

WHY DOESN'T GOD ANSWER OUR DEEPEST PRAYERS? DOES HE REALLY CARE? (JOHN 11)

Ted Turner is the multi-billionaire who created CNN and TBS. He became a very outspoken atheist in his 20's, but he was a very religious high schooler in his youth group. He even wanted to be a missionary. So, what changed?

Well, when he was 15 his younger sister, Mary, who was 12 at the time, contracted lupus – a degenerative tissue disease. She was in horrible pain and constantly vomiting, and her screams would often fill the house. So, Ted would come home and hold her hand, trying to comfort her. *He* prayed for her healing, but *she* prayed to die.

And after years of misery, she finally did. Ted's dad, Ed Turner, made the comment: "If that's the type of God He is, I want nothing to do with Him." And when Ted heard his dad's comment, he also walked away from his faith in God. He said, "I was taught that God was love and God was powerful, and I couldn't understand how someone so innocent should be *made or allowed* to suffer so."

And then on March 5, 1963, Ted's dad had breakfast with his wife, went upstairs, and placed a 38-calibre pistol in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. He was 53 years old. And that sealed the deal for Ted. Like his dad, he thought to himself: "If that's the type of God He is, I want nothing to do with Him."¹

You see, even for those of us who haven't walked away from faith in God – we've all gone through moments of doubt and disappointment when God didn't stop our painful situation. For example, C. S. Lewis, a famous Christian who was once an atheist watched his wife die a brutal and painful death from cancer. He later wrote...

"I can't understand why God is always there when things are going well... But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face... After that, silence... Why is God so present in our time of prosperity and so very absent in time of trouble?"² – C.S. Lewis ("A Grief Observed")

¹ Taken from http://www.kenauletta.com/2001_04_23_thelostycoon.html and <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1064962/9/index.htm>.
² C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1961), 17.

This quote never makes it on everyone's list of "favorite C.S. Lewis quotes." By the way, he made it through that horrible season of pain, and his faith was ultimately strengthened by it, but he articulates what many of us feel at some point(s) in our life.

So, the question tonight is: *"Why doesn't God just answer our deepest prayers? Does He not care when we hurt?"*

In fact, this is the question *everyone* should ask. And honestly, it would take a long time to answer properly. But tonight, let's begin the conversation by looking at one particular story about Jesus and three of His closest friends...

John 11:1–6 "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent to [Jesus], saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when [Jesus] heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were three of Jesus's closest friends. He spent time in their home and even used their house as a place to teach others (Luke 10: 38-42). But one day, Lazarus got sick – *really* sick. But they knew the Way Maker, the miracle Worker, so they weren't overly concerned. After all, they'd seen Jesus heal *thousands* of people. And if He healed complete strangers, surely He would heal one of His closest friends, right?

So, they sent Jesus a message in **verse 3**: *"Lord, he whom you love is ill."* And they expected Jesus to come right away. But notice what He does in **verses 6**: *"When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."*

How weird is that? Notice: John doesn't say, "Jesus loved his friends, but He was super busy with other things so He couldn't come right away." He also doesn't say, "Jesus did *not* love His friends, so He ignored their request." No, John says that because Jesus loved His friends, He didn't answer their request. In fact, Jesus intentionally waited until Lazarus was dead, and then He came.

What do we learn from this? Three things...

1. There are times that Jesus intends for us to suffer.

It's not because He *doesn't* love us but because He *does*. We may not understand it at the time, but there is always a purpose in the pain.

Illustration: Parent and child. There are many good reasons why a parent might allow their child to suffer. For example...

- If a child has a major health problem, the parent is more than willing to allow the pain of surgery and the suffering that comes with it.
- If a child has a tendency to play in the street, the parent would use some form of discipline (pain) that would motivate the child to stay out of harm's way.
- If a child has a cavity, a parent is more than willing to let the child endure the pain of a dentist.

Maybe you've had suffering in your life, and you've prayed really hard for God to take it away...

- Maybe somebody at school bullies you, and you've prayed that he would stop. But he hasn't.
- Or maybe your mom got really sick, and you prayed for her to get better. But she didn't.
- Or maybe you prayed and prayed that your parents would stop fighting, but instead they got divorced.

If God loves us and He really is in charge, then we think God should take all sad things away when we ask Him to. And sometimes He does. But sometimes He doesn't – just like when Mary and Martha called for Jesus and He didn't answer *when* and *how* they wanted Him to.

Notice what Martha says when Jesus finally shows up...

John 11:21-27 "Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

Notice: when Martha goes out to meet Jesus, she says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."

Martha's faith is amazing. She firmly believes that Jesus *will* raise her brother up one day in the future. But what she's really asking is: "Jesus, why won't you bring him back *now*? Why won't you help me *now*?"

Martha wants to have her brother back more than anything in the world. She's desperate. And she knows that Jesus could make her deepest prayer come true in an instant. But instead of giving Martha her wish, Jesus gives her something much better, which leads us to our second point...

2. Suffering reveals our misplaced focus.

You see, Martha wants her brother back more than anything in the world, but Jesus tells her that what she needs most is not her brother Lazarus. What she needs most is Jesus Himself. He *is* the resurrection. In other words, He *is* life itself!

What she needed most is *not* what Jesus could give her – she needed Jesus Himself. And suffering is the only thing that could reveal her misplaced focus.

Illustration: Like us, Martha viewed prayer like a vending machine. We make a request to God – like pressing the number on the vending machine for the thing we want most – and we expect it to drop into our hands.

And if God really loves me, He'll give me what I desire most! But, when we don't get what we ask for, we think the machine must be broken – prayer doesn't work, God doesn't care, or maybe He doesn't even exist.

But God is not a vending machine; He's a Person. He's not just the greatest gift-giver; He's the greatest *gift*! And He meets us most tenderly in our suffering. And in those times of suffering, He shows us where our focus has been misplaced.

Back to the story: When Mary (Martha's sister) shows up...

John 11:32-35 "Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the

Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴ And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus wept.

Why did Jesus weep?

- Because His friends were hurting. He genuinely loved these people.
- Because of all the suffering that sin has brought on His perfect creation.
- Because He was being blamed for the curse that we (mankind) brought on ourselves through our disobedience to God.

And then the bystanders blame Jesus as well...

John 11:36-37 "So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Even the bystanders could see how much Jesus loved Lazarus. But they also couldn't understand why a good and powerful God would allow His friends to suffer like this. The bystanders were missing one more important truth that we learn from this passage...

3. Our suffering is ultimately for God's glory and our good.

In **verse 4** Jesus says, *"This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* You see, we get so focused on the pain that we often miss what God is trying to accomplish *through* our suffering.

For example...

- **Suffering makes us more Christ-like.** The truth is, our character is shaped most effectively by *pain* not by *pleasure*.

1 Peter 1:6-7 "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary [NOTICE: temporary & necessary], you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

- **Suffering can rescue us from a dangerous path.** Throughout the Bible, God uses a range of discipline (suffering) to bring them back from a path of destruction. Of course, this does NOT mean that all suffering is directly related to a person's sin, but sometimes it is.
- **God uses my suffering for the good of others.** One classic example is the story of Joseph. Because God allowed Joseph to suffer many hardships for over a decade, he became a wise and compassionate leader who saved *millions* of people from starvation (Gen. 50:20; 2 Cor. 1:4).

But the greatest example of this is Jesus's death on the cross. He was falsely accused, given a corrupt trial, beaten and tortured, and publicly executed. But God used it to bring about a much greater good – the salvation of all who would receive Christ!

You see, these are the things that Ted Turner (and his father) never bothered to learn. Did you notice what he said – “*I couldn't understand how someone so innocent could be made or allowed to suffer so.*” Just because Ted couldn't *see* a good reason for her suffering, he assumed there couldn't *be* a good reason for it.

But, as we've learned in this passage...

- There are times that God intends for us to suffer, not because He *doesn't* love us but because He *does*. We may not understand it at the time, but there is always a purpose in the pain.
- Our deep disappointment and doubt in God shows that our focus is on the wrong thing. What we need most is *not* what Jesus can give us or fix for us. What we need most is Jesus Himself! And suffering is often the only thing that can reveal our misplaced focus.
- Our suffering is ultimately for God's glory, our good, *and* for the good of others. If God can take the greatest evil in the world (the death of His Son) and use it for good, can He not also use your suffering for good?

Small Groups