

Series: "Questions About God and Life"
"How can a good God allow so many bad things to happen?"

It was a bright, sunny morning in early October, just another day of learning and play at school. Until a man named Charles Roberts IV entered a little country schoolhouse near Gap, PA and created a horrific scene that caught the attention of the nation, and the world. You know the rest of the story: five innocent Amish girls shot to death. Five other little girls wounded, a few left with injuries that will never heal.

In the aftermath of such carnage, it was natural to ask all kinds of questions. One of the questions people asked is: Why didn't God stop such an awful event?

The Amish shootings that took place October 2nd of 2006 are the kinds of things that trigger this gut-wrenching question: *How can a good God allow so many bad things to happen?* We ask this at other times: a five year-old boy gets leukemia and dies; a tsunami engulfs a town and sweeps thousands of people into the sea; a kind young man stops to fix a flat tire for an elderly woman, and an oncoming car slides on a patch of ice and crushes him to death, leaving a grieving wife and two young children; a person or family comes up against a string of misfortunes, one thing after another, that just beats them down.

All of us can point to instances of evil and suffering that beg us to answer this haunting question: if there is a God, and this God is good, how can God allow so many bad things to happen? We're going to tackle this thorny issue today. And I approach this message with great humility, for none of us has all the answers. If we had all the answers, we'd be God. And we're not God! But that doesn't mean there is nothing to say on the subject. The Bible does shed light on the pervasive question of how we reconcile belief in a good God with the reality of so much evil and suffering in the world.

First of all, let me say that ***not all suffering is shrouded in mystery***. A lot of times God gets blamed for things that really aren't God's fault! For instance, ***sometimes we suffer because of our own foolishness and unwise choices***.

For example, we know now that smoking is a health hazard, and increases the risk of such things as lung cancer. So if I smoke, and get lung cancer as a result, do I have a right to pin that on God? If I drink too much alcohol and get behind the wheel of my car and smash into a tree, there's no great mystery why I might suffer some broken bones or worse. Call it stupidity, or poor choices, or my own moral weakness. But it's my own doing.

If I get high on marijuana or cocaine and crash my car into another vehicle, and injure or kill someone, my own foolishness or unwise choices cause suffering to others. ***A lot of suffering in life comes about because we live in an interdependent world, where what one person does often affects other people***. Now if I or a family member are injured, say, by a truck driver who falls asleep at the wheel, I probably will struggle with the question, "Why didn't God prevent this from happening"? *But what's the alternative?* A world where we are not connected to other people? Where we would have no meaningful

relationships? Think of all the *good* that happens because our lives are interwoven with the lives of other people!

Some of the suffering in life comes because we live in an orderly universe. God designed the world to operate by certain laws, such as the law of gravity, or the law of centrifugal force. So, if I'm standing on a high ledge, and lean over too far and fall, I'm going to get hurt. God's not going to suspend the law of gravity just to keep me from falling. But imagine a universe where there are no natural laws? Where everything is chaotic and unpredictable. Most of the time these laws of nature work on our behalf, and bring order and stability to life. I love a program on the Smithsonian Channel called "Air Disasters." I know, tell me it's kind of creepy to sit and watch accounts of airplane crashes. It's fascinating (but sad). Anyway, whether the cause of the crash is pilot error, or mechanical failure, or whatever, God does not suspend the laws of aerodynamics just to keep people from being injured or killed when a plane crashes. We grieve, and in our hearts we may ask why. But that's the price we pay for living in an orderly universe.

Then, a lot of the evil and suffering in the world comes about because of our sin and our rebellion against God. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). That doesn't just mean "death" in the sense of spiritual death and separation from God, but it means that our sinning destroys the goodness of life. People get hurt and suffer. Think of the suffering that results from wars, or our committing adultery, or stealing. Imagine the hurt caused by racial prejudice, or by lying and cover-ups, or by the powerful lording it over those with little clout or influence. This is all the result of our *sin* as human beings. Let's not get mad at God for our own waywardness and foolishness as human beings.

You may say, "Why does God allow this? Why couldn't we have a world where there is no sin or evil?" God could have created human beings to be puppets or robots, obeying His will automatically. But God gave us the freedom of moral choice. If we didn't have the option *not* to obey God, there could be no goodness. "Good" only has meaning if there is the freedom not to do good.

What have I been saying? That a lot of the bad things that happen in the world are not caused by God, but by our own (or someone else's) foolish choices, or sin, or the playing out of the natural laws of the universe. When we suffer as a result of this, we may instinctively ask "why", but the reasons why may be more obvious than we may like to admit!

While this explains much of the suffering in the world, it doesn't explain everything.

Think again of the shooting of the Amish children. Charles Roberts was obviously a mentally disturbed, sick man, a man who was apparently emotionally wounded as a child, and turned this rage outward on those little children and inward upon himself as he took his own life. So, we may ask, why does God allow mental illness?

The same can be said about physical illness. For instance, here's a young, vibrant, loving mother of 3 young children. She gets cancer, or has a brain aneurysm, and dies. Couldn't God see that her children needed her? Couldn't God have healed her? If so, why didn't He?

Pandemics and so-called natural disasters raise those same questions, too. Case in point: the coronavirus. This has created chaos throughout the world. Why does this happen? A hurricane devastates an area, causing flooding and wind damage. People suffer. How can a good God allow all of this?

Some people answer this question by saying sickness and natural disasters are God's way of punishing people. I hope we don't go down that road! To think that God singles out individuals, or certain towns or communities, to punish them for their sins is poor theology, and not supported by the New Testament. During one of the times when New Orleans was flooded I heard some people suggesting that this happened because of the sinfulness of that city. But I ask, what city or town isn't in some ways wicked or ungodly? At the time of Jesus a tower had fallen on some people and killed them. Jesus reflects on that natural disaster: "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did" (Luke 13:4-5). I believe Jesus is saying that God didn't single out these people for punishment.

Sickness, mental illness, natural disasters are all part of a fallen world. God created the world good, a paradise. But ever since humankind rebelled against God and sin entered the world, the world has been infected by evil, sickness, decay and death.

When God's kingdom comes, the world will be restored to its original goodness, but the kingdom isn't here yet. In the meantime, the medical community works tirelessly to heal the sick. Counselors and psychologists and psychiatrists devote themselves to healing the mentally and emotionally distressed. Scientists and researchers strive to find cures for diseases, and try to tame the forces of nature. *And God is working with all of these people in their efforts to bring wholeness to life.* But getting sick and dying goes along with living in a fallen, evil-infected world.

One thought that might be helpful here is to point out that ***many people mistakenly believe that the purpose of life is happiness.*** We hear this so often. Someone says, "All I want is a little happiness in life. Is that asking too much?" Or, "all I want for my children is that they are happy." Well I'll tell you, that's not all I want for *my children!* Happiness is *not* the purpose of life, as God intended it.

The purpose of life is the knowledge of God – to know and love God! Or as the catechism had it: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." See, just because things happen in life that cause you to suffer doesn't mean God doesn't care about you or that God is not good. God didn't create you just to be happy all the time! God can use

suffering to shape our character. God can use the hard knocks of life to help us to grow and to come closer to Him. Isn't it true that often the times we grow the most and seek God the most are the rough times of our life?

God can bring good out of suffering. For example, in times of natural disasters (an earthquake, flood, tornado), it's an opportunity to reflect upon our human condition, to realize our limitations, that we're not in control, and that we need to depend on God. Times of calamity or disaster can also become those moments when we reach out to one another - to put aside our differences, and help each other. Think of how our nation came together for a while right after 9/11. Think of the many people who unselfishly respond to a natural disaster and pitch in to help.

The cross of Jesus was the epitome of human suffering. Crucifying God's sinless Son was the worst thing ever done to anyone. Jesus suffered the horror of the cross. Yet out of that suffering has come the greatest good. God has given us human beings such expansive freedom that He even allowed us to kill His Son. Yet it's through the massive evil of the cross that our salvation and redemption were won.

So many of the bad things that happen in the world are not what God wants! God *allows* it, but He doesn't will it. If we respond to our suffering by clinging to God in faith, and trusting Him, God can bring good out of even the worst that happens.

The Book of Job in the Old Testament is a marvelous book that probes deeply into the question of suffering and God's role in human suffering. Remember the story? Job is a righteous man, blessed with a large family and many possessions. God allows Job to be tested. He loses all of his possessions. His 7 sons and 3 daughters are all killed one day when the building they are in collapses on them. Job himself gets some sort of skin disease and has ugly sores all over his body.

Most of the Book of Job is comprised of 3 rounds of discussions between Job and 3 of his friends. They are religious people who try to convince Job that he must have done something really bad to deserve his suffering and misfortune, and that he should repent of the wrongs he's done, and everything will be ok. These friends represent the common belief of the day that if you suffered it meant God was punishing you for your sins. Job vehemently insists that this is *not* the case! He hasn't done anything to warrant this! Throughout the book Job maintains his innocence. He rants and raves, storms and stomps, even saying that he wants to hold court with God and have God explain what's going on!

Do you remember how the book ends? It doesn't really give a pat answer as to why people suffer. But in the end, instead of Job interrogating God, God is going to question Job! "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, *I will question you, and you shall declare to me*'" (Job 38:1-3). God says, I want some answers from you, Job!

God continues: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements - surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy...have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?" (Job 38:4-7, 12). Were you there at the time of creation, when I created it all, God asks. Throughout the next couple of chapters God pursues his questioning of Job: "Where you there when I.....?" "Do you know this....?" "Can you do this...?" OK smarty pants, explain it all to me!

How does Job respond? We find out in the last chapter of the Book of Job. "Then Job answered the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted...therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes'" (Job 42:1-3, 5-6). Job is put in his place! He repents!

We can explain *some things* about why there is evil and suffering in the world even though God is good. But we can't explain *everything!* We learn from this extraordinary book of the Old Testament that God's purposes are more encompassing than we can imagine. Like Job, we look at life wearing blinders and seeing only our narrow perspective, seeing just our own suffering, or the struggles of those around us. *But God sees the big picture*, and His purposes include the whole world - everyone. In addition, God's purposes are being worked out not only in the span of this brief life here on earth, but in eternity. In our finiteness as human beings we simply cannot grasp how God's purposes may need all eternity to come to completion.

The Book of Job also assures us that no amount of evil or suffering can ultimately thwart God's good purposes for His creation, and for us!

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