



Facing the Reasonable Questions of a Skeptical Culture

HOW CAN MY GOD ALLOW THIS TO HAPPEN IN MY LIFE?

We all love the story of Jericho. It's a biblical epic passed down from generation to generation. Our perspective of Israel's encounter with Jericho is typically the triumph of God's greatness and His faithfulness to His people. We see it this way because the Lord has given us a view of His plan this side of Heaven through Scripture. But what if Facebook had offered live footage from inside the walls of Jericho? It would be a different take altogether. Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber's jolly little song about the destruction of Jericho in the Veggie Tales series would probably not sit right? I think if we saw that moment with our own eyes we might actually prepare to march in protest on Jericho's behalf. When seen from another angle it highlights severity and not victory. It raises serious questions about equity and suffering.

The question that is inescapable for all humanity is this: Why couldn't (or didn't) God stop tragedy from happening? I don't just mean those tragedies we read in Scripture, but all suffering: murder, slander, war, cancer, miscarriages, disabilities, death, famine, floods, hurricanes, etc. Why does God allow so much pain in His sovereign plan? Some assume that He doesn't have a sovereign plan. Others that He is uncaring. Regardless of your view of God, no one is able to escape the most common of human experiences—suffering.

There's good that comes from pain. One of the ironies is

that suffering is a great builder of community, personal growth and depth in relationship. You're closest to those you have suffered alongside or have shared in suffering with. Suffering strips away all pretenses. You might even say you haven't truly lived until you have suffered. In moments of suffering you come to grips with what you're truly living for. What drives you. What you live without. Where your values lie. Through suffering, you're able to see the real heart of an individual.

Here's a question for you: How do you respond to suffering? When you are face-to-face with the reality of human suffering and pain, what comes out of your heart and mouth? Unfortunately, so many well-meaning people have no idea what they're doing close to suffering. Some offer pithy clichés to comfort those in agony while others turn to the Bible in search of a magic verse. We try to find the magic phrase that will make it all better. Most of the time those offering these "magic phrases" have never actually suffered. They're still under the delusion that we can make sense of it all. They assume if they search hard enough for an answer to why suffering exists it will come to them.

Philosophers and theologians have dedicated much time to understanding the problem of evil. That's really what this whole conversation is about. Why, if there is an all-powerful and good God, can suffering remain? How

can God and suffering co-exist? This intrinsic connection between God and suffering has caused many to reject the idea of God. In the darkest moments of life we face the question—"How can God allow this to happen in my life?"

The problem of evil exists exactly because we don't understand why. Why did death come early? Why did suffering come to the innocent? Why did God allow this to happen? And finally, why should I trust a God that would let this happen? In reality these are all reasonable questions. It's valid to question how God and evil can co-exist. The worst thing we can do as believers is to invalidate these questions or even scold those who are asking. Tell people it's wrong to question God. It's sad when those who are hurting the most are told to remain silent in their pain. We act like God is not big enough to handle their hurt. The most reasonable response we can give to suffering is understanding. As Paul said, "weep with those who weep." The first thing we should do is just sit with those in pain. Jesus acknowledged those suffering and offered love.

But what about the problem of evil? Why does God allow suffering to continue? Is there an answer to the question so many have asked? Unfortunately, this side of heaven, there is not. The question of "why does evil exist" is a mystery locked in the mind of God. We don't have an answer; no one does—atheists or Christians. We all experience suffering, but no one has an answer for why it was allowed. We're left standing next to our fellow human, believer and non-believer, wondering the purpose and reason for all the pain. But that leaves this question for believers, "Do you have enough faith to suspend your judgment and trust that God knows what He is doing?" In the crisis moment, can you trust despite not understanding?

Here is our hope: While we do not know why specific suffering exists, we do know and trust God who knows why. We cannot see things from the eternal perspective. That belongs to God. However, we can trust that the One who sees the suffering also suffered on our behalf. Our doubts concerning the purpose and goodness of God are suspended in the Son of God. Christ came and took on

flesh and suffered at the hands of men. God agrees with us, evil is a problem. But thanks be to God, He sent His son to offer hope in spite of suffering. Consider these verses.

1 Peter 2:21-23 *"For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*

Hebrews 2:14-17 *Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. 16 For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

Discussion Questions

We often jump straight to "fixing" those who are in pain or suffering. How can we strike a balance between sitting and understanding someone's pain while not allowing them to remain in that position?

When we encounter suffering we should offer hope from Scripture. For example, Romans 8:28 is often quoted to those walking through a painful situation. But is there a right or wrong way to present Scripture to those suffering?

Psalms 27; 28; 31; John 16; 2 Corinthians 5 are a few of my favorite passages to read in times of sorrow. Share with the group if you have a personal favorite that you return to during moments of suffering and why.