

You're Not Crazy to Believe that...The Only Hope In Suffering, 5/25/25

Intro our series "You're not crazy to believe that..." **Series Text Line: 302-217-6594**

In a poll a few years ago it was asked if you could ask God only one question, what would it be? The most common response was **why is there pain and evil in the world?**¹ I suppose this question could be the most common question of God in any era of human history. And this is not merely a philosophical question for us unless you have somehow lived a pain-free, sheltered life of rainbows and gumdrops...and if you have, just wait...live a little longer. We ask this question because of our visceral experience with pain and evil in this world. Suffering, heartbreak, disease, addiction, loneliness, chaos in us and the world around us, senseless tragedy constantly fed to us through the newscycle.

This problem of pain and evil was at one point considered by many atheists the nail in the proverbial coffin against the God of Christianity. **Atheist Philosopher J.L. Mackie put the problem like this, "If a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless evil, but because there is much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, the traditional good and powerful God could not exist."** AKA, How could God allow bad things to happen to good people?

"Nate, I thought you said this series was about compelling reasons for believing, this problem seems like a check box in the non-belief category." As we are going to see today, the problem of pain and evil, as Rebecca McLaughlin says, is **"not a wrecking ball that knocks Christianity down, but rather the cornerstone on which, painfully, brick by brick, it has always been built."** I hope to show you that Christianity provides the most glorious answer to the problem in the marketplace of ideas.

Now, when the problem is often posed, it's usually seen as a unique problem for Christianity, but this is not just a Christian problem. It's a problem for all religions and philosophies, and it certainly is for an atheistic worldview. Removing God from the equation of pain and evil in the world on the surface promises some relief. If there is no divine first cause, no meaning, no reason...just blind chance and pitiless indifference (as Richard Dawkins says), we can stop trying to read the tea leaves, and get on with life, finding whatever meaning you can get out of life and don't expect a higher power to help. But this philosophy of life falls apart just below the surface of the very ground it stands on.

Atheism: Two Problems of Pain and Evil. 1- No Category for Real Evil and Good.

Pastor Todd addressed this two weeks ago, so let me just touch it briefly. Nietzsche, the father of modern atheism, argued that if God is dead then there is no anchor for morality, no absolutes of good and evil, only what is practical for the survival of our species. Richard Dawkins **"We must deny the reality of evil if our argument is going to stay."** Here we see the relentless chain of no design, no purpose inevitably leading to no evil, no good... If all nature, even suffering dances to its DNA, and is meaningless, then there is no basis for calling anything good or evil.

¹ Randy Alcorn, *If God is Good...*

There is no basis for justice, love, no grounding for being morally outraged over scandals, genocide, rape, racism, or any other injustice we can imagine. MLK Jr. in his *Letters from Birmingham Jail* said, "If there is no divine higher law, there is no way to understand if something is just or not."

If there is no God, then how is any historical event unjust?"

Tim Keller in his landmark book, *The Reason for God*, "People who laugh at the claim that there is a transcendent moral order do not think that racial genocide or rape is just impractical or self-defeating, but that it is actually objectively wrong."

If you insist on a secular view of the world and yet you continue to pronounce some things right and some things wrong,

then I hope you see the deep disharmony between the world your intellect has devised and the real world that your heart knows exists."

#2 No Basis for Human Flourishing

On what grounding, on what greater vision or standard can a flourishing society be built? One of the fathers of atheism, Bertrand Russell, "Man is the product of causes, which had no pre-vision of the end they were achieving. All the labor of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the new day brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man's achievement must be buried beneath the debris of a universe of ruins. Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."² At least he's intellectually honest because that's where a non-God answer must start: despair, nothingness, extinction of all life...But how do you build on this a foundation of a robust moral life where we treat one another with equality, respect and love, look out for the weak and vulnerable, promote loyalty and self-sacrifice, qualities that humanity strives for. Yeah, give that a try and see where it leads, have we not seen societies attempt to build themselves on atheism? Haven't we already seen that experiment in Nazi Germany, Stalin's Communism and North Korea today?

A phenomenon we are seeing today is sort of a boomerang effect of the failed atheist answer to the problem of evil that has led many back to seeking God. More recently, Christian author, Andrea Dilley shared her experience coming back to Christianity from agnosticism. Raised by missionaries in Kenya, she was exposed to far more death and darkness than most children in western countries ever see. By the time she was a teenager she began to question God's goodness and by the time she was in her 20s, she rejected Christianity altogether. Eventually, she came back to faith. Here's what she said.

"When people ask me, what drove me out the doors of the church and then what brought me back, my answer to both questions is the same. I left the church in part because I was mad at

² Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship*.

God about human suffering and injustice. I came back to church because of the same struggle. I realized that I couldn't even talk about justice without standing inside of a theistic framework. In a naturalistic worldview, a parentless orphan in the slums of Nairobi can only be explained in terms of survival of the fittest. We're all just animals slumming it in a godless world fighting for space and resources. The idea of justice doesn't really mean anything. **To talk about justice you have to talk about objective morality and talk about objective morality you have to talk about God.**³

The insistence that something here is off, something is not how it should be, and our yearning inside of us for justice, love, meaning, beauty and a world put right, and at times the sense that we are compelled to do something about it are all signposts to the deep realities of a transcendent, good God who made us in his moral image and called us for something greater.

What is the Christian Response to the Problem of Pain and Evil?

The full response goes well beyond what we can tackle here in this short sermon, tonight in Christianity 101 we will go a little deeper into it, if you are interested in sitting in for that, 4pm.

The Bible is not shy about addressing the problem. Only three chapters into the Bible and we find that suffering and evil are already part of life on earth. The prophets throughout the OT write about the tension. The book of Job is a masterclass on the problem of suffering, and dedicates 42 chapters to this problem. David in the Psalms continually asks the questions of every sufferer, "Oh Lord, why?" And "Oh Lord, how long?" And as we will see, Jesus not only faces the problem head on, we come to find out the solution to the problem is why he came into the world. So let me address four questions, the first three we will touch on quickly.

How did pain and evil get here? Unlike the atheist worldview of denial and trivializing of pain and evil, the Biblical story says that pain and evil are real, but they are parasitic invasions, they are unnatural, not part of God's original creation. They are brought about by **Rebellion against God's Good and Perfect Creation**- Starting with the fallen angel, satan in eternity past (Isaiah 14) and the rebellion of Adam and Eve through the deceptive influence of satan (Genesis 3). The rebellion against God's goodness and shalom (harmony and peace), results in a series of curses- like a cosmic and moral chain reaction listed in Genesis 3, that deeply fractures the goodness and harmony of God's creation. So while we still experience cosmic and moral beauty, we also experience its deep dysfunction through both nature and nurture, suffering and death.

Why does God allow pain and evil? For reasons for which we cannot begin to fully grasp, and must hold in mysterious intention; God allows the temporary, finite invasion of pain and evil into the world. And while we don't know all the reasons why, the Bible tells us **he allows it for his ultimate good and glorious purposes**. And we have the promise that in it, he's at work for God. **Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.** While it's hard to see it in the moment, many

³ Quoted in Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*

of us are walking testimonies of God bringing beauty out of ashes, that give us just a peek into his divine and glorious plans.

Is there hope for an end to pain and evil?

The answer is an infinitely resounding **YES!** The story of the Bible ends with glorious beauty and goodness beyond our wildest imagination, with the return of the resurrected Jesus to conquer pain, evil, and the final enemy death. His declaration is *"Behold I am making all things new."* **Revelation 21:5.** Jesus himself promises no more tears, no pain, no mourning, no death in the presence of God himself forever that makes it all worth it. In fact the apostle Paul goes so far as to say, *The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.* (Romans 8:18).

St. Theresa of Avila, "When you get to heaven the first kiss from Jesus' mouth will make 100 years of utter misery look like one night in a bad hotel."

Does Christianity offer help and comfort in the pain now?

Oh, fellow sufferer, **YES!** do you know the vast storehouses of help and comfort found in the Christianity? Not only does Jesus give us a bright future that pierces the deepest darkness, not only does he provide us a new family, the church, to be his hands and feet of help and comfort in suffering, but He personally draws near to us Himself. The gospel story I most often cling to in my times of pain is the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in John 11.

Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother and friend of Jesus, falls sick. But they know Jesus, so healing is coming...right? Wrong. Instead **John 11:6** *So, when Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.* In the meantime, Lazarus dies. And it just doesn't make sense in the moment does it? He could have healed, but he doesn't. This is the harsh reality with which Christians must wrestle. Sometimes, we call for God in our pain, and he does not come immediately to rescue us from it. I remember my first raw experience with this as a teenager when my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. My family prayed, our church prayed, I prayed sincerely for healing. But the cancer spread and she suffered and died. Where was God? Did he not love me, my grandmother, did he not love Mary and Martha? This is the reality of living in this sin-soaked world.

Lazarus was in the tomb for 4 days by the time Jesus arrives. Martha runs out to meet Jesus filled with grief and unanswered questions. **John 11:21-22** *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."*

But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." This response wasn't out of expectation of a miracle resurrection, we know that because of what she says next. I think Martha was expressing, "Jesus, you *could* have done something, (he hadn't lost his powers), but you *didn't* do something. Jesus responds, *"Your brother will rise again."* (**John 11:23**). Martha says, "Sure Jesus one day we all will rise again at the end of time." This is what the Jewish people believed. We can almost hear her thinking...But what about now? What about our pain and suffering now, Jesus?

Martha stands where many of us stand in pain and heartbreak. We have all the future, ultimate promises too that Jesus will one day return and put the world back together, and make everything sad come untrue (as Tolkien once wrote in *Lord of the Rings*). But our pain is real and urgent. It is soothed by the future, but is there any help now?

Jesus looks her in the eyes and says, *John 11:25-26 "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die yet shall he live,*

and everyone who lives and believes in me, will never die. Do you believe this?" Jesus isn't just talking about Lazarus, he's talking to Martha as she is standing there in her deep grief, that her greatest need, her deepest meaning and purpose is not to have her brother back again (that's the resurrection), it's to have Jesus (the life). Jesus is claiming to be life itself. He is life in the face of suffering, he is life in the face of death.

Martha reaffirms her belief in him, and in runs Mary who weeps at the feet of Jesus for her brother. And, deeply moved and grieved and in his humanity, *Jesus wept. (John 11:35).* This is remarkable. Unlike the God of the deist, the Hindu, the Buddhist- Jesus is not impersonal, aloof, unflinching in the face of human suffering. The opposite is true. He is the God who inhabits our suffering. Isaiah 53 prophesied that he would be a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrow. He bears the heartbreak of our suffering, he is close to the brokenhearted...Have you invited him to hold you, weep with you and carry your heartbreak with you? He's the only God with tears. Even though he knows the end of the story and will wipe away every tear, it doesn't stop him from grieving with us in our moment as our sympathetic high priest.

People around Jesus say, "How he loved him!" And it's an incredible comfort to know this is how Jesus feels about each one of us. He has a deep sympathy and compassion for us. But if this is all he was, a cosmic sympathizer- like holding a puppy when you are sad, but he couldn't do anything about our pain, and was unable to do anything to stop death and evil...that's not enough, that's not a god that deserves our devotion.

But this isn't the end of the story. To everyone's shock, Jesus upends reality, he reverses the curse of pain, evil and death, in a moment in time. Jesus orders the stone to be rolled away, and he shouts, *"Lazarus, come out!"* And the dead man came out alive. And we come to see this miracle is just practice, a signpost of what would be repeated not long after, this time Jesus would bear not only our pain and sorrow on his shoulders, but our sin that separates us from God to the cross. In Christianity we have the only God who enters pain and takes on the worst of evil himself. He dies to pay for it, to kill it once and for all. He was buried in the tomb like Lazarus was. Until the astonishing moment when Jesus upends reality once again, in the resurrection from the grave.

And in his glorious resurrection we see indeed the ultimate mystery that somehow God can take evil and bring good out of it. It is precisely in the excruciating pain and at the hands of the deepest evil that God accomplishes the greatest good- the substitute for the sin of mankind,

and the promise of one day his return to wipe away every tear, remove the curse of pain and evil, and give us eternal life.

So while we don't have all the answers, Christianity offers a compelling reason for hope in our suffering. "He is so committed to our ultimate happiness that he is willing to plunge into the greatest depths of suffering himself.

He understands us, he has been there, and he assures us that he has a plan to eventually wipe away every tear.

Someone might say, "But that's only half an answer to the question 'why?' Yes, but it is the half we need." -*Reasons for God*, Tim Keller

Other Works Consulted

The Problem of God, Mark Clark

The Problem of Life, Mark Clark

Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, Timothy Keller

The Reason for God, Timothy Keller

Confronting Christianity, Rebecca McLaughlin

The Problem of Pain, C.S. Lewis