

Life's Toughest Question

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[0 : 00] What would you ask God if you could ask him one thing, one thing you're concerned about, you wonder about, you have problems with? Well, the Barna Research Group did a survey several years ago, and they asked people that question.

If you could ask God one question, what would it be? The number one response, why is there pain and suffering in the world?

That is the most commonly raised question or objection by unbelievers who explain why they don't believe.

I put it on your outline, something that John Stott, one of the most influential Christian writers over the past 50 years or more, he agreed this is a very challenging question.

He stated it this way. The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith and has been in every generation.

[1 : 06] So, thinking people, and I'm going to assume all of us are thinking people, thinking people have always wondered, if God is good, why is there so much evil and suffering in this world?

If God is sovereign, why doesn't he prevent all these tragedies from happening? And if God loves his children, us Christians, why does he allow us to experience pain and suffering?

Those are not just questions that unbelievers ask. We as Christians, if you've never asked out loud, talked about it out loud, you've at least thought about it at times.

And these kind of questions naturally arise from the study we did last week on the providence of God. How God is sovereign, how God is sovereign, totally in control.

Well, tonight we're going to look at how the Bible answers some of these questions. Some of them will not be answered until we get to heaven.

[2 : 38] But look on your outline, number one. Suffering was not part of God's original creation, nor will it be a part of God's final new creation.

The Bible begins, Genesis 1, God created the heavens and the earth. And it goes on to describe the days of creation after each day.

It says it was good and it comes to the end in verse 31. And God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good. Well, the Bible ends with God creating a new heaven and a new earth.

Revelation chapter 21, verse 1. And the promise that in this new heaven and new earth, everything will be good.

Look at two examples. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

[3 : 45] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. And then verse 27.

Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. We can conclude two things from the way God created everything in the beginning and the way he's going to recreate everything in the new heaven and a new earth.

Number one, God is not the source of sin, evil, and suffering. It is absent from his original creation. Everything was very good.

And it will be absent from the new creation, the new heaven and the earth, as he said. Number two, sin, evil, and suffering are present only in this fallen sinful world.

Not a part of God's original creation. It will not be a part of the way he recreates the new heaven and new earth where we'll spend eternity with him.

[4 : 59] It's the only present. Sin, evil, and suffering is the only present in this present fallen sinful world. Let's look at what little bit we know about how it happened.

Number two, sin, evil, and suffering entered the world when Adam and Eve sinned. In Genesis 3. When it comes to the actual origin of evil, of sin, the Bible is silent.

But sometime between the end of creation, when he created everything and it was very good, and the appearance of the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve that you read about in Genesis 3, something happened.

Something happened that led to the existence of an evil being that the Bible refers to as Satan and sometimes the devil. A few passages of Scripture indicate that rebellion against God took place in the, what we would call, angelic world.

Look at 2 Peter 2, 4, one verse. And if God did not spare angels when they sinned. Something that took place outside of what God reveals in his word.

[6 : 23] And then Jude 6 is very similar to 2 Peter 2. The book of Jude is very similar to the second chapter of 2 Peter. And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling.

He is kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day. Now that's about all I know about that.

And anyone else. Many people think that this rebellion against God in heaven resulted in the fall of a very powerful angel who became Satan or the devil.

And the less powerful angels who followed him in rebellion became his demons. Now the Bible does not really spell this out. The Bible does not explicitly tell us anything about that.

But there's a few passages that imply it. Two are found in Revelation. Note that they describe Satan as that ancient serpent.

[7 : 38] In Revelation 12, 9. And the great dragon was thrown down that that ancient serpent, who was called the devil and Satan and the deceiver of the world. He was thrown down to the earth and his angels were thrown down with him.

And then 22. And he sees the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan. I want to emphasize in that he's called the serpent.

Because that's how he makes his first appearance in the Bible. In Genesis 3, he's the serpent who tempted Eve and Adam to sin against God.

But there's no explanation as to where he came from. God created everything and it was very good at the end of Genesis 1. Genesis 2 describes God's special creation.

How he created Adam and then Eve. Brought them together. And then chapter 3. There's the devil.

[8 : 42] The ancient serpent. There's no nothing about why God allowed him to come into existence and then come into his garden, his paradise.

The fact is that God has chosen not to explain the original source of sin, evil, and suffering. There is no explanation.

There is no explanation of why he allowed it. How it came about or anything like that. But he does tell us when and how sin, evil, and suffering entered into this world and the lives of human beings.

It's there in Genesis 3. In the paradise of the Garden of Eden. Perfection. Perfect environment.

Adam and Eve created in the image of God without sin.

They enjoyed perfect fellowship with God and perfect fellowship with each other. And it was in that environment that Satan entered.

[9 : 54] Came to them and tempted them. He tempted them first to doubt God's word and then to disobey God's word. Doubt what God said.

And then disobey what God had clearly said. Both Adam and Eve chose to listen to Satan and to disobey God.

Read that in Genesis 1, beginning in Genesis 3, beginning in verse 1. On your handout there, verses 13, 7 through 13 are listed.

We're going to look at some of those in particular now. We can describe the immediate result of their sin was broken relationships. The immediate result of their sin was number one, their relationship with God was broken.

They both became afraid of God and tried to hide from Him. Look at verse 8. And they heard the sound of the Lord walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

[11:00] And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden. They sinned.

Their eyes were opened. Not in a good way. And the first thing that they did, they hid from God. Then Adam implied that it was God's fault that they'd sinned.

Look at verse 12. The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree and I ate.

The blame game is one of the oldest, is probably the oldest game in existence, isn't it? He's blaming God. Number two, it's not just their relationship with God, their close, intimate relationship with God we're talking about.

Walked with God, talked with God. But their close, intimate relationship with each other was broken. After the fall, they were no longer comfortable being naked before each other.

[12:13] So they covered up with fig leaves. It says in verse 7, Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked. And naked's not good.

It's not bad. It's good. That's why Genesis 2 ends. They were both naked and they felt no shame. It was just the way it's supposed to be. They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

They covered up. They also turned against each other. Adam, specifically, blamed Eve. Look again at verse 12 with a different emphasis this time.

The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me. She gave me the fruit of the tree and I ate. You see, Adam, he's the real culprit in it all.

He let his wife be deceived. Why didn't he not speak up when the devil tempted them because they were together? But he was not being the leader, the man that he should have been, the protector that God made him to be.

[13:29] And then when he failed and he sinned as well through the eating, he turns around and blames God and then blames his wife.

That's been an eternal temptation for us as men to not be who God's called us to be and when we fail, we look around and we'll find somebody else to blame. We can get a good idea of the nature of sin by looking at the immediate effects of Adam and Eve and their sin.

Number one, sin is rebellion against God. That's what they did. Sin is rebellion against God. It is the failure to do what God commands.

Or it is the doing of what God forbids. It can be active or passive. Omission or commission. Sin is number two, is the source of evil and suffering in this world as seen in what the entrance of sin introduced into God's good creation.

I want you to look at this list here. After they sinned, there was death. There was separation from God. There was fear and hiding from God.

[14:49] There was shame, a lack of transparency and intimacy between husband and wife. There was a refusal to accept personal responsibility, accusation, and blame.

It's all there in Scripture. They're listed there for you. Pain and suffering and the normal experiences of life like childbirth, marriage, the breakdown of unity and oneness.

Work. There was a curse upon the earth. Then the next chapter, chapter four, there was jealousy, there was anger, there was jealousy, there was pride, and the first murder.

Brother kills brother. Now, that's sort of a little introduction on how sin and evil and suffering entered into this world.

But I want us to look now at how God is still in control and He can be trusted to take care of us in the midst of a life surrounded by sin, evil, and suffering.

[15:56] Now, I want everybody, if you would, to turn to 2 Corinthians 7, 2 Corinthians 12, and we're going to look at verses 7 through 10 in particular.

And they're on the back of your outline. 2 Corinthians chapter 12. You don't have to turn there. I forgot that I put it on here.

I thought I wasn't going to have room. It's on that sheet. Paul gives us in 2 Corinthians 12 one of the best examples of how God works through the evil actions of Satan and the suffering of His people to accomplish His good purpose in us and through us.

Paul begins 2 Corinthians 12 describing a vision of heaven that he experienced in the past. But what he says next is surprising. Let's just look at it.

Verse 7. So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

[17:14] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. After Paul had his vision of heaven, he was given a thorn in the flesh for the purpose that says there in verse 7 of keeping him from becoming conceited.

That phrase is repeated a little bit later on. The thorn in flesh, we don't know what it was. I think most commentators, scholars who try to figure this thing out would think is something physical. Maybe a problem with his eyes. He says something in Galatians about see what big, at the end of Galatians, he writes himself, see what big letters I'm writing with as if he can't really, he's having trouble with his own vision.

[18:35] Some people think he suffered the effects of malaria. some think, you know, just a lot of different things. Some people think, though, that it could be something psychological, emotional, spiritual, something he struggled with.

No one knows. But it was some kind of issue that hurt him, that caused personal pain and suffering, and he pleaded with God to take it away.

But God didn't. God did not answer Paul's prayer, pleading three times, remove this thorn in the flesh, but look on at verse 7.

A messenger of Satan. God sometimes allows Satan to inflict us with pain and suffering, but Satan is always limited by God, and can only do what God allows.

What book of the Bible drives that point home? Job. The devil can inflict much harm on people, but only if God allows it, and only according to the level that God allows.

[20:04] Job helps us to understand that. And at the end of Job, here's just sort of, if you ever want to read this, Job's a hard book, especially trying to figure out what his friends were saying and all that kind of stuff, but at the end, Job, you know, he asks him questions.

How does God answer the questions of Job at the end of Job? Basically, God turns the tables on him and says, where were you when I did all these kind of things?

And it's sort of like, Job, if you can answer these questions that I have for you, I'll answer your questions from me, you have for me. God does not tell us these kind of things for whatever reason. But look at what, I sort of jumped to go in, look at what happened in verses 8 through 9, look at the back and forth. Paul prayed and asked God to remove the thorn. God answered by saying no and explained why he said no.

Verse 9, but he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness. Paul responded by accepting God's answer and trusting that God would work through his strength, God's strength through Paul's weaknesses.

[21:23] Look at it, verse 10 again, the end of 9 and 10. Therefore, I will boast all the more about my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. Now, I want us to understand when Paul responds this way, it's not as if, okay, and he went on and life was good.

He didn't have any issues. He didn't have any struggles. Paul had a horrible life. Paul experienced more physical, emotional, pain, pain, and we can imagine.

Just read some of the things it says in 2 Corinthians about what he went through in chapter 10, for an example. Paul's sufferings as an apostle, beginning in verse 16.

It was hard for him to accept what God said and carry it out. But he had to write just a great attitude.

[22:38] Paul's attitude was, if God said, if God said, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness, he so loved God and trusted God and wanted to be used by God, he was willing to live most of his life in pain and suffering and discomfort in order to do God's will, which resulted in preaching the gospel and many people saved, churches being planted, gospel spreading throughout the Mediterranean world and in all of that, God was glorified and that was good enough for him.

In all of that, many people were saved, churches started that would impact future generations and that was good enough for him. He wasn't concerned about himself.

He just wanted to be used by God but at the same time, he knew that a better day was coming. He knew that his suffering and pain and disappointments, heartaches, it would all end one day and he'd live in perfect goodness, comfort, joy in the new heavens and new earth.

Think about this. Suffering usually makes people better or bitter. Paul's a great example of someone who became better. Most of you are familiar with the story of Johnny Erickson Tida. She's been a faithful servant of the Lord in a wheelchair for what, 50 years maybe now and she truly made the best of her suffering.

[24 : 19] Been an inspiration to many people who have gone through heartaches. Do you know someone who has responded like that to suffering? Somebody that inspires you, somebody who's just a trophy of grace in the way that they have responded like Paul or like Johnny.

Maybe not their whole life but in certain ways. Anybody come to mind in your life? We won't call anyone's name who's become bitter from life's suffering but some of us know people who have. Life's hardships made them bitter. Let's close this, wind this up. What are some of the keys to allowing the sufferings of life to make us better instead of bitter?

What can help us be more like Paul, more like Johnny and be better rather than bitter? Well, number one, look on the paper there to believe what God says, what the Bible says about God using them for good purposes in our lives.

There's just a list. You can read it. We're going to run out of time so I'm not going to read all of those but one, two, three, four, five, six. Six different passages just as an example of things the Bible says how God uses sufferings, difficulties, trials for our good to develop our character to teach us compassion and empathy for others to prove the genuineness of our faith to make us more like Jesus to bring glory and honor to God.

[26 : 20] Number two, another key to allow these sufferings to make us better to trust that God is both great and good as Jerry Bridges says in this quote, look at it, God in His love always wills what's best for us.

In His wisdom He always knows what is best and in His sovereignty He has the power to bring it about. But in order sometimes, we've got to accept this, in order at times for God to be glorified and His big plan accomplished, we suffer.

He uses our suffering for that ultimate good and it's hard and we shouldn't say it's not hard.

Paul would never just laugh and carry on about how his life was wonderful, his life was hard. But he looked at it as this is not the end.

He looked at it from an eternal perspective. Better days were coming for Him and they'd be forever. But in the meantime, he was willing to have less, to suffer more so that others could have more at least spiritually speaking.

[27 : 46] Not suffer eternally. That kind of thing. Paul says all this better. One of my favorite verses. Romans 8, 28. And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

Any thoughts on this tonight? You cannot answer everybody's concerns about why there's sin, suffering, and evil in this world.

I can't answer all the questions I have. about why these things are. I don't know. And there may be times in your life where a friend or family member have gone through some kind of devastating loss and they're Christians.

They look at you and say, why would God allow this to happen? Why would God cause this to happen? And sometimes the best answer you can give them is, I don't know. And I don't think anybody knows.

God knows. And we may find out when we get to heaven. But we have to trust that God does know what He's doing. You know, in a much, much, much smaller way, our children, when they're little, they don't really understand why we do things that hurt them, disappoint them, tell them no.

[29 : 17] But we know, but maybe they're just, they're just not at the age, the ability that they can understand it. And we're just not, our thoughts are not like God's thoughts.

We just can't understand everything. And we have to accept that because God's God and we're not. But He is good. He created this world good.

He's going to recreate everything good. And He is working in the midst of the mess now. Still in control. Working for ultimate good.
His purpose. Other people's good. And we just have to trust Him.