

WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE IN A GOD WHO ALLOWS SUFFERING? 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7, 4:16-18; 1 PETER 1:6-7

It happened again this week. Cheryl and I turned on the TV news Monday morning only to hear about another horrible school shooting up in Chardon, Ohio. Five students are shot by a fellow student. Three eventually die from their wounds. The young man who pulled the trigger apparently picked his victims randomly. It numbs your mind and freezes your spirit. You throw your hands up in total dismay and shock. Then the questions start: “Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Where was God last Monday at Chardon High School? If God is all powerful, why didn’t He just step in and stop it? If God is loving and good, how could He allow something so evil to happen?” Next week it might be a natural disaster like a tornado that kills dozens of people. Or it might be a family killed on the interstate by a drunken driver. Perhaps you’ll see a documentary about the slums of Mumbai, India and wonder how an all powerful, loving God could allow children He created to live in such impossible conditions. Then, you might hear about a child who just died from a terminal disease. We are constantly reminded that we live in a world full of suffering and evil. And, if you’re a normal human being, it makes you question if God is really there and, if He is there, why He doesn’t do more to stop suffering and evil.

We’re in the Christian season of Lent – a forty day period of time that leads up to Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Day. Lent is a time for Christians to reflect and meditate on the meaning of the central story of our faith – the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. This Lenten season we’re considering seven objections to the Christian faith that we hear quite often in our own culture. I’m calling the series: “Why Should I Believe? A Fresh Look At Old Doubts.” Why think about this subject? If one of our primary tasks is to be ready to share with others why we trust in and follow Jesus, we need to understand their questions so we can respond to them with gentleness and respect. But, additionally, we ourselves often have profound doubts about who Jesus is and what it means to be His follower. We often have the same doubts as non-Christians; we just don’t like to admit it. But if having doubts and asking questions can help you ultimately discover a deeper faith and a more informed faith, well and good! My hope is that as we ask and answer these questions, our faith will get stronger and be more alive by Easter Day. So, here’s today’s question: “Why should I believe in a God who allows suffering?” Let’s try to ask and answer two questions. First...

DOES SUFFERING CALL INTO QUESTION GOD’S EXISTENCE OR CHARACTER?

The answer is yes! Several polls conducted in recent years underline the fact that of the seven objections we’re considering this Lenten season, the fact of suffering is the single, greatest obstacle to faith in our culture. Last week we talked about the exclusivity of Christianity – that it claims to be the one, true religion. It’s a big obstacle, to be sure, but why God allows suffering is even

bigger. People who are sincerely interested in the Christian faith or who might find themselves enormously attracted to Jesus have a hard time getting past this issue. “If there is a good and loving God,” they ask, “why is there evil and suffering? If God is all powerful like Christians say He is, why doesn’t He just put a stop to terminal diseases, or tsunamis that kill tens of thousands of people, or a T.J. Lane who gunned down five students in Chardon, Ohio?” They see the presence of evil and the fact of suffering as evidence that either God doesn’t exist or that He’s neither good nor loving. Frankly, as a Christian, you might ask the very same questions. If you believe in a world ruled by an all powerful God who loves us, then answers to this question are hard to come by.

But, ironically enough, suffering can actually point to God’s existence. How’s that? Many times when a person objects to God’s handling of suffering, it’s based on a sense of fair play and justice derived from God Himself. Most people in our culture believe that people should not suffer, be hungry, suffer abuse or die a terrible death. But why? If you think evolution explains reality, you should buy into the theory that death, destruction and violence – the survival of the fittest – is all perfectly natural. What good reason does an atheist or a nonbeliever have for being outraged at injustice? Whenever someone says that something evil just ought not to be, it means he or she has an idea of what ought to be. If you’re sure this natural world is unjust and filled with evil, you assume the reality of some extra-natural standard by which you make your judgment. Couldn’t that standard be God Himself? That’s why evil and suffering can actually and ironically point to God’s existence.

Another observation: suffering neither proves nor disproves God’s goodness and love. Just because evil appears pointless to you, is it, therefore, pointless? You can make yourself the judge and jury of what seems pointless. Just because you can’t see or imagine a good reason why God might allow something to happen doesn’t mean there can’t be one. I think of the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. He was sold into slavery by his miserable brothers. If anyone had a reason to question God’s goodness and love, it was Joseph! But God had an incredibly wonderful purpose in Joseph’s suffering that was not apparent at the time. With time and perspective most of us can see good reasons or good results for at least some of the tragedy and pain that comes our way in life. Why isn’t it possible that, from God’s perspective, there are good reasons for all of them? We believe God is all knowing. Isn’t it possible to believe in a loving God who deliberately tolerates horrible things because He foresees that in the long run more people will be better and happier than if He miraculously intervened? God has demonstrated how the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the world - Jesus dying on the cross - ended up being the very best thing that has ever happened in the history of the world – eternal life for all who put their trust in Jesus. We’re going to celebrate God’s goodness and love by taking Communion at the end of this service. But wasn’t that at the expense of Jesus suffering horribly and the apparent all out triumph of evil?

Sure, many people use just the fact of suffering and evil to question God's existence or to suggest that He isn't good or loving. But there are reasonable responses to their doubts. The presence of evil and suffering in our world neither proves nor disproves God's existence or His character. Now, let's ask and try to answer another important question.

WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY'S PERSPECTIVE ON SUFFERING?

As I prepared today's message, I came up with at least seven key answers to that question. They all come from the Bible, although we won't have time today to look at a specific Bible passage concerning each one. And as I thought about each one, I realized again why Christianity's perspective on evil and suffering is the very best one out there. True, not everyone agrees with the logic of the Christian perspective. Not every question can be answered to everyone's satisfaction. There is still room for doubt. If you can find a more intellectually and emotionally satisfying perspective or a perspective that explains reality better than, by all means, follow it. But I doubt that you will.

First of all, the ultimate cause of all suffering is human sin and rebellion against God. God created this world as great and perfect in every way, but an alien intrusion prompted first by a being called Satan and then adopted by human beings destroyed God's good world. The Bible teaches that the effect of human sin - the resulting evil and suffering - has permeated every corner of our world. It implies that even nature is screwed up because of human sin which might explain natural disasters and the suffering they cause. So the blame lies with us human beings ultimately. God did His part perfectly; we're the ones who messed up. G.K. Chesterton, a brilliant British Christian who lived a century ago, said, "God had written... a play He had planned as perfect, but which had necessarily been left to human actors... who have since made a great mess of it." God is even less pleased with the moral and spiritual condition of this world than we are. The Bible is the story of His plan to restore and renew His creation to its original state of perfection.

Secondly, suffering is never denied or its effects minimized. Some other religions, specifically Buddhism, try to deny all pain and suffering. Christianity asserts that evil and suffering exist and is proof of our broken relationship with God. Part of what makes evil so evil is that it affects and hurts innocent people as well as guilty ones. As a result, the Bible never says that followers of Jesus won't or shouldn't have afflictions and trouble like everyone else. Suffering isn't some kind of evidence that God doesn't like you or even a sign you've messed up spiritually in a personal way. In fact, the Bible assumes every follower of Jesus will have troubles all through life. After all, Jesus did say, "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." (John 16:33 NLT) Christians face storms in their marriages, with their kids, in illness, with money and job situations, in the death of loved ones. We all endure storms

of all kinds, shapes and size just like everyone and anyone else the world over. You could say the Bible teaches that suffering is inevitable. True, some suffering in life is just the inevitable consequences of sin or stupidity. You can avoid a lot of that kind of suffering. But a lot of suffering is inescapable.

Some years ago now, a man named Jerry Sittser was driving the family van with his wife, mother and daughter on board. A drunken driver crossed into oncoming traffic and struck his vehicle. In a fraction of a second, Jerry's life changed forever. He watched his wife, mother and daughter all die before his eyes. In his book, entitled *A Grace Disguised*, he writes, "As I reflect on the story of my loss, I have learned, though entirely unique (as all losses are), it is a manifestation of a universal experience. Sooner or later all people suffer loss, in little doses or big ones, suddenly or over time, privately or in public settings. Loss is as much a part of normal life as birth, for as surely as we are born into this world we suffer loss before we leave it. It is not, therefore, the experience of loss that becomes the defining moment in our lives.... It is how we respond to loss that matters. The response will largely determine the quality, the direction, and the impact of our lives."

Here's a third perspective. God can use suffering to bring you to Himself. In other words, God can use life's trials, setbacks, failures and disappointments in order to get your attention. Whether it's to bring you to Himself for the first time ever or to bring you back to the Father's house after you've been out there wallowing around in the pigsty of life like the story of the prodigal son, God can and will use suffering to lead you to repentance. The Bible says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret...." (2 Cor 7:10 NLT) God will most definitely take you to the woodshed and worse in order to get you rightly related to Him! C.S. Lewis made this memorable statement: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Pain and suffering are frequently the means by which you get motivated to finally surrender to God and start to follow Jesus with all of your heart.

But not all of God's purposes in suffering are to punish or correct you. A major perspective of the Bible is this one: God uses suffering to transform and deepen your relationship with Him. Let's turn to 1 Peter 1:6-7 and look at it together. Peter was writing to a group of Christians living in what is now the country of Turkey. Apparently, they were starting to get persecuted for following Jesus. Nobody was getting killed yet – that would come later, of course. But at this time it was things like getting physically attacked or injured, losing your job or being economically affected in negative ways. It meant being ridiculed, scorned and hated. So what do we learn here? Well, again, God's people are not immune to suffering in life. Godly people will always have great struggles of all kinds. We also learn that no adversity or suffering in life just shows up randomly or appears there by chance. Every part of your life has meaning, purpose and value. And God either sends or allows every storm. Why? Suffering of all kinds has great

potential in the hands of God. Our suffering as Christians is never wasted. God can bring something good, worthwhile and beneficial out of it. Peter says your faith is like gold that needs refining. Afflictions have a way of testing the reality of your faith in God. They burn away the stuff in you that has no spiritual value or worth. It's not a guarantee problems will do that – just a potential. I can tell you as a pastor that sometimes people give up on God because of trials. But Peter is implying that tough times never destroy true faith; tough times just prove if your faith is real and authentic. Any and every kind of suffering in life can be used by God to fulfill His great purposes in your life – to know Him more and serve Him better.

I happened to catch a few minutes of a TV documentary on Hoover Dam last week. Back in 1935, the dam was built on the Colorado River between Arizona and Nevada. It's still recognized as one of the nation's engineering wonders. Hoover is an arch-gravity dam meaning that it's an arch laid over on its side. It's designed so that the more pressure that's applied against the dam by the water it's holding back, the more it's wedged into the solid rock on either side. The more pressure it receives, the stronger it gets. If your life is built upon and into the Solid Rock that is the Lord Jesus Christ, then the more pressure that comes against you, the more your life will get wedged deeper into Jesus and the stronger you will become.

A fifth perspective about suffering is also a major one in the Bible. Suffering is best evaluated from the perspective of eternity. That's clearly taught in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. The trials and troubles in life can be very heavy. These verses are not minimizing or trivializing the hard things that happen to you in this life. But when you compare them with your future in eternity, they seem light and temporary. When you realize all that God has given you – particularly salvation – and the God who stands behind that gift, it gives you a perspective about affliction that you could not get otherwise. What you're experiencing today may be taking a lot out of you, but it's nothing compared to what you're going to get. It may be very painful today, but it will be long forgotten in the eternal joy of what's coming. "Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered." (Heb. 5:8 NLT) If that was true of Jesus, than perhaps you have things to learn as well that only suffering can teach you. In fact, the Bible does say, "Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world." (1 Pt 4:13 NLT)

Six, suffering qualifies you to comfort others. That's one message found in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. When you are going through a very painful, hard time, who do you want to talk to and open your life up to? Isn't it the people who have experienced what you've experienced or, at least, people who have suffered greatly and found a way through it? God is the source of all comfort and compassion. He channels or funnels that through His people who have suffered, endured and stayed faithful to the Lord. I believe that's one way God redeems

the tough things that happen to you in life and makes some sense out of them. You may never be able to figure out why God allowed something painful to come into your life, but how you got through it by God's grace can be an enormous encouragement to other people who face similar struggles.

And here's a final perspective on suffering and it might be the most important one of all especially in light of our question today. Seven, God has not exempted Himself from suffering. He entered into and endured suffering in the person of Jesus. The many gods of Hinduism do not suffer. Allah, the god of Islam, doesn't suffer. Even the God of Judaism doesn't suffer, because Jesus is rejected as God's Son in Judaism. Only the God of Christianity enters into and experiences human suffering fully. Have you felt despair? So did Jesus. Have you been rejected? So did Jesus. Have you ever been lonely? So was Jesus. Have you ever been poor? Jesus was poor. Have you ever been treated unjustly? Jesus knows what that's like. Have you experienced deep grief because of the loss of loved ones? So did Jesus. Have you know incredible physical pain? Jesus did, too. Have you experienced the humiliation of being in prison? So did Jesus. Will you one day face death? Jesus experienced death in a terrible way. In Jesus, God experienced the depths of evil, suffering and pain.

There's a little play entitled "The Long Silence" that says it all. At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But a few groups near the front talked heatedly together with much belligerence. "How can God judge us? How can He know about suffering," snapped a young woman. She ripped open a sleeve on her dress to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror, beatings, torture and death." In another group, an African-American boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched for no crime but being black!" In another group, a pregnant teenager with sullen eyes murmured, "Why should I suffer? It wasn't my fault."

Far out across the plan there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and the suffering He permitted in His world. How lucky God was to live in Heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred! What did God know of all that human beings had been forced to endure in this world? God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said. So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he or she had suffered the most: a Jew, an African-American, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a child whose body was distorted. They consulted each other and at last they were ready to present their case.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man! "Let Him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of His birth be questioned. Give Him a task in life so difficult that even His family will think He's out of His mind.

Let Him be betrayed by His closest friends. Let Him face false charges, get tried by a prejudiced jury and be convicted by a cowardly judge. Let Him be tortured. Let Him feel what it's like to be terribly alone. Then let Him die. Let Him die so horrible a death that there can be no doubt that He died.”

As each representative announced his or her portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled there before God's throne. And when the last one had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. Because suddenly, everyone knew that God had already served His sentence.

Many people dismiss Christianity's explanation of and its perspectives on suffering. Faith can only exist in a world where having faith is difficult. I don't need to have faith to know that two plus two equals four or that there is a sun out there when it shines in my eyes. Any and every explanation or perspective on evil and suffering – biblical or unbiblical, Christian or non-Christian – demands faith of some kind. If you can find a better explanation than the one the Bible provides, follow it. If you can find one that matches up better with reality, believe it. Here's one undeniable fact about living in this world. You will suffer. I will suffer. That will test the truth of your perspective. Will it give you joy? Will it give you courage? Will it help you persevere? And will it lead you to God?