

Series: Questions People Ask
Title: How Can A Loving God Allow Evil to Exist?
Text: Romans 5:1-5; Hebrews 5:7-10; John 16:31-33
Key Word: Truths
Proposition: Everyone should know peace in spite of suffering b/c of these biblical truths.

Throughout the centuries, people have been asking tough questions of various world religions. Christianity has not been exempt from those questions. Sometimes questions arise out of curiosity. Because we are created in the image of the God of truth, we have the desire for understanding and knowledge. Understanding and knowledge gives us strength to confront difficult circumstances and relationships. Deep down inside we yearn for certainty. Unfortunately that is hard to come by. Doubt harasses us. We want to walk with the living God, yet lingering questions keep us from such intimacy.

During the course of the next several weeks we will be asking some tough questions as they relate to the Christian faith. We will ask: “How Can Jesus Be the Only Way to God?” “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?” “What about Evolution and Christianity?” “How Can I Have Doubts and Still Be a Christian?” Hopefully, this series will provide some truth that can help us navigate uncertainty. We may not completely find what we’re looking for. But hopefully, God will reassure us of His abiding presence in the midst of our questioning.

Global or personal suffering raise the question: “How Can a Loving God Allow Evil to Exist?” Hardship, suffering, heartbreak, man’s inhumanity to man are what we witness every day as we watch the evening news. Unfortunately, sometimes it invades

our world as well. Sometimes we experience the grit and pain of life up close and personal.

I have counseled victims of molestation. I have listened to the tears of a mother wondering how she was going to tell her children that their father committed suicide. I have heard parent's grieve over their infant's death to SIDS. I've visited noisy and chaotic jails and prison. I have smelled the stench from the slums of a third world nation. I've seen low budget nursing homes where the elderly fade away because of neglect and abandonment. On the first weekend of April in 1984, Melinda heard her name over her dorm's intercom.....

A few have seen first hand the gruesome evil of war and genocide during the reign of Adolph Hitler, Stalin and the Korean conflict. We can not forget the killing fields of Cambodia and Sadam Hussein's torture chambers. We have seen images of famine in Sudan and Ethiopia, acts of terrorism in this country and abroad. We have heard about a woman who murders an expectant mother in order to harvest her child from the womb. We remember the images of the Tsunami that devastated greater Asia. Indonesia, Sumatra, India, and Thailand have lost approximately 100,000 lives from an earthquake that agitated the floor of the Indian Ocean. In 2007, we remember the Virginia Tech slayings, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the fires in California, tornadoes in the Midwest, and violence in the Middle East. We wonder where God is in the midst of this suffering and evil. It is one thing to see and hear the villains suffering with cancer or broken backs. It seems more just for the crooks and thieves to get a

chronic disease. But we're angered when the innocent suffer. We fail to remember that justice delayed is not necessarily justice denied. Does the very presence of such heart-wrenching suffering disprove the existence of a good, loving heavenly Father? One writer referred to the problem of pain as, "the question mark turned like a fishhook in the human heart." How can we be released from this fishhook?

Jesus acknowledged, "*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*" (John 16:33b) The Son of God understands our problem with pain. I hope we can be open to the possibility of a loving God who knows far more than we ever know, including our future. What about the possibility of a loving God who would allow short term sufferings and evils in order for a more long-range good that we humans can not possibly see?

When I was in seminary a professor told the story of a time when one of his sons had to have corrective surgery on his legs. After the surgery the professor and his wife were instructed to perform some daily painful rehabilitation exercises on their son. Each time they performed these painful exercises the boy would cry and yell, "No, mommy and daddy. No. It hurts. It hurts." Each time one of the parents had to hold the child down while the other put the child through those painful procedures. It was hard for the parents to put their son through these short term sufferings. But they knew that if they didn't their son would never walk again. Sometimes love allows short term sufferings for a more long-range good that only God can see. In times like these why not trust that God is working for our ultimate good?

Traditionally, Christians have believed that God is all powerful, he can do anything. God is all knowing, He knows what is good. God is all good, He wants only good. So how can we affirm these beliefs while evil and suffering exists? Let's explore these characteristics of God.

First, God is all powerful. God can do anything that brings meaning to life. He makes all that is possible come to be. There are some things that God cannot do. God cannot make himself cease to exist. He cannot make good evil. He cannot lie. He cannot make mistakes. God can not violate our free will. We have free will, the ability to choose good and evil, right and wrong. Therefore there is the chance for good as well as evil, depending upon the decisions we make. Since God decided to create us with the freedom to choose good or evil; he permitted the possibility for evil and consequently suffering would result. The source of all evil is not God, but human beings misuse of freedom. If God would have created a world with no human freedom, then He would have created a world with no hate and tragically no love. Real love, our love of God and our love of each other must involve our ability to choose love. Most of all suffering in our world today is caused by our choices to kill, to slander, to be selfish, to stray sexually, to break our promise, to be reckless. God is all powerful. He chooses to limit his power in order to secure free will.

Second, God is All-knowing. Since God knows all, He not only knows the past and the present He also knows the future. He knows all the good and all the evil that will be done. And since He knows the future, then it is reasonable that a Good God

would tolerate horrible things because he foresees that in the long run more people will be better and happier than if he miraculously intervened. God has already revealed how this works.

All we need to remember is the cross, the place where God Himself died. At that time even the disciples could not see the good that would result from this tragedy. And yet, both God the Father, and the Son foresaw the good that would come. God foresaw that sin would be forgiven and people would be reconciled with Him. So the worst tragedy that ever occurred in human history lead to the most glorious event in history. If the ultimate evil can result in this ultimate good—then God can take our tragedies and turn them into triumphs!! God turns Satan’s perceived triumph into a fatal defeat. God simply says, “Trust Me!” Like the disciples we may not see the good that will come out of our tragedies. Our knowledge is only in part. Our vision is greatly impaired. It is hard to imagine good coming out of our pain. But when we look at the Author and Perfector of our faith seeing what he endured for the joy set before Him, we can trust that God will transform our tragedy into triumph.

Finally, God is good all the time. The meaning of Good varies among us human beings. I may say that broccoli is good, but some of you would disagree. If the meaning of good varies between us then would it not be reasonable to think that there is a big difference concerning the meaning of good between God and humans? We might think that it is good of God to sit by and refuse to perform a miracle that would take us out of danger. But is it really?

Let me suggest this perspective. There are times when my daughters hate to do homework. It is painful. It is frustrating. They certainly could think of a thousand different things to do with their time. Melinda and I could bail them out by doing their homework for them. We could “save” them from the difficulty of learning a new skill or forming a new habit. But that would mean that we would be irresponsible parents. In many situations we can not place our children in a clear plastic bubble in order to protect them from pain and suffering.

I remember when Ilea was learning to ride a bicycle. Every part of me wanted to go out there and hold the bicycle for her and run along side her to protect her from falling. But Ilea would have no part of it. She saw something that I didn't see at the time. I was hurt by her rejection. But she wanted to do it herself. After I let go of my hurt, I realized that it would be better for her to risk pain and suffering. After a few mishaps she mastered the skill of riding a bicycle without training wheels. She was thrilled, saying, “Daddy look at me.” Pain was good for her. Repeated failure leads to mastery.

God is wiser than us. He foresees that we need some pain for reasons we may not understand but which he foresees as necessary for eventual good. Therefore He is not being evil to permit such suffering. Many of us know that sometimes to be good is not to be kind. God may deprive us of some lesser good or pleasure in order to help us toward a greater moral or spiritual good. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, “*Not only so, but we also rejoice in our suffering, because we know that suffering produces*

perseverance, perseverance character, character hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.” (Romans 5:3-5) Let’s face it; the point of living in this world is not our comfort, but the formation of our character into Christ-likeness and preparation for eternity.

God uses suffering to get our full attention. Through out the history of Israel we see that it was only after suffering, disaster, disease, that the children of Israel, nations, or individuals return back to God. We are often hard headed. C.S. Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Such repentance leads to joy unspeakable, peace unimaginable, hope undeniable.

One might be asking, “Where is God for all those fathers and mothers who lost children in the Tsunami or at Virginia Tech? If God can not bear the death of a sparrow, how can he bear the suffering and death of men, women and children, from the beginning of time to the end of time? The answer is He did bear it. On the cross we see the power of Grace bearing pain, every disease, every act of violence and injustice, every physical agony, every emotional rejection and separation. If love did that, then how could you not love a God who went the extra mile, who practiced more than he preached, who entered our world, who suffers our pains, and who offers himself in the midst of our sorrows? God removed our heart from the fishhook and replaced it with his. Someday we will join the great company of heaven and praise Him, worship Him,

for such love and for sharing in His suffering. I love what Saint Teresa said, “In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth...will be seen no more serious than one night in a convenient motel.”

You see we have been looking for an answer to our question. The answer is not found in good reasonable arguments, but in the Answerer. It is not a bunch of words, but the Word. It is Jesus Himself who shed God’s tears. He sits beside the mother who lost her child; the husband who lost his wife to cancer; the child who lost her dad to suicide; the student who lost a friend in a campus slaying; the veteran amputee; and the adult child of an Alzheimer’s patient. He was broken like bread for us. Like us He was despised and rejected. Like us who cry that we can’t take it anymore, He is the God acquainted with grief and sorrow. Every tear we shed becomes His tear. He may not wipe them all away, but He shares them. What we really need is not an explanation, but a friend who sits and weeps with us. That friend is named Jesus. Such love compels our worship.