

Do We Have to Wait Until Heaven?
Part 3 of "Crucial Questions the Church Needs to Answer"

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Why does God allow people to suffer?

That is, perhaps, the most commonly asked theological question. Non-believers often think that a tragic car accident means God is either not all-powerful or is not really loving.

Atheists claim that human suffering is evidence against the existence of God though they seldom explain how, without God, suffering could be anything but merely a natural occurrence.

Christians also struggle with how to answer this question. We do believe that God is all-powerful, and that he is perfectly loving. Why, then, does he allow his children to suffer. Christians frequently give one of three answers to that question:

1st Some people say it is our fault – a lack of faith on our part or some sin in our life is assumed to be the cause of our suffering.

I remember a conversation with one couple, dear fellow believers, who insisted that a Christian never needed to have health problems. I asked, "Well, what about when we die?" They replied, "Christians who have enough faith will die in their sleep at age 90 without ever being sick a day of their life." Well, that didn't quite happen for those folks or anyone else I know. Suffering seems to be a part of life for people who are far more devout and godly than I am.

A 2nd explanation is more plausible – Suffering is simply a result of living in a fallen world.

God created a world without pain or death; but because of human sin, starting with Adam and Eve, the world became very different. Only when Jesus Christ returns and rules will there be freedom from pain, tears and death.

These folks acknowledge that we sometimes bring suffering upon ourselves. However, much of it cannot really be traced to someone's

specific actions. Why one person gets cancer and another doesn't, why one individual is hit by a drunk driver while someone else is not doesn't really seem to correlate with how much faith someone has or doesn't have. This echoes what Jesus said:

Luke 13:4 – "Those eighteen that the tower in Siloam fell on and killed – do you think they were more sinful than all the other people who live in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as well."

Or, for example, when the disciples encounter a man who has been blind since birth. They ask Jesus:

John 9:2-3 – "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

That verse also points to the 3rd explanation, which I believe to be the best. Much, if not all, suffering has a redemptive reason.

In other words, God uses suffering to accomplish his purposes, which is always ultimately good.

Oh, certainly our bad choices sometimes result in bad experiences for us. And we, no doubt, live in a fallen world. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. Bad things happen to both good people and not-good people. Yet, because God is sovereign, remember he is the one who:

Ephesians 1:11b - ...works out everything in accordance with the purpose of His will.

We can be confident that...

Romans 8:28 NLT – God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

Though it usually doesn't look like it at the time, though we may never recognize these redemptive purposes in this life, the Lord will take all of our suffering and use it in a way that brings glory to him and is "ultimately" (that is the key word – meaning in the end), ultimately good for us as his children.

But that word "ultimately" is also the catch. It means that we will have to wait, wait until heaven before we are free from suffering. And waiting is not something most of us like to do.

In fact, I think it is only normal that we desire to experience blessings from the Lord in our lives now today. The thought that the Lord may allow us to go through years of pain, even decades of pain, before we experience the joy of heaven, just doesn't seem fair.

It seems like God, if he cares about his children, if he really loves us, would help us and relieve our suffering right now. Well, maybe.

All this is part of the "Already, But Not Yet" nature of God's kingdom. This is a very important part of what the New Testament teaches, but a part many Christians tend to ignore.

The details of this doctrine or teaching may seem a bit complicated, but the basic truth is pretty clear. *We already* experience some of the benefits of Jesus' kingdom. **Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has already defeated sin, death and the devil.**

Colossians 2:16 – (Jesus) disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.

At the same time, however, even though Jesus has won this victory, we have not yet experienced many of the benefits he has procured for us. **Or, as I sometimes remind you, "We ain't in heaven yet!"**

In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul talks about how we as Christians, and the entire creation, currently "groan" because of our suffering, as

we wait for the redemption of both our bodies and the natural world around us.

The most common analogy used to explain this somewhat paradoxical truth is D-Day, World War 2. The successful landing of allied troops in Normandy, France spelled the end of Nazi Germany. It was now basically inevitable that the allies would achieve victory.

In one sense, they had *already* won the war, but there were still battles to fight. It would be over ten months before the Nazis would surrender. Many would be wounded and killed during this time because the war was *not yet over*.

I also sometimes use the Battle of New Orleans as an analogy (not the Johnny Horton song, but the battle). It was fought by Andrew Jackson and American volunteers against British soldiers after the peace treaty of Ghent had *already* been signed. But that news had *not yet* reached anyone in that town called New Orleans.

Jesus has *already* defeated sin, death and the devil. Yet, we are *not yet* experiencing all the fruit, all the benefits of that victory. *We ain't in heaven yet!*

As a result, the Christian life is filled with many paradoxes – things which on the surface don't make sense, but when understood more deeply, contain powerful truth. Many of them are reflected in what the Apostle Paul writes in a couple of passages in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 4:8-10 – We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body.

He adds:

2 Corinthians 4:16 – Therefore, we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day.

Then he says:

2 Corinthians 6:8b-10 NLT – We are honest, but they call us impostors. We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.

I love verse 10 – “Our hearts ache, but we always have joy.”

Other versions say: “We are sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” If we asked Paul, “Which is it? Are you happy or sad?” – his response would be “both/and. I am happy because Jesus has *already* won the victory, and I am sad because we are *not yet* experiencing many of the benefits of that victory.”

Now, there are, as usual, ditches on both sides of the road. Theologians call these the errors of “over-realized eschatology” or “under-realized eschatology.” That simply means we either forget that many of the benefits of Jesus’ kingdom are not yet ours or we forget that many of the benefits of Jesus’ kingdom already belong to us.

I am a bit of both. Depending on the situation, I sometimes forget that Jesus has already won the victory, and I sometimes forget we ain’t in heaven yet. The key, I suspect, is to always remember that both are true. Let’s talk about how we do that in practical ways.

The 1st topic is physical health. Will the Lord always provide healing to those who have enough faith?

Well, I think the answer to that question is, “Yes.”

1 Peter 2:24 – He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

I do believe that part of the redemption Jesus provides through his atonement, his death on the cross, is healing for our physical bodies. The

question is *when* do we experience that healing? The answer the Bible gives is that some of it will be experienced now and some will be experienced in heaven.

Praying for those who are sick should be a normal part of our life together as a church.

James 5:14 – Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

And then we have this remarkable promise:

James 5:15 – Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well.

This is an *already* part of God’s kingdom. And there are many of you in this room who will testify you have experienced that healing in a variety of situations and in different ways. Some of your stories are pretty extraordinary, miraculous, where others are not nearly as dramatic. Yet, in each case, God brought healing to your body.

However, there are also plenty of cases when that doesn’t happen, when God doesn’t bring healing in this life. That is the *already, but not yet* of Jesus’ kingdom.

Some people experience physical healing here and now, while others experience healing only in heaven, and none of us experience permanent and total healing until heaven.

Revelation 21:4 – “...there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. (For) all these things are gone forever.”

But, Pastor Dan, if we had enough faith, wouldn’t we experience more healing? I don’t know. Maybe. Yet, I do know that even if our faith was much greater and more pure than it is, we would still get sick. Some of these illnesses would be very serious.

Unless the Lord Jesus returns first, all of us are going to die. And that death will almost always be because of some type of health problem. Our

bodies deteriorate. Or as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, they are wasting away. There is almost no one who dies in their sleep at age 90 without ever being sick a day in their life.

Perfect health was not something the Apostle Paul had. 2 Corinthians 12 talks about his “thorn in the flesh.” Biblical scholars are almost unanimous in their belief that Paul was referring to some type of physical ailment, perhaps a problem with his eyes. Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 12:8-9 – Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

Friends, that last sentence reminds us that God uses our weakness, pain and suffering to accomplish good things in our lives.

Now, I am not going to pretend I am a fan of pain and suffering. I would love to die in my sleep at age 90 without ever having been sick a day in my life! Yet, I suspect there are lessons the Lord wants me to learn which I can best learn, maybe only learn, through suffering.

A couple of weeks ago, Anne Graham Lotz learned that she has breast cancer. She responded to the news with these words, borrowed from the 19th century missionary Amy Carmichael: “*What fuel has the Refiner added to the fire as He works to reveal Jesus in and through me?*”

Ann believes the Lord will use her cancer to help her and the people around her *see Jesus more clearly*. That may happen through her healing on this earth or through her healing in heaven.

Relying on the Lord, on his grace and power, tends to happen much more frequently when we feel weak than when we feel strong. And it is relying on the Lord that will open up doors for us to see Jesus more clearly and enable us to help others see him more clearly.

Health problems also help us look forward to our eternal home in heaven.

One of the problems with which many Christians struggle is focusing exclusively on this life and ignoring the promises that God has given us of eternal life with him in heaven.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that the hope we have as Christians is never experienced completely in this life. In fact, he says, if it were not for the hope of the resurrection, the *not yet*, it would be foolish to be a Christian. The blessings of what we already experience in this life don’t always equal the suffering we go through for the sake of the Lord. But...the *not yet* of heaven *far outweighs* any suffering in this life.

1 Corinthians 2:9 – “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.”

Friends, the Lord desires that we experience and enjoy blessings he *already* has for us in this life, but he also wants us to patiently wait for the blessings that are *not yet* ours, but which will be experienced in heaven. That is true when it comes to physical health and in many other areas of life as well.

Perhaps the most important involves the struggle we as Christians have with sin. The Bible says that all of us, by nature and choice, are sinners.

Not only do we do things that are wrong, but we choose to rebel against God and his authority. Because of our sin, we all are deserving God’s wrath.

Romans 3:23 – All have sinned (that means every single one of us) and fall short of the glory of God.

Our actions and attitudes fail to meet the standard of holiness God has set.

Romans 6:23 – The wages of sin is death (meaning eternal death), but...the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, Jesus has paid the penalty for our sin. God promises that all those who believe in and trust in Jesus and what he has done for them will receive free and full forgiveness. In fact, that forgiveness includes not only a pardon for sins we have already committed, but also sins we will commit in the future.

Yet, that's the problem.

Even though we have experienced God's grace and forgiveness, we still commit sin.

We fail to love God and love the people around us as we should. And that, folks, is something that troubles us – at least it should. If we have experienced God's grace and forgiveness, we will naturally feel a sense of gratitude which grows into love, which gives us a desire to obey the Lord.

Plus, if we are truly a believer in Jesus, we have been regenerated and filled by the Holy Spirit, and he gives us a desire to avoid sin. Yet, the reality is that even as Christians, even after we have maybe been a Christian for fifty years, we are still sinning, pretty much on a daily basis.

Like the Apostle Paul (Romans 7), we find ourselves doing the bad things we don't want to do and not doing the good things we want to do. This is part of the *already, but not yet*. We *already* have the desire to live in a way that pleases God, but we do *not yet* have the ability to do this as consistently as we would like.

Now most likely, the sins with which you struggle are not robbing banks, getting drunk or having an affair. The sins with which most of us struggle probably include things like pride, lust, selfishness and greed. Yet, those attitudes are still wrong and still sinful; and until we are with the Lord in heaven, we will not be completely free from them.

Our current condition is described quite clearly:

1 John 1:8 – If we say, “We have no sin,” we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

One of the qualifications of being a Christian is to admit we sin.

1 John 1:9 – If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

That is the good news, the freedom from guilt and shame we *already* have through Jesus!

1 John 1:10 – If we say, “We have not sinned,” we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Now, even though we are not yet free from sin, we are not to be passive. We are to (Hebrews 12:14) strive to be holy, meaning to make a real effort to avoid sinful actions and attitudes.

We are called to (Romans 8:13) “put to death our sinful nature” or as the KJV says, “mortify the flesh” as we seek to overcome our tendency to sin. We do so knowing that by God's grace, through his Spirit, we *already* have the ability to avoid sinning in any particular situation. As the Apostle Paul tells us:

1 Corinthians 10:13 – The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

I think this means that it is always possible for us, as Christians, to do the right thing in a particular situation. We have the ability to do that. What we lack is the ability to do that consistently.

Yet, by God's grace, as we grow in our faith, as we become more and more the person the Lord has called us to be, we become more and more consistent in doing the right thing, speaking the right words, and having the right attitude. And then one day in heaven, we will truly be holy, as God is holy.

Friends, I believe one of the big problems in the church today is that many Christians don't realize the *already, but not yet* nature of Jesus'

kingdom. Some of us underestimate the *already* parts of the kingdom and fail to experience blessings the Lord wants us to have.

Others of us overestimate the *already* parts of the kingdom and become impatient and discouraged and even lose faith because our lives are not full of some of the blessings we desire.

May the Lord help us to realize both the *already* and the *not yet*. May he enable us to experience and appreciate all that he *already* has for us today through Jesus. And may he enable us to persevere, to not give up, and patiently wait for what is *not yet* ours, but what will one day surely be ours in heaven. Because one day, in heaven, there will be (Revelation 21:4) no more death, mourning, crying or pain, as the *not yet* becomes the *already* for all eternity!