

Serious Answers to Hard Questions

Why Do the Innocent Suffer?

Frankton – 8/3/14

Scripture: Genesis 1.26-28

Proposition: God never said that following him would lead to no suffering

We are beginning a short series of four sermons that I have titled [SLIDE] “Serious Answers to Hard Questions”. And the series is really what the title suggests: well thought answers to important questions people have asked at sometimes difficult times in their lives. This week, we’re going to talk about why seemingly innocent folks suffer.

A woman looks up at the televisions screen to learn that a natural disaster has forced millions of people from their homes in an underdeveloped country. The camera shows great scenes of devastation. She says out loud, “How can anyone believe in God when you’ve seen something like this?” A man who lost most of his retirement due to the Great Recession of 2008 did not reject his faith, but asked God, “Why are you punishing me. I go to church. I pray. I serve others. And now my retirement’s gone. Why did you do this to me?” A young woman sits confused. Her husband died leaving her a single mom to care for two small children. Several Christian friends have suggested that she take comfort in the fact that this “must have been God’s will.” Far from comforting her, it leaves her angry, confused and disappointed with God.

Our anger, confusion and disappointment with God in the face of suffering or tragedy typically stems from our assumptions about how God is supposed to work. A lot of people assume that the Bible teaches that if we believe in God and try to be a good person, then God will take care of us and bless us and nothing bad will happen to us. That’s what some people take away from it, but they are wrong. The Bible does not promise that those who believe and do good will not suffer. In fact, [SLIDE] the Bible is largely a book about people who refused to let go of their faith in the face of suffering, sometimes immense suffering. Consider just a few stories from scripture. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. The Israelites spend 400 years being slaves to the Egyptians. Job’s life is all but taken away from him by Satan. Steven is stoned to death. Paul is often beaten and abused. Then there’s Jesus who is nailed to a cross. His disciples are nearly all put to death because of their faith. We are never promised that we will not suffer.

There are three basic truths that will provide the foundation for reconciling God’s goodness with the suffering we experience in our world. The first is that [SLIDE] God has given human beings managerial responsibility over this planet. The opening chapter of the Bible tells us that our universe is a product of God’s will. Our scientists help us understand the processes and the laws that developed the universe as we know it today (physics, quantum mechanics, etc.). But Christians believe that behind those process and laws is a mathematician, physicist, biologist, and artist – God. And God also created human beings and gave us the responsibility to manage and oversee his creation. Genesis 1.28 states: [SLIDE] *Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.* [1.28]

The second truth is this: [SLIDE] to be human is to have the ability to make choices. In this we are different from all the other animals who are driven by instinct alone. God gave us alone the

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ability to make choices. And sometimes those choices lead to pain and suffering in our lives or in the lives of others. We see this, again, in Genesis where God puts the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and tells Adam and Eve they can eat of any tree in the garden except that one. That one tree, the knowledge of good and evil, represents the freedom God gives human beings to choose God's way or another way. God deemed the ability to choose to be an essential part of human existence. God's decision to give us the ability to choose right from wrong is itself an expression of God's love.

And this ability to choose leads us to the truth foundation which is: [SLIDE] Human beings have a tendency to be drawn to things against God's will. In other words, we have a predisposition to sin. The Hebrew behind the word sin means to "stray from the path" or to "miss the mark." The path is God's path and the mark is God's will for humankind. Even the best of us human beings have something within us that draws us to stray from the path. Back to Adam and Eve. God tells them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the devil tells them its ok, that God surely wouldn't want them to miss out on such lovely fruit. So Adam and Eve rationalize sin and then eat the fruit of the tree and paradise is lost.

Adam and Eve's story is our story. Whether people take it literally or symbolically, the story points toward who we are as human beings. We find ourselves drawn to do those things that will bring us or others pain and are easily tempted to stray from God's path. This tendency toward sin leads to dictators and tyrants. It leads to spouses violating their marriage covenant. It leads to people worshipping idols like money, sex, and power. In the end, misusing our freedom and straying from God's path leads to pain for us and those affected by our actions. So, what God intended as a gift for us, our freedom, when misused, leads to suffering.

So now that we have these three truths forming a solid foundation, let's look at suffering and how we might now think about it in relationship to God's justice, mercy, and love. Some suffering is caused by [SLIDE] natural disasters: hurricanes, tsunamis and the like. Throughout most of history, these were seen as acts of God. Today we can look at them differently. We see earthquakes as the result of the earth's tectonic plates moving; a process that keeps the core of our planet from overheating. Monsoons that bring terrible flooding are part of the earth's system for cooling our atmosphere. These terrible things actually support the longevity of the planet. Knowing more about these natural disasters, we are no longer bound to believe that God sends earthquakes or floods. Likewise we understand why God does not intervene and stop these things from occurring – for to do so would ensure the destruction of our planet. If these forces strike in areas that are poverty stricken that they bring the greatest destruction. But, God didn't send such terrible devastation on the poor. God's provision for human beings who face these natural disasters is to send other human beings to provide care. When God wants to bring hope and help to people, God sends other people. Natural disasters and widespread poverty are calls to action. The question is, will God's people heed the call.

What about [SLIDE] suffering caused by human decisions? We all agree that sometimes, in our freedom to choose, we make decisions that negatively impact us and others. In spite of our bad decisions, God never takes from us the freedom to make decisions, nor does God miraculously deliver us from the consequences of our actions or the actions of others. The question I pose is this: What would it look like if God restricted our freedom so that tragedies didn't happen. If we have no choices, and we only do God's will, we cease to be human and become puppets playing

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life on a stage being manipulated by a puppeteer God. I don't think that is what we want. We humans value our freedom above practically anything else. But a part of the risk God took in giving us freedom is that we might misuse that freedom to do the very things that would break God's heart.

This line of reasoning we have been pursuing is the only one that makes it possible to reconcile the idea of a good and loving God with the atrocities humans have committed. God gives humans the responsibility to manage the planet, God gives us the freedom to choose God's path or turn away from him; we humans have a tendency to turn away. So that's how atrocities such as the Holocaust inflicted on the Jews by the Germans and genocide inflicted by Idi Amin on his fellow Rwandan people and all other human-based atrocities have come to pass. God allows us to manage the planet; he gave us the power of choice, and often humans make wrong choices.

So let's look at one more category: **[SLIDE]** Suffering caused by sickness. I never heard him express it, but when my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, I'm sure he asked God, "Why me?" Sometimes, we tend to think of illnesses as a punishment from on high. While God has the power to punish people this way, I suggest that if we take seriously the idea that Jesus bore on the cross the punishment for sin, then we should be very careful suggesting that God has made us sick. Sickness is not God's way. When Jesus walked the earth, he devoted much time and energy to healing the sick, not making people sicker for their sins. Our bodies are amazingly resilient. We think a car is great if we get ten years out of it. Yet our bodies last, on average, over 75 years. Our bodies also have the capacity to repair themselves. We get a cut on our arm and the body heals it. Try that with a car. You'll wait a long time for a car to repair the dent in its hood. However, our bodies are not indestructible. Disease and sickness, injury and death are all a part of having flesh-and-blood bodies.

Do we blame God for illness or do we, with the psalmist, look at our bodies and declare that we are **[SLIDE]** *made in an amazing and wonderful way.* [PS 139.14] Even when Alzheimer's riddles our brain or cancer riddles our body, we need to remember that God walks with us through the journey. Yes, we get angry. We may even yell at God, venting our frustrations. But it is interesting to me that even yelling at God is an act of faith. To shout at God requires that one believe in God. God is big enough to handle the anger that comes from our profound grief. And anger is a part of grieving. But we pray; and our family and friends pray. And soon the anger begins to diminish.

One final thought strikes me about people who reject God in the face of suffering. Rejecting God doesn't change the situation that has caused the suffering; it only removes the greatest source of hope, help, comfort, and strength we have. And that thought leads to one final thought: while Christianity does not promise that we will not suffer, it does promise that suffering will never have the final word. The Israelites were freed from slavery. Job's life is given back to him. And Jesus was raised from the dead. God does not bring unjust suffering on his children, but God came to earth in the form of Jesus and because he overcame the world, we can to. God will walk us through the fires and the flood waters. And God promises that **[SLIDE]** *Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.* [John 16.33]