

INTRODUCTION:

Let's be honest. "It seems that we live in a crazy world, that we are surrounded by things that make no apparent sense. Murders, rapes, child abuse, disease, war, famine, crime, divorce, death, pain, corruption, natural disasters and a host of other things swirl around us continually ... Why does God allow it? ... Atheists are not the only ones asking 'Why?' Job asked 'Why?' The psalmist repeatedly asked "Why?" Even Jesus was so deeply moved and troubled by death and people weeping over it that He Himself wept. So why is the world so full of pain and suffering? Why didn't God create the world so these things had no place in it?" (John Clayton adapted).

DISCUSSION:

1. He did. The garden of Eden was heaven on earth.

2. Human beings brought pain and suffering into the world, not God. The Bible is the story of how man by sin changed earth from a paradise to a place of pain and suffering, and how man by God's grace can now use this pain and suffering to regain in heaven the paradise he lost on earth.

3. We deserve far worse, but by His grace can obtain far better.

A. Luke 13:1-5; Romans 3:9, 23; 6:23A.

1) Most of us use the wrong standard to determine goodness. We are like prisoners who try to make themselves feel better by saying, "Well, at least I'm not a child molester." Maybe not, but they deserve to be in jail just as much as a child molester. Luke 18:9-14.

2) God is the proper standard by which to judge our goodness, not other people, and by that standard we are all wretches. Luke 5:8; Isaiah 64:6A; Romans 7:24.

3) What's surprising is not that we have to endure pain and suffering, but that we do not have to endure more of it than we do.

4) The question should never be "Why me?" but always "Why not me?"

B. Heaven is worth whatever pain and suffering we must endure to obtain it. 2 Co 4:16. Regardless of what happens, our songs should always be, "God is so good" and "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

4. While pain and suffering are unpleasant, they are not inherently evil. They can and should be blessings not curses.

A. God allows us to endure the pain and suffering of our own sin to warn us that sin is a problem that needs our immediate attention.

1) If we have appendicitis, pain and suffering are not the problems. Rather, they are blessings that warn us that we have a problem that needs our immediate attention. If we had appendicitis without pain and suffering, we might not know anything was wrong until our appendix burst and it was too late to do anything about it.

2) While unpleasant to take, Adam and Eve's shame, banishment from the garden, pain in growing food, and suffering in childbirth were curatives, medicines that were good for what ailed them, blessings not curses.

3) If everyone would practice the fruit of the Spirit, no one would experience pain and suffering. Temptation would have no power and death would have no sting. It would be congrats, onward and upward, see you soon—just inside the gate!

B. God allows Satan and his servants to cause pain and suffering within limits when He hopes it will serve His purposes not theirs. 1 Corinthians 10:13; Job 1:20-22; 2:9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. How can He do this? Because pain and suffering are morally neutral. It is how we respond to pain and suffering that dictates whether they are a blessing or a curse. Otherwise, how can we explain Haman's sorrow and Paul's joy? That the greatest periods of spiritual growth and development occur when God's people endure pain and suffering?

C. God sometimes causes pain and suffering in hopes of preventing greater pain and suffering.

1) We sometimes we need pain and suffering to spiritually grow. Hebrews 12:5B-6. Satan will not cause pain and suffering if he does not expect it to serve His purposes. "The alleged Christianity of so many church members is so tepid that the wicked do not persecute it, but simply ignore it ... A time-serving, compromising, lukewarm Christian will never be persecuted because he poses no threat to those who are opposed to Christ and his teaching" (Tolle). In such cases, God may cause pain and suffering when He expects it will serve His purposes. No loving Father would do otherwise and no wise child would have their father do anything less. Hebrews 12:7-11.

2) God causes pain and suffering:

a. Generally. Ecclesiastes 9:11-12.

b. Specifically. John 9:1-3. No one was blind in the garden of Eden and no one will be blind in heaven. But if God causes blindness to help people get to heaven, He is not unjust and those who endure the pain and suffering are privileged to do so.

5. How would we do it?

"I would issue a challenge to those who feel that God should have created a better world: how would you design such a world? What would you do that would be different than what God has done? Someone will say, 'Well, I'd create a world with no war!' That is a marvelous idea, but how would you do it? Would you cause anyone who picked up a weapon to die? Would you cause anyone who thought a violent thought to drop dead? Would you destroy any religious or political system which in any way involved force to promote its ideology? Would you make men's minds so that they could not think a violent or destructive thought? I would suggest to you that to eliminate war, you would have to eliminate man's ability to plan, create, reason or advance!!! As long as man can dream, create, design and imagine, the potential for bad things to happen is there!!! Only if man becomes an android—like a robot or puppet, incapable of engaging in evil or advancing in good—can one conceptualize a world without the potential for war.

When one really gets down to basics, everything positive in our existence is dependent upon our ability to choose. Love is only possible because we have the choice of not loving. If there was no choice, love would be impossible. Doing something nice to someone only has meaning because we have the choice of not doing something nice. Giving only has meaning because we have the option of not giving. Every act we do consciously has meaning because we have the choice of not doing what God has told us to do. The admonition of work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12) has special meaning because it is our choice as to whether we wish to follow God's plan or not.

At this point, another principle comes into play. In Galatians, we read, 'Every man shall bear his own burden ... Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' The meaning of the passage is clear. If we jump off a bridge, we are going to hit the bottom. If someone pushes us off a bridge, we are still going to hit the bottom. One might say, 'Well, why doesn't God intervene in these cases? Why doesn't God catch the person who falls or jumps and prevent the damage from occurring?'

What kind of a world would it be if such a plan were in effect? It might sound beautiful at first glance, but if you keep thinking, you will see that the end result would be very negative. Any consequence of anything we did would be good. Nothing we ever did would be wrong or bad, and there would be no need of improvement. No building would be built so poorly that it would collapse because God would always repair the damage. No one would need to do a good job of flying or building a car because God would prevent all adverse consequences. No marriage would be special and no one would need to make an effort to bring joy and beauty into someone else's life because any bad things that might happen would be prevented. No one would need to worry about fixing a meal properly because food poisoning or special needs would not exist. No doctor would need to worry about his competency or surgery because God would rectify all his mistakes. We would live in a boring, meaningless haze of indifference. In cultures that have become reasonably affluent and successful, that attitude and climate has in fact developed. Many of our problems in the United States today and all our apathy and indifference in the Church is related to this very situation" (John Clayton).

APPLICATIONS: We must ...

1. Trust God. It is the height of human presumption to defiantly question God's judgment. Job 38:1-4; 40:1-4; 42:1-6.

A. Job never learned why he endured pain and suffering. Rather, he learned that he did not need to know, that he just needed to trust God because whatever He does is always for the highest possible good.

B. "Prayer Of The Handicapped. I asked God for strength, that I might achieve, I was made weak, that I might learn to obey ... I asked for health, that I might do greater things, I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy, I was given poverty, that I might be wise ... I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men, I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God ... I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life, I was given life that I might enjoy all things ... I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men most richly blessed" (Keller).

2. Take response-ability for our state of mind. Philippians 4:4, 10-13. "As Eleanor Roosevelt observed, 'No one can hurt you without your consent' ... It is our willing permission, our consent ... that hurts us far more than what happens to us in the first place. I admit this is very hard to accept emotionally, especially if we have had years and years of explaining our misery in the name of circumstances or someone else's behavior. But until a person can say deeply and honestly, 'I am what I am today because of the choices I made yesterday,' that person cannot say, 'I choose otherwise'" (Covey). "I'm a full-time nurse to the most miserable, ungrateful man you can possibly imagine. Nothing I do is good enough for him. He never expresses appreciation; he hardly even acknowledges me. He constantly harps at me and finds fault with everything I do. This man has made my life miserable and I often take my frustration out on my family. The other nurses feel the same way. We almost pray for his demise. And for you to have the gall to stand up there and suggest that nothing can hurt me, that no one can hurt me without my consent, and that I have chosen my own emotional life of being miserable – well, there was just no way I could buy into that. But I kept thinking about it. I really went inside myself and began to ask, 'Do I have the power to choose my response?' When I finally realized that I do have that power, when I swallowed that bitter pill and realized that I had chosen to be miserable, I also realized that I could choose not to be miserable. At that moment I stood up. I felt as though I was being let out of San Quentin. I wanted to yell to the whole world, 'I am free! I am let out of prison! No longer am I going to be controlled by the treatment of some person'" (Covey).

3. Anticipate and prepare for suffering.

A. God warns us that we will have pain and suffering. If we haven't had it yet, we will. It's just a matter of time. Eccl 7:14.

B. Yet, many people live in denial. "Living life is a lot like running a race that includes hurdles. Some people expect life to be easy and smooth. When they encounter a hurdle, they become surprised, angry, or fearful. They don't think they should be expected to deal with such things. So they wait around for someone to remove the obstacle, they try to find shortcut around it, or they simply give up and stop running. And during the process, their attitude gets worse and worse" (Maxwell).

C. We must anticipate and answer the questions we will ask when we suffer. Examples: How will I react if I lose a loved one? What will I do if I get cancer? Why did God not answer my prayers the way I wanted Him to answer them?

D. We will only react then as well as we prepare ourselves to react now.

4. Keep perspective.

A. Even when bad things happen, we are abundantly blessed, we still have ample reasons to rejoice. "When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed ... ;" Romans 8:28.

B. I don't mean to be insensitive, and I am just as guilty as anyone, but some of us, if not most of us, need to quit whining—things aren't nearly as bad as we think they are or as they could be.

C. "Dear Mom,

Since I have been away at college, one full semester, I think it's time I bring you up do date as to what is going on. Shortly after I arrived at college, I got bored with dormitory life and stole fifty dollars from my roommate's purse. With the money, I rented a motorcycle, which I crashed into a telephone pole a few blocks from the dorm.

I broke my leg in the accident, but I was rescued by the young doctor who lives upstairs in the apartment house on the corner. He took me in, set my leg, nursed me back to health, and thanks to him, I'm up and around again.

We wanted to let you know that we're going to be married as soon as possible. Unfortunately, we're having some trouble with the blood test—they're not sure what the disease is, but it keeps showing up in the test. We hope to get that worked out quickly so that we'll be married before the baby arrives. Shortly thereafter we will all be home to live with you and Dad. And I just know you will learn to love the baby as much as you love me, even though the baby's dad is a different religion and wants us to convert. Please understand, the only reason we're coming back home to stay is that my husband-to-be got tossed out of medical school because he was too busy taking care of me to complete his work.

Really, Mom, I didn't steal any money or rent a motorcycle or hit a telephone pole or break my leg. I didn't meet a young doctor. There's no disease and I'm not expecting a baby. And I won't be coming home to live with you and Dad either. However, I am getting a D in algebra and an F in geology, and I just wanted you to keep these grades in their proper perspective!" (Maxwell).

5. Be thankful. 1 Th 5:16-18. "Why must there be suffering, sorrow, heartache, death, even among God's own children? ... Suffering keeps this world from becoming too attractive. Though our dwelling places here may have more permanent foundations than the Bedouin tents of our father Abraham, we are reminded that we are no less pilgrims and strangers (1 Peter 2:11.) Woe to the man or woman whose life here on this earth is so pleasant that he forgets about heaven. But the affairs of this life are so ordered that this world soon loses its attraction. Most young people would like to live forever but by the time a man reaches his three score and ten he is usually happy he has been able to endure one life and is ready for something better. This world is too full of pain, grief, and heartache to be very pleasant or attractive for very long" (McWhorter).

CONCLUSION:

As I have gotten older, I have lost my hope that this world will ever substantially or permanently change for the better. I have come to see what the preacher long ago taught us in the book of Ecclesiastes. As a result, I no longer strive to make the world a better place, but to get people to a better place. I'm so thankful that through pain and suffering I have come to realize that this world is not my home, that I'm just a passing through, that My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue, that angels beckon me from heaven's open door, and that I can't feel at home in this world anymore.