

Why? Do the Innocent Suffer? (part 2 of 4)

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Genesis 1: 27-28 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." This is the Word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God. Amen.

You remember each one of you, as to exactly where you were 10 years ago. A September morning, and you heard the news. Planes hijacked, planes crashed in buildings and fields. It was difficult for us to fathom the extent of the damage and the resulting way in which normal before 9/11, had changed everything. I heard a man say in line at the hardware store that day, "How can you still believe in God when you witness something like that?"

This week a family in Bastrop lost their home to drought propelled wild fires. They said, "Wonder what it was we did to deserve this punishment?"

The young wife passed away and the friend says to the deceased's family members, "It must have been God's will."

If you have ever wondered why the innocent suffer, then you are in a community of thoughtful people who wrestle with these kinds of questions.

We have notions as to how God is to act in life. Particularly in our lives. When God doesn't meet my expectations or yours, we can become disappointed, disillusioned, angry and confused. The Bible is clear as to what the focus is. The message of the Bible is not that those who believe and do good will **not** suffer. In a close reading of the Bible we understand that the Bible is a book about God's love and about people who refused to let go of their faith in the face of suffering. Faith, hope and love. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Stories abound in the Old Testament about suffering and the likes of leaders like Moses, Saul, Job, and David. We read the New Testament and read about disciples, followers of Christ and Christ himself who suffered. Christ says to his disciples, "follow me and be prepared to encounter hardship, trouble and persecution because of what you believe." The Bible is not about a life of bliss; it is about dogged faith of those who trust in God despite suffering, and the comfort and strength they hope to find in the face of suffering.

Today we think about innocents on planes, in buildings, and first responders who were merely going about their business and were killed. I heard a man tell a friend that the loss of a young beloved cousin happened for a reason. What that means is, "we hope God has a plan and we can't see where it is going, just trust God."

But that means that every tragedy is God's will, and God caused it to happen to you. If someone is murdered, is that God's will? For a young person to suffer a head injury on the football field? God's will? For thousands to die of disease and starvation daily? God's will? No.

Three basic ideas help us understand suffering that occurs in the world.

1. **God gave us dominion over the earth.** We are in charge and we are responsible. Natural laws like gravity, high and low tide, changing of the seasons are laws that govern our world and are predictable. We have brains and intelligence and conscience that allow us to know right from wrong.

The Law and Prophets were sent to humanity and then Jesus, the Word made flesh. Christ teaches and shows us God's will for humanity which is to love others, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and to forgive others. But even with Christ given to us, we still have ruling dominion over the earth, and that occurs through God's people. God calls you and you and me, to go to the Food Bank and sort canned goods. God calls us to write a check to missions, to sit with a child and tutor them in math or reading. God calls us to care for the ill, to speak words of encouragement to those in need.

2. The second idea we need to address in understanding God and suffering is that to be human **we have the ability to CHOOSE right and wrong.** Animals are instinct driven, yet we can opt to pursue various courses of action, because we have freedom to choose our own free will. In Genesis 2: 16-17, God gave Adam and Eve freedom to eat of any of the trees in the Garden. But they were to avoid the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We know the story, they opted, and they chose to disobey God. Free will given from God is integral to our humanness.

3. The third idea is that we have a **tendency to be engaged in things other than God's will.** Call it sin. Missing the mark, getting off in the weeds, straying from the straight and narrow.

If you have ever been around a person who has "new car fever" you can identify. They can convince themselves they "just have to have that new car!" The world beckons to them, "you'd look great in that new seat, new shiny paint job. You owe it to your self. You work hard, you deserve it." And etc, and on and on.

Just as we hear the voice of the world in many choices in the world today, so Adam and Eve chose to eat from a tree they were told not to. It's easy for us to find ourselves drawn to the things that will bring us, or others pain, and we can be swayed from God's path. We wind up worshipping the idols of sex, money, power, prestige, and success.

When we misuse our gift of self will or freedom of choice. It can often lead to suffering. Hang on to these three ideas and I want to address three categories of suffering.

1. **Natural Disasters.** In the last two weeks we have encountered wild fires in Texas, tropical storm flooding in New England, and tornadoes spawned by a hurricane in the Atlanta region. Many folks see tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods as God's acts of disaster. How many of you hoped that we'd get some rain from the hurricane? Yet we knew that coastal dwellers might die or be flooded out and lose everything. When humans get involved in forces of nature there can be death and suffering.

But we also know that in the suffering, God does send others to provide housing, care, food. FEMA, Red Cross, Salvation Army and our own UM UMCOR provide aid to other humans in

need. We assisted with clean water in Africa, support the Methodist Mission Home for unwed mothers in San Antonio, and help support the Food bank and schools with Change for Children in Lubbock. We are called to be God's hands and feet and voice. God sends people as answer to prayers of others, to help others in need.

2. ***Suffering caused by human decisions is a result of misuse of our freedom***, or others freedom too often.

My three boys have opted to pursue different life careers and goals. One is an attorney; one joined the Army for four years and was in 15 months of combat in Iraq. One is a musician/ college student who has been in and out of college for several years. I tell them I love them, but they make their own choices, but I will always love them.

My high school friend David was a risk taker and it cost him his life. David was loud, funny and dove into a shallow pool that was marked with signs "NO Diving." He died after hitting the bottom of the pool. David's mom blamed God for David's death. Yet no one pushed him, no one challenged him, David dove in of his own accord.

Sept. 11, 2001. Some people made choices to hijack, and do harm. They opted to kill and destroy rather than try to build and grow. But there were other people who did their job. They answered the radio call and got in the police car. They heard the alarms sound and climbed aboard the fire truck and ambulance and headed to the World Trade Towers. Many lost their lives in attempting, in choosing to help others. Others volunteered from all over the country to work at Ground Zero. It is people who are the responders to battle tyranny, injustice, and violence. God calls humanity to stand for the innocent and fight back. God calls for people to hold fair trials, to bring evil to justice, to make a stand for good and truth. What do we hold onto in the midst of trial and suffering? Faith, hope and love?

3. Last is ***suffering caused by illness***. I got an unwelcome diagnosis of cancer and said "Doctor, is this really happening, how did this happen?"

If we understand that Christ died on the cross for each of us and our sins, we need to be cautious if we blame our illnesses on God. When I was in Tanzania last year, Dr. Guy Wells was on our mission team. He pointed out to me that the street kids we were working with had chronic malaria and cholera. You see it wasn't that God gave them this illness, it was treatable and Guy had the medication to treat it. His God given talent of being a healer, using his intellect and training for good, was God responding through a human to battle disease.

Sickness is not God's way. Jesus healed many sick people in his ministry. He did not make them sicker. Our bodies have great capability to heal. If you scrape your car door, it will not heal itself. Scrape your arm, it will heal. But we know that our bodies are not indestructible. Sickness and longevity takes their toll on each of us, and eventually our life on this earth will end. When you bring that child home from the hospital, when you see the niece or nephew, little sister or brother rejoice with the glow of discovering a butterfly, seeing or petting a horse for the first time, then you can see how God has created us to live lives of wonder and awe. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. (Psalm 139: 14)

Ronnie is a pastor, and a friend of mine. 15 years ago his wife was diagnosed with cancer. She fought bravely for 12 years and endured times of illness, times of remission, but she always had a kind and happy heart. Eventually she died from the reemergence of cancer cells and I spoke with Ronnie a while after she had died. He didn't blame God; he was angry which is part of the grieving and healing process. After a few years he and I talked at Annual Conference and he said that he came to realize that his wife was with God and he knew he'd see her again one day. He said the scripture that gave him assurance was Psalm 136:1, "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever."

As a Christian, I know that rejecting God does not change my situation. Blame laying does nothing to help me heal. The misconception of everything happens for a reason, or God is teaching you something, or you are not good enough, are all misunderstandings of how God works.

We understand that God gives us dominion over the planet. To be human is to make free choices. We have a tendency to stray from the path and we know that natural disasters are part of a nature that was broken at the time of Adam and Eve's choice to be disobedient.

Hear me people of God, God walks with each one of us through the fires and the floodwaters. God promises that "the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us." (Ro 8:18)

Ten years ago, the world changed. Lives changed. It would be easy simple to give up, be fatalistic, and to cry that God has not heard us. We know as people of faith that as long as there is sin in the world, as long as there are people who do not love others as they love themselves, there will be hurt in the world. There will be inequity, and pain. But we can't be consumed with hatred, anger, retribution or payback. You see we are a people even in the midst of trial and tribulation, in the midst of suffering and pain, we know as people beloved by God and as people who claim Jesus Christ as savior and redeemer that our suffering on earth is but a moment. It is but a blink of God's eye. Hear these words of grace and peace people of God,

Take heart- you are loved by God the creator.

Take hope-God sent his Son Jesus Christ to bring you salvation.

Take comfort-God through the Holy Spirit walks with you all of the days of your life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.