

My friend Tom became one of the first elders at a church we planted in California many years ago. We have stayed in touch very sporadically. Last week, after he saw a picture that Jana posted on Facebook in light of our 38th anniversary, he sent me a note. Here is what it said...

Pain and suffering are common to all. Every week, if you listen closely, you can hear the groans in here. You are sitting near a woman who has lost a loved one or a man who has been diagnosed with cancer. Someone near you is battling an addiction or recovering from the pain of divorce. Last week our staff was grieving with a former staff member whose first-born infant child died suddenly of a seizure. Our elders have been praying for Jim Nethery who has chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy, which is causing ongoing nerve damage to His arms and legs and even his tongue making it harder to talk. *"I have to say that God has been the strength of my mind and heart during these days. My family and friends are really there. This is a lot of tough information. I am still unsolved. Really, what can I do? I'm not going to get philosophical. I'm weary of that, but I will trust God and stay at it. Please, continue to waft your prayers Godward as we live, breath, and have our being ... in Him."*

There is no escaping it. Life is pain. Why? Why does God allow pain and suffering? When you approach the problem philosophically you encounter an apparent dilemma: EITHER GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL OR GOD IS GOOD BUT HE CANNOT BE BOTH.

If God is all-powerful but He must not be good. In other words, if He is powerful enough to prevent my pain and my suffering then why doesn't He? Maybe He's not good.

On the other hand, if God is good then He must not be all-powerful. This is the conclusion of Rabbi Harold Kushner who wrote the book, *"Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People?"* After the death of a child Kushner decided that if he had to face the fact that God was either all-powerful but not kind, or thoroughly kind and loving, but not totally powerful. Kushner decided he would rather compromise God's power and affirm his love. "God and I came to an accommodation with each other a couple of decades ago, where he's gotten used to the things that I'm not capable of and I've come to terms with things he's not capable of."

A false dichotomy is a logical fallacy that presents two options in such a way that if one of them is true the other is necessarily false. But there is a third option – God is all-powerful and all good AND uses pain and suffering to accomplish His greater purpose. In fact, APART FROM THE LOVE AND REDEMPTIVE PURPOSE OF GOD PAIN AND SUFFERING ARE MEANINGLESS.

What could that purpose be? Why on earth does God allow pain and suffering? Let's approach the question theologically.

1. Pain and suffering remind us of the unintended consequences of rejecting God. The biblical narrative explains that when our ancestors, Adam and Eve, rejected God's clear instructions, they suffered the consequences. As a result, man is separated from God, things are not the way they're supposed to be. We have just lived through the bloodiest century in human history. This world is cursed. Human life is not, and will never be "perfectable-so-long-as-we-get-our-politics-right." Some hold on to the sleepy notion that the world is getting better so God uses pain and suffering to wake us up. "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." C. S. Lewis

2. Pain and suffering make us homesick for Heaven. If we never experienced pain and suffering we might confuse this earth with the new heavens and the new earth promised in the Bible. There is a place where things ARE the way they're supposed to be. In our first message in the Explore God series we considered Paul's words in Romans, "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope, that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Ro. 8:20-21. Our present bondage to corruption will result in the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

3. Pain and suffering prove our faith which is precious in the sight of God. My friend Tom said, I never questioned the Lord, nor asked why, nor was I angry because I know He is loving and perfect in all His ways – He gives life and takes life. I knew she was blessed to now be in His presence as she waits for a heavenly body at resurrection day. The scripture that I asked a pastor friend to use for the message at Jaymie's memorial service (and that I had engraved on her grave marker), is from 1 Pe. 1:3-9: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls."

Peter wrote these words while Christians were being blamed for the burning of Rome. The reign of Nero led to intense persecution. Some Christians were skinned alive while others were covered with pitch and used as living torches to light the imperial gardens at night. What do you say to these people? You remind them that this is not the end of the story. APART FROM THE LOVE AND REDEMPTIVE PURPOSE OF GOD PAIN AND SUFFERING ARE MEANINGLESS. God has a redemptive purpose for our pain and suffering. No one can say it is good. Yet God will take what is evil and make it good.

Let me offer one more answer to the question, “Why does God allow pain and suffering?” “I do not know.” God alone knows. We cannot unscrew the inscrutable. We will not accomplish what has not been accomplished in 3,500 years. But the nature of God helps us when we can’t understand. This is the pastoral answer to the question.

I can still recall those early morning trips to the hospital emergency room with my oldest child. Jana would usually stay with the other two kids while I put Erin in the car. I prayed and she wheezed all the way to the hospital. Our pediatrician would meet me there and I would have to hold her down as he administered a shot of epinephrine to open her lungs. She fought and screamed trying to escape the sting of that needle and I could see the fear in those big brown eyes. She did not understand why her daddy would do this to her. How could she know that we were possibly saving her life? Here’s the crazy thing. She still came to me and held me after the shot. Wouldn’t you run from someone who had just inflicted you with pain and suffering? You would if you were not sure about his nature. She knew that her daddy loved her more than life itself. So, even though she couldn’t possibly understand what was happening or why it was happening, she trusted her dad. There had to be an explanation for her father’s seemingly cruel behavior. And of course there was, and there is, but APART FROM THE LOVE AND REDEMPTIVE PURPOSE OF GOD PAIN AND SUFFERING ARE MEANINGLESS.

“We still do not know what the answer is. However, we do know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that He doesn’t love us. It can’t be that He is indifferent or detached from our condition.” Keller

The message that we have been given and give to the world is that God actually entered into our world to experience the pain and suffering we experience. Think about that. I don’t know of another religion that worships a God who suffers. Ours God suffers with us and suffered for us. Christianity is uniquely comforting because only the Christian God plunged into the suffering we experience. Maybe the most important question to ask in our pain is not “why” but “who?”

If you search for meaning in happiness then suffering destroys the meaning of life. But if you search for meaning in Jesus then you have a high priest who “although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.” Heb. 5:8-9

Lacy Martin and the shark...where was God in all of that?

Benediction – “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Jaymie and Tom lost 7 children to miscarriages, Jaymie lost her kidneys to lupus, she lost her hair more than once due to chemo, she was hospitalized more than 200 times yet remained sweet and loving and because she could still rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, knowing that the outcome of her faith was the salvation of her soul.

Hey Gary,

Congratulations on your and Jana's 38th anniversary, may the Lord grant you many more. By God's kindness He gave Jaymie and me 37 years of marriage, and bonded us tightly together after losing all of our children to miscarriage and almost losing Jaymie about 5 times to Lupus – But in His providence he took Jaymie home in June of 2013. We were sitting together in the front room and were getting ready to go to bed when she suffered a massive brain hemorrhage due to complications of Lupus. The emergency crew got her to the hospital very quickly, and I was expecting the doctor to tell me about the damage and recovery, but I was not prepared to hear that there was no chance of recovery. She was transferred to a specialist at a Walnut Creek hospital just to make sure, but the next day she breathed her last while I held her in my arms as I was kissing her, and as I was committing her soul to the Lord. Gary, I felt like I was standing in a field with a massive explosion in front of me and everything was laid waste, except I was still standing there with nothing – my world blew up. The delight of the end of the day after getting off work was to just be with Jaymie – and suddenly she was gone. She was my earthly rock, my go-to person for life's challenges. I won't sugar-coat it – the pain was/is brutal beyond words – a type of horror. Though I never grieved for Jaymie's death because she has transcended this brutal and painful world to be in the beautiful presence of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, but I was grieving the loss of my soulmate. I feared mental breakdown a few times after the first couple of months, and sometimes Gary the only prayer I could get out after on my knees crying was – Help.