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COMMUNITY GROUPS

RIVERS CROSSING CHURCH

Community Group Discussion Guide

April 16, 2023

Ask Me Anything Week #1 / Pastor Paul Taylor

How Could A Loving God Allow So Much Suffering?

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

1. Icebreaker Question | We're just beginning a sermon series titled Ask Me Anything: Bringing Clarity to Controversial Questions. If you could ask God anything and be assured to receive His answer, what would you ask?
2. When you have questions and/or wrestle with doubt – whether about your faith, God, church, the way the world is, etc. – how do you process those? Do you tend to feel comfortable or uncomfortable when questions arise?
3. The issue of suffering is the most frequently raised objection to the Christian faith. And whether directly or indirectly, we're all confronted with the reality of suffering. Suffering brings into question God's character and the extent of His power and authority. In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis summarizes this tension:
“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.”
Is this week's question – How Could a Loving God Allow So Much Suffering? – more intellectual to you (i.e., one you wrestle with mostly in your head) or more personal (i.e., one you feel mostly in your heart and soul)?

DIVING DEEPER

4. While all suffering is ultimately a result of sin – whether one's own sin, sin done by another person, or sin resulting from living in a broken world (Romans 8:20-22) – we need to be cautious when making an automatic link between a specific sin and a specific experience of suffering as a judgment from God.
“We are tempted to believe that suffering is a punishment for sin. But the Bible is clear that – while sin and suffering are clearly connected in a universal sense, and living in rebellion against God can cause us heartache now – the amount of suffering a person endures is not proportional to his or her sin. The Old Testament book of Job dramatizes this point. Jesus reinforces it.” – Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity*
John 9:1-3 (NIV) – ¹As he [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His 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.”
 - a) How would you explain the connection between sin and suffering?
 - b) If God is sovereign (i.e., supreme in His power and authority), we have to wrestle with the question of why God would allow sin – and thus suffering – to enter the world. How would you answer this question? How might Jesus' exchange with His disciples in John 9 shed light onto God's purpose(s) in allowing suffering?

5. Through the suffering of losing their brother Lazarus, Mary and Martha learned to fully embrace who Jesus is – “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25-26). As Pastor Paul taught, Jesus used this instance of suffering to teach Mary and Martha to cling to and trust in Him, even in the face of death. One of the most profound teachings of the Bible is that God works through suffering. Read the following Bible passages and quotes together and discuss the corresponding questions.

1 Peter 1:3-9 (NIV) – ³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Hebrews 12:7-11 (NIV) – ⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Romans 5:2-5 (NIV) – ²...And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Genesis 50:19-21 (NIV) – ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

“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... No doubt pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to a final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.” – C.S Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

“There is no doubt that millions of Christians all down the centuries have become more Christ-like through suffering. I know of many who have an almost ethereal beauty about them, refined through pain. In fact those who have experienced more of the love of God than anyone I have ever met have also endured more suffering. When you crush lavender, you find its full fragrance; when you squeeze an orange, you extract its sweet juice. In the same way it is often through pains and hurts that we develop the fragrance and sweetness of Jesus in our lives.” – David Watson, *Fear No Evil*

- a) From these Bible passages, how does God work in our lives through suffering?
Would you consider this work to be an act of God’s love toward us?

b) Have you personally experienced God working in your life through suffering? If so, describe what that looked like and how it affected you. How has this suffering shaped your relationship with God and how you view others?

6. In the midst of our suffering, the Bible provides us two incredible truths/promises – 1) God doesn't just know about our suffering – He's suffered Himself and 2) If we've placed our faith in Jesus Christ, we have the hope of eternal life in heaven.

Isaiah 53:3-5 (ESV) – ³He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

Romans 8:18,35-39 (NIV) – ¹⁸I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us... ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NIV) – ¹⁶Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

How do these two truths reshape our perspective when it comes suffering? What have these truths meant to you in seasons where you've walked through suffering?

TAKING IT HOME

7. In his booklet *Searching Issues: Why Does God Allow Suffering*, Nicky Gumbel provides the following questions we can ask ourselves when responding to suffering:
- Is this suffering a result of my own sin? If so, ask God to reveal that to us.
 - What is God saying to me through this suffering?
 - What does God want me to do in light of this suffering?
 - How can others in my life support me during this suffering?
 - How can I hold on to hope and come back to the cross of Christ?

If you're experiencing suffering, which of these questions do you need to lean into? How can your Community Group best support and/or pray for you?

8. How can we care for others in our life who are suffering? How might we discern when simply to be present without words and when to share encouragement?

Job 2:16-18 (NIV) – ¹¹When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. ¹²When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. ¹³Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Romans 12:15 (ESV) – Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

PRAYER REQUESTS

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RIVERS CROSSING - THINGS TO KNOW

1. Man Day | Get ready for a day of fun as Rivers Crossing hosts Man Day: A one-day men’s event with team-based challenges, awesome prizes, food, and community! Man Day is Saturday April 29th from 9am - 1:30pm at YMCA Camp Kern. Learn more and register at <https://riverscrossing.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/1660462>.
2. Alpha at Rivers Crossing | Whether you’re skeptical, exploring faith, or wrestling with doubt, Alpha is a safe place for you to bring your questions and connect with others. Our next Alpha class will take place this summer, from June 15th – August 3rd. Learn more about Alpha and register for the summer class at the link below: <https://riverscrossing.com/alpha/>
3. Preteen Extreme | Who is ready to Race to the Extraordinary this summer at Preteen Extreme? Sign your preteen up now for an experience they’ll remember for a lifetime at Preteen Extreme on Saturday, June 17th at Camp Kern. They will conquer an obstacle course, seek out the cross, work together to canoe, aim at archery, grow in community with their small group, and much more! Learn more and register at <https://riverscrossing.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/1639769>
4. New Community Group Leaders | Interested in leading your own Community Group or have anyone you believe would make a great Community Group leader? If yes, we’d love the opportunity to connect with you or them and share more about our vision for groups at Rivers Crossing. We’re always looking to create more space for people to experience and grow in the extraordinary life together!
New Group Leader Interest Form:
<https://riverscrossing.churchcenter.com/people/forms/414625>.
5. 2023 RC Students Summer Camp | Next summer (June 19-24, 2023), RC Students is going to Eagle Sky of the Ozarks for camp! We truly believe that Summer Camp is one of the best ways for your Junior High or High School student to get connected in RC Students. They’ll build lasting bonds with other students and their leaders that will continue throughout the year. Most importantly, your student will have a week to focus on connecting with Jesus in a new way. Learn more and register below: <https://riverscrossing.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/1450605>