

If God is Good, Why do Bad Things Happen

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Psalm 73

I recently read an online survey of people who said they used to believe in God but no longer do. They asked people, “why did you turn away from God and turn away from the Church?”

[SLIDE #1]

- **The church is too political**
- **The greed and hypocrisy of religious leaders**
- **Feeling un-welcome in the church because of their sexual orientation**
- **Having unanswered questions**

But the number one reason that people said they turned away from faith was suffering – their own suffering or the suffering of a loved one.

Some people mentioned infertility which God didn’t heal even though they felt they were put on Earth to have children. Others mentioned experiencing infidelity and divorce and that God didn’t save their marriages even though they prayed. We constantly hear about suffering in far away places like Ukraine or Israel. We read about famine again in the Horn of Africa and wars in Sudan. And we read about

suffering right here in America. Another church member gets divorced, a relative gets cancer, a loved one commits suicide. The suffering of a car accident that kills a loved one or leaves them disabled, losing a child to a miscarriage or disease. The suffering of going through chemo treatments with all the side effects. The suffering of the loneliness of a single person or divorced person, a widow or a widower.

Whenever we human beings suffer, whenever we don't experience healing or a happy end to a story, whenever our prayers go unanswered, the question of God's goodness comes to mind. "Why are you letting bad things happen, Lord, when you are good?"

The question I want to tackle today is this: "If God is Good, Why Do Bad Things Happen?"

[SLIDE #2] If God is good, why do bad things happen?

I know that for some of you, this is a very raw subject right now – you're personally experiencing real pain, real grief. You may be struggling with real doubts about God and His goodness this very day. I'd like to begin by asking all of us to pray for sufferers in our own midst. They we'll turn to God's Word for us today. Let's pray!

You know, suffering affects, or will affect, all of us. If you're doing well now, we know from life experience that at some point, everyone is going to experience loss

and grief and pain. No matter how many precautions we take, no matter how much we try to plan and save and exercise and eat right, no matter how careful we are, we know that we're always vulnerable. Even some of the wealthiest people in Southern California with great bodies and fabulous movie careers lost their homes in those terrible fires. Let's read Psalm 73.

[SLIDE #3] Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

[Ps 73:1-3 NIV]

This psalm is called a

[SLIDE #4] Psalm of Lament

Laments are everywhere in the Bible – in fact, there's a whole book of the Bible devoted to laments called Lamentations which some Christian traditions read during Holy Week, right before Good Friday when Jesus was nailed to a cross. Many of the psalms in the book of Psalms are prayers of lament. In fact, every prophetic book in the Old Testament except Haggai contains at least one lament. And Jesus, as the supreme example of the Righteous Sufferer, regularly prayed Psalms of lament. In fact, the words that Jesus spoke when He hung on a cross were almost entirely drawn from Psalms of Lament.

[SLIDE #5] Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? [Psalm 44:23-24 NIV]

[SLIDE #6] Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion? [Psalm 77:7-9 NIV]

How about when Jeremiah tells the Lord that “you are like a stream that looks promising but runs dry when you come to it!”

[SLIDE #7] Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? You are to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails. [Jeremiah 15:18 NIV]

The point of the hundreds of laments in the Bible is this – never allow your broken heart or your suffering to drive you away from God! Let your suffering be like a hammer that drives you like a nail deeper into God! You might say, “But God’s

failure to answer my prayers is precisely my problem! Why would I go to God now when He didn't answer my prayer for healing or protection that I prayed for a loved one? Or for myself? It's God who let me down! Why would I turn to God again? Why would I let my sufferings drive me to the one who betrayed me?" I can't come up with a better reason to turn to God, even when we're disappointed, than the really common-sense reason that John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace, gave.

[SLIDE #8] IMAGE and quote: John Newton

"If we are not getting much out of going to God in prayer, we will certainly get nothing if we stay away!" [John Newton]

Friend, if you're looking for an answer to prayer, the Lord is the only game in town! Pray even if your prayer sounds like you are complaining to God. When we pray, we're simply opening the door and inviting God into our pain, instead of slamming the door in God's face and suffering all alone. We have a choice in this unjust, fallen world. Our choice is not to avoid suffering. We will suffer! The only choice is whether we're going to suffer alone with a locked door in God's face, or instead choose to suffer with God as we open the door and invite Him in. Laments help us to do that.

Psalm 73 is a lament. Let's listen to this lament.

[SLIDE #9] Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.[Psalm 73:1 NIV]

This is a great statement of moralistic theology.

[SLIDE #10] Our belief in Moralistic Theology

Moralistic theology teaches that if you're a reasonably nice person, if you're reasonably kind, if you try your best to be a good person, if you mow your lawn and edge your yard, if you attend your kids' parent teacher conferences, if you give to charity and exercise and save for retirement and go to church and say your prayers – if you don't do anything really bad or really cruel, then life should go well for you and your loved ones should be safe from real harm.

Moralistic theology is what we parents teach our children. We say, "Listen, life is really clear. We often reap what we sow. If you study hard, you will probably do well on your test. If you sow kindness and goodness in your relationships, there will be lots of people who will want to be around you. If you're known to be a generous and loving person, you'll probably have many friends. If you know how to resolve conflicts and you're a forgiving and humble person, your marriage will generally be stronger. If you pray, you're going to see answers!

Moralistic theology is not just what we teach our kids as basic wisdom for doing life.

Moralistic theology is what prosperity churches teach. Obey God, believe hard enough, and God will always heal you, he'll always bless your finances, he'll give you the desires of your heart – a great spouse, the ability to conceive, a child who loves God, a great big house! So what's the problem?

[SLIDE #11] Our experience of life and moralistic theology

The psalmist goes on in the Psalm to address really common experience. There seems to be too many times when moralistic theology doesn't work. There seems to be too many exceptions to the idea that we always reap what we sow and that God is good and gives people what they deserve.

The psalmist said as he looked around at life, at his own life, and at the lives of the people around him, he almost fell into unbelief and a kind of nihilistic despair.

[SLIDE #12] But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. [Psalm 73:2 NIV]

What caused the condition of his feet almost slipping and his faith nearly collapsing? The bottom line is that his experience in the moment didn't square with what moralistic theology taught him! He felt his parents lied to him, or at least

didn't tell him the whole truth. He read all the prosperity teachers' books, he listened to their preaching on television, he was someone who tithed, served God, tried to obey, but wasn't experiencing any of God's blessing. Do any of you know this one? "I'm doing everything the preachers on TV tell one to do and it's still not working." The Psalmist felt exactly this way! Here's what we read in verses 13 and 14:

[SLIDE #13] Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments. [Psalm 73:13-14 NIV]

Now the psalmist doesn't tell us the nature of his problem. I think that's actually a really helpful thing because we fit our own experience into this Psalm. Maybe the problem that he had was a chronic illness, maybe he suffered from insomnia that went on and on and on, maybe he had pain every time he moved, his body ached. Have you ever wrestled with God's goodness simply because of bodily pain? I have. "Lord, you said you love me. The Bible teachers that you're good to all who turn to you in faith. I hear all this teaching in church about healing. It's nothing for you to stretch out your hand and heal the bulging disk in my back, or my migraines." For you maybe it's a kidney stone or chronic stomach problems. Fibromyalgia or arthritis or dementia. I just read a statistic that up to 2 billion people, nearly ¼ of the world's population, suffer from some kind of chronic pain.

If we read the whole Bible and not just wrench a few verses out of context, what we find is that there are many good, faithful people who suffered even though they loved God and prayed regularly. You would not get moralistic theology as the total explanation for life if you read the whole Bible. Because starting at the beginning of the Bible, we read about righteous Abel who was murdered, and Noah who was mocked, and Moses who had his life threatened, and David and Elijah who were persecuted by evil kings and Naomi who lost two sons and her husband in a really short time, and Jeremiah who was thrown in jail for speaking God's Word, to say nothing of the New Testament, where we find Stephen and James and Peter and Paul and Jesus, all of whom were martyred. Where did we ever get the idea that in this fallen, unjust world that does not operate yet according to God's perfect will or plan, where did we ever get the idea that if we were reasonably nice, and tried our best, we would not suffer? Certainly not from the Bible! From the beginning of the Bible to the end, we find stories of people who lived way better lives than me and you and who suffered.

As I read stories of good people in the Bible or throughout the history of the Church or around the world today who suffer, I think, "Lord, here's a woman or man who were so much better than me, and yet they suffered just like your Son, Jesus, suffered. And yet they continued to love you! If suffering is what you've got for me

in this period of my life, I want to walk thorough it just like Jesus and his faithful followers did.

But you know not only is the Psalmist struggling to understand why his own life was going so badly, he's struggling to understand why the lives of the wicked are going so well!

[SLIDE #14] The success of the wicked

As the Psalmist looks at the corrupt, at people who never give God a passing thought, people who never say thank you to God, but believe they're self-made men and self-made women, as the Psalmist looks at the arrogant, at the abusers, at the liars, at the total narcissist who never admits fault, who never repents, who never backs down, who always twists the truth, here's what he sees:

[SLIDE #15] For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity;

their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?”

The Psalmist does such a great job in describing the successful, ungodly person. He’s talking about the lewd, professional athlete who is sleeping with hundreds of women in dozens of cities. He’s talking about the athlete who can be accused of sexually harassing dozens of women and yet still gets a huge contract and a massive signing bonus. The Psalmist is talking about the arrogant businessman who never plays by the rules, the man who lies and cheats suppliers and stiffes workers and then declares bankruptcy. The Psalmist is talking about the influencers on TikTok or on Instagram, the people with great bodies who are prosperous and popular and fawned over and celebrated and photographed, all these people with perfect teeth and perfect complexions, but who are horrible to everyone who works for them. He’s talking about the dictator who orders the bombing of elementary schools and hospitals just because he doesn’t want to look weak.

And the Psalmist says, “What gives, God? These folks spit in your face, never ask for forgiveness, abuse people, yet you seem to bless them. Why are you not holding really wicked people accountable?”

And if this weren’t enough, the enemy is not through with us. He’s a combination puncher. Once he causes you to stagger with what you see, a lack of blessing in your own life, a lack of accountability in the lives of the wicked, he hits you with a third punch. The enemy’s goal is to knock you out completely. Here’s the third punch. On top of everything else, on top of all the unfairness that we experience, on top of the unfairness of watching people seem to get away with everything, the enemy whispers in our ear, “You can’t figure it out, can you? Maybe there is no justice, maybe there is no rhyme or reason, maybe everything is just random.”

Read verse 16 with me

[SLIDE #16] When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply

[Psalm 73:16]

As human beings, we have an insatiable desire in us to make sense of things, to bring order to our world, to try and figure out why something is the way it is. How did our child get so far out when they were raised in our home? Why did this terrible thing happen to such a great person? Why this loss, why this tragedy?

My favorite Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, in a fabulous book titled

[SLIDE #17] The God I Don't Understand

said this about our attempt to make sense of evil:

[SLIDE #18] We finite human beings cannot, indeed, must not “make sense” of evil. For the final truth is that evil does not make sense.

“Sense” is part of our rationality that in itself is part of God’s good creation and God’s image in us. So evil can have no sense, since sense itself is a good thing.

Evil has no proper place within creation. It does not intrinsically belong to the creation as God originally made it, nor will it belong to creation as God will ultimately redeem it. Evil is not there to be understood, but to be resisted and ultimately expelled. Evil was and remains an intruder, an alien presence...evil is beyond our understanding because it is not part of the ultimate reality that God

in His perfect wisdom and utter truthfulness intends us to understand.” [Christopher Wright]

In sum, the reason why you struggle to understand sin or corruption, or terrible tragedy is that evil ultimately does not make any sense! We cannot put order around something that is not created by God and will not exist in the coming Kingdom of God.

This doesn't mean that we're totally in the dark. Look with me again at verses 16 and 17.

[SLIDE #19] When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. [Psalm 73:16-17 NIV]

[SLIDE #20] Understanding Found in the Sanctuary

Notice, verse 17 does not say, “I didn't understand until I went into my study.” It does not say “I did not understand until I went to the library or the lab. I did not understand until I consulted with the experts. I did not understand until I took a psychology class or a sociology class or an anthropology class or a philosophy

class.” No, the Psalmist states, “I didn’t understand until I went into the sanctuary of God.” He said, “I was spiraling down until I entered the sanctuary of God.” What do we learn in the sanctuary of God? In the Psalmist’s day, the sanctuary of God would have been the Temple, where the priests offered sacrifices and taught God’s law. Today, the sanctuary would be the church, where the gospel is clearly proclaimed, where Christ – His sinless life, His perfect death, and His glorious resurrection – is preached. Today, the sanctuary is the church where the scriptures are opened up and explained.

What do we learn in the sanctuary? Two things, and I want to finish with these. First of all, we learn in the sanctuary that

SLIDE 21: We are not without hope.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul writes to Christian believers who have lost loved ones:

SLIDE 21: Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. [I Thessalonians 4:13 NIV]

Friend, whatever bad thing you're going through, if you have entrusted your life to Christ, this bad thing is not the end of the story! Whatever you're going through is not the end of the story! Whatever the world is going through is not the end of the story! We are not denying reality when we Christians say, despite everything, we have hope. We're embracing reality. But all of reality, including the fact that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead, and He will return to bring justice to this world.

Have you ever wondered how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and the Civil Rights movement that he led in the 1950s and 1960s, how they triumphed? Think about the odds that were against them. Their opponents had almost all the guns, and the police, and the judges and juries, and the jails, and the banks, and all the big businesses, and the newspapers, and all the education, and seemingly all the power, and yet, church-going Black folk in the South sang, "we shall overcome!" Were they just whistling past the graveyard? Just closing their eyes to reality? No! They sang "we shall overcome" because they knew a deeper reality. They were tapped into a greater power. They knew that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, was crowned as Lord in heaven, and was returning to judge the world. Either during this life or the next, there would be justice!

When we enter the sanctuary, we learn a second thing

SLIDE 22 We are not alone.

Pastor Tim Keller put it so well in his book, Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering.

SLIDE 23: “We may not know what the answer is, BUT we know what the answer is not. It can’t be that God doesn’t love us. It can’t be that He is detached or unconcerned about our condition. He took our suffering on Himself.” [Tim Keller]

Friend, you can be confident that whatever you go through or whatever you see that shocks your sense of justice, the Triune God totally understands how you feel. God the Son took on human flesh. He stepped into this world. He understands what it feels like to be rejected. He understands injustice. He understands physical pain. He understands betrayal. He understands loneliness. He understands what it feels like to be lied about, and have your words twisted. Jesus experienced all of these things. He even experienced the loss of His relationship with the Father. From the cross He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus understands what it feels like to lose a family member.

And God the Father also understands what it feels like to lose a family member because God the Father watched His Son die on a cross. Jesus was an utterly good

man, completely righteous, completely holy, and He died unjustly. God watched His Son die, in fact He sent His Son to die because He loves us.

And God the Spirit also understands our suffering. He was sent into the world to comfort us when we grieve and to pray through us when we don't know how to pray. God the Spirit is closer to us than our thoughts.

Whatever you are going through or will ever go through, you can be confident that God loves you and completely understands how you feel.

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