We must imagine ourselves as the image of our loving God. We must imagine no more wars, no more famine, no more autism, and

no more death.

He has a son who is autistic. Then he says:

Living in this Kingdom story (this Kingdom vision) is the only way to keep faith when facing an unfixable situation. We keep pursuing no more wars, no more disease, and fixes to the problems of this world, but we aren't discouraged by the results that we might find (when it doesn't work out). We aren't discouraged because God has already (in Christ) set in the motion the ultimate fixing of this Universe.ⁱⁱ

This morning I want to invite you to just think on this for a few minutes. I've asked the band to come help us with a song that, I think, expresses the idea that even though we may have doubts about the answers to our questions, where we truly stand is on

Jesus and on the grace of God that's revealed in him – what he did and what he's going to do.

And I know that some of you walked in the room this morning carrying some very heavy “why” questions in your life. I want to invite you to lay them down and just listen for a few minutes. Let the Holy Spirit of God speak to your heart about Jesus. And when the band is finished, we'll do one more thing together and be finished. Let's pray.

God, I want to offer this time up to you as our band sings. I pray that you would speak to those of us who really need to hear you in this moment. Amen.

Feature – Shifting Sand (Caedmon's Call)

Why Wait?

Now, you may have noticed – or not – that we only considered “part one” of the question of evil. Why if God is good and all powerful, does evil and suffering exist at the same time? We saw, of course, that while we might not be able to answer that question, our faith isn’t dependent on that because our faith is centered on a person – Jesus – what He did and what he is going to do.

However, that still doesn’t answer the question of why God allows things to continue as they do. Why God doesn’t intervene and put a stop to some of the evil.

Well, a couple of thoughts. If you think about it, for God to put an end to evil and suffering, God would have to stop every act that causes suffering, right? He’d have to put a stop to everything that causes any amount of suffering. And we’ve heard already that you and I are sinners, and when we sin and we

fall short and we commit evil, we cause suffering and we propagate evil. So, if God puts an end to evil, then he has to put an end to us as well.

Another thought – sometimes people say, “well, if God could just draw a line in time and say, ‘that is far enough.’” Well, here’s the question: Where would you draw the line? If you were in charge you might say, “50 years ago - the Andy Griffith Show, Mayberry, those were the good old days. There wasn’t a whole lot of terrible stuff then. So, 50 years ago, that’s where we’ll draw the line.” Or, “no, it was bad then, so maybe 500 years ago, during the Church Age. That’s where God should draw the line and put the end right there.” Or, 1,500 years ago. Do you realize if God had intervened at any of those points you wouldn’t have been born. You wouldn’t have gotten to experience life. You wouldn’t have the opportunity to know God,

to experience the goodness that is in this world, the goodness of knowing Him.

Just because God has not yet ended evil and suffering, does not mean that He will not end evil. It's just going to happen according to His timing, not ours..

The Apostle Peter once addressed this exact question. People were asking, "where's Jesus? Why hasn't God put an end to this?"

He wrote:

Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead he is patient with you,

*not wanting anyone to perish,
but everyone to come to
repentance. 1 Peter 2:8-9
(NIV)*

See, God hasn't put an end to it yet. And, it's sad, it really is in some cases, but it's a great opportunity because, God loves you, God loves me, God loves this world and He wants us to have the opportunity to repent. So, I think maybe some of us need to do that this morning. Some of us keep trying to get all the answers to the questions. We want to put our faith in all these different things, and Jesus is saying, "put your faith in me. Put your faith in what I've done and what I'm going to do." And I think this morning some of us need to say, "Yeah, okay, Jesus, I'm going with you, and I want you to be my Savior and my Lord."

A couple minutes ago, we asked you to listen

and reflect, but I want to give you the opportunity to respond. And some of you may need to respond in that way in your own heart. But all of us need the opportunity to respond maybe a little more verbally, so the band is going to do another song but this is one we all know. We sing it together a lot and we're familiar with it. So, I want to invite you to join in the singing of this song as an expression of your faith in Jesus as the ultimate answer to the question of evil and suffering.

And I know that some of you might not be there just yet – spiritually, intellectually, emotionally – and that's OK. I want to suggest that you sing this song as a desire of "God, this is what I want to be true about me. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Maybe that's what this song can mean for you at this time.

So, let's stand together and let's sing.

Worship Song – “You Never Let Go”

Endnotes

ⁱ From the song “Dear God” by Andy Partridge, © EMI Music Publishing

ⁱⁱ Greg Boyd, whchurch.org/sermons-media/sermon/imagine