

If God Loves Us Why Do We Suffer?
Living and Talking with Atheists
February 20, 2011
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(Romans 8:28,31,35,37-39 NRSV) We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. {31} What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? {35} Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? {37} No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. {38} For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, {39} nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This morning we continue our series: **Living and Talking with Atheists** with an issue that perplexes not only our non-Christian friends, but also many of us.

That question is → if God loves us, why is there so much suffering in this world?

Think about it → our world is filled with tragedy.

- Natural disasters
 - Katrina
 - Tsunami's
 - Earthquakes
 - Floods

But not just natural disasters, we witness other tragedies as well

- Auto accidents
- Fires
- Illness
 - Cancer
- Evil committed by people
 - Murder
 - War
 - Holocaust

WHY?

Why doesn't God protect God's children from being attacked by the tragedies of the world?

It is an issue that many of the authors of the Bible have struggled with.

The Hebrew people understood themselves to be chosen by God, yet they were inflicted with tragedy after tragedy.

Why? they kept asking themselves.

The book of Lamentations is filled with cries of pain to God

Over 1/3 of the Psalms are also calls of pain to God.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? - Psalm 13:1

And then of course there is the book of Job . . .

Job a righteous man – the most righteous man is inflicted by God with terrible tragedies

Loss of possessions

Death of family

Personal illness

Why? He cries?

If I were to ask you give me some descriptive words for God, most Christians would answer with words like:

God is → loving, kind, good, merciful, just, all-knowing, all-powerful

I think that most of us would agree with those descriptions, but those descriptions leave us in a quandary.

How can explain then a God that seems to allow:

Pain, suffering, tragedy and injustice

Let's be honest here, there is no way that I can explain this in 30 minutes or 3 years.

- Many books of the Bible were written trying to make sense of this very issue and to be honest – many do not have very satisfactory explanations.
- Theologians have wrestled with this issue since the dawn of time and thousands of books have been written.

What I am going to try to do this morning is give you a quick glimpse at this problem and how we might address our non-Christian friends if they raise this issue.

A friend of mine, who grew up with me, and now lives in Minnesota shared these thoughts:

People seem to start from the opinion that there is a benevolent God and then tie themselves into knots trying to understand how their benevolent God can allow suffering.

It seems to me that the easy answer is that there... is no benevolent God

and suffering is just the way of the things. . . .

Why don't we just accept the fact that there is suffering in our lives and stop trying to figure out how it fits into our idea of a benevolent God.

Brian's wife just died a few weeks ago after battling cancer.

If you want to learn more let me recommend a couple of books.

- Harold Kushner's classic work: When Bad Things Happen to Good People
Harold Kushner is a rabbi, so he not going to look at the problem through a Christian lens, but he still can help us as we wrestle with this issue
- A second book I would recommend is: Philip Yancey's book Disappointment With God

Our non-believing friends solution to this problem is not the answer!

They say: look at all the terrible things that happen in this world → doesn't that just prove that there isn't a God. If there was a God that was good and loving and caring that God would stop all these terrible things from happening!

I don't think suffering proves that there isn't a God, what it suggest is maybe the way we understand God needs to be re-examined

The other thing I want you to hear from me today is this → that many of the answers that are given by Christians are totally inadequate.

Many of us may not even believe the words we often say, but when we need to offer explanations, we offer explanations that are not very helpful to people who are mired in the depths of suffering.

Our culture proclaims that natural disasters are from God.

If you don't believe me go home and pull out your home-owners, life, or even your auto insurance policy. In them, it will mentions that certain occurrences are ACTS OF GOD.

Now it is easy to understand how the ancients would have understood things as Acts of God.

- A huge wave washes over the land, clearly they would have understood that God caused it
- The earth begins to shake – again, God must have done that

But we know better today → don't we?

We understand that God did not cause the earthquake that devastated Haiti, nor the wave of water that killed thousands in Somalia.

But do we also understand that God did not cause the cancer that racks a loved one's body → or that, on the flip side, that God prevented us to be hurt in the auto accident that we were recently in?

How does God operate in the world → that's the 64 million dollar question today.

When we try to answer that, there are two poles of understanding this.

One the one hand is DEISM

Belief that there is a God

God created the Universe

Created the laws of nature

God watches from the outside – not actively involved

Much like Brian suggested in his comments to me

On the opposite pole is HYPER-CALVINISM

God is in control of everything

God is doing everything

Nothing happens without the sovereign will of God

Everything happens because God willed it to happen, God's hand is in everything

God is involved in the good things that happen to us

As well as the tragic

Somehow God is involved in these things

God is pushing history ahead by a pre-set plan

Deists would say → NO God isn't involved in our world

I have to be honest with you → on this continuum I am much closer to Deism

I find much of their arguments attractive

But there are problems with this understanding of God

The biggest is somewhat of a circular argument

And that is the Biblical authors understood that God was involved in the world

Deism leads to the questions

Why Pray?

Why look to Scriptures?

I have lots of problems with the idea of Hyper-Calvinism

Most of us buy into it without questioning the assumptions

When things happen we say it was the will of God

Friend & auto accident last week

We believe when good things happen it is because of God

Many pastors suggested that God sent the Tsunami to Somalia, Katrina to New Orleans and the earthquake to Haiti, along with the planes into the World Trade Center on 9/11

And why?

So that we can grow

By responding

By changing

The notion is whenever something happens → even when it is hard and difficult that it is the will of God

God uses the events to teach us

Teach us things like patience and perseverance

Somebody once said to me that they believed that God had made them sick so that they could learn humility and patience

Think about that for a second

Can you imagine a parent saying that they were going to inject their child with cancer cells because they loved them and they wanted to get them to learn and grow?

If you knew of a parent that did them you would turn them in to the authorities for child abuse!

But that is what we are saying God is doing.

God is willingly making Tom, Judi and Mary sick?

That is ridiculous!

Do you really believe that God would put it in a parents head to sexually molest their child?

If we believe that God does all things then God did that!

Do you really believe that God would create AID'S or cause an earthquake like the one we saw last year in Haiti?

I have told you many times how in my own life I came to question this notion that God wills all things.

Twenty-Six years ago Stewart Wesley Conger died of cancer.

I was in my final year at Duke when Stewart got sick.

It was right after spring break when I got a phone call from my Dad. Mark and I were getting ready to host an end of the year party when the message came to call home ASAP

My dad told me that the doctors found a tumor in Stewart and they were going to operate shortly to try to remove it.

A week or so later I was there when the doctor walked out of the ER and told us that the tumor, which was the size of a softball had metastasized and was everywhere, that there was nothing they could do.

Stewart was very ill and my parents were not able to attend my ordination at Lake Junaluska that May.

I ran home every opportunity that I had, and in the summer, Stewart and my parents even made a trip to visit me in North Carolina, and we went to the beach for a few days together.

That November, my phone rang once again → this time it was a collect call from my dad saying to me that the Doctor suggested that if I was going to come home I better leave immediately because they did not expect Stewart to live long.

It was a Saturday night, I was a student Pastor at the Richfield and New Mount Tabor Churches in Stanley County North Carolina and I had a dozen or so youth spending the night at the parsonage for a lock in, and I was to preach the next morning.

I called Nancy and her mom drove her the 110 miles from Durham so that she could make the long journey with me to Downers Grove.

Sunday morning, I got up and told my two little churches that I was leaving and didn't know if I would ever be back, and as soon as church was over, Nancy, my dog Nahum and I, got in my car and started the drive back to Chicago.

We got as far as Frankfort, Kentucky and I couldn't drive any further. This was before cell phones, so we had not called home until we stopped, and when we did, my dad told us not to hurry – to get some rest and be careful because Stewart was in a coma and would not live long.

After sleeping for a couple of hours I woke up with the urge that we had to go. We got back into the car and arrived at the house hours before we were expected.

Nobody knew we were there until we appeared at Stewart's bedside. Even my beagle dog didn't make a sound, he simply walked with us into the family room where Stewart lay.

About 20 minutes after we arrived, Stewart died.

I don't believe that God made Stewart sick because of some sin in his life, nor to make him or any of us better people.

I do believe, however, that I would not be here today, without having gone through that experience.

Through it my life was transformed.

I was amazed at some of the things that people said after Stewart died, things that I have heard repeatedly since then.

People would say → God needed Stewart in heaven

That is just crazy --- God is here, why would God NEED Stewart there?

I have also heard people say that such and such a person died so that God could save somebody at the funeral service.

Maybe their death was just for you so that you could come to Christ

Is that how God works?

Does God kill somebody, so that someone else might be saved?

I spent the next couple years wrestling with God.

I am so grateful for the people of Pretty Lake United Methodist Church, just outside Plymouth, for putting up with me as I wrestled with God those first few years. They really shaped me with their love and compassion!

Through this experience, I came to understand and experience God in ways that I had never imagined before.

I also figured out why Stewart died.

He got cancer! Unfortunately it was a cancer that in 1985 the doctors had no idea how to treat. And ultimately, it took his life.

God didn't take Stewart's life, esophageal cancer did.

And if God does not intervene to save us, or cause the cancer or tragedy that kills us, just what does God do?

I believe that God was with Stewart --- every day of his life and as he went over the summit

I believe that God was with my parents, and with all of us who grieved over Stewart's death

I believe that God enabled good things to happen from his life and his death.

I was changed

I would not be here today if Stewart hadn't died --- BUT God did not kill him!

Somehow God used this tragedy to bring good

So what does God do?

If we hold on to the idea that God causes everything that happens → the good and the bad, then the reality is, you are no more than a puppet → we have no free will to choose (good and bad)

I don't think that is what the Bible tries to teach us about God

God guides

God sustains us

God is our hope

God is our help

(Psalms 46:1 NIV) God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

I do not believe that God is a manipulative puppeteer, pulling the strings of our lives

So how does God work?

I do not believe that God is an interventionist God

Intervening in the world by suspending the laws that God made

I don't believe that if I am driving my car that God will push a drunk driver out of my way and into somebody else

- Even though that is the way most of us pray every day.

I believe the way that God works in by nudging us through the spirit.

That inner voice that calls us to a better way.

Remember me getting up in the middle of the night in Frankfort, Kentucky so that we could arrive before Stewart died → I believe that was God!

Our atheist friends don't offer a better way.

God has promised to be with us. To walk with us through the valleys of the shadow of death. To sustain in whatever trouble we find ourselves in.

And while it does not shield us from tragedy or take the pain out of our lives. I believe that it is GOOD NEWS!

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