

February 11, 2018  
 “God and Suffering”

This sermon is based on *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014. See chapter 23.

*I will give a similar intro as I did the last 2 weeks. Here’s a picture for it:*



*(prayer slide)*



When I was a young child, the even younger son of a neighbor was tragically killed in an accident. I remember hearing someone, perhaps a friend of my mother’s, say something suggesting that God needed another angel so had the boy killed. I was shocked and horrified. This was not the God that I heard about in Sunday school. The comment, and its implications, affected me so deeply that I put it away and didn’t unpack it for many years.



Today I’m going to pull it out and publicly address the controversy: If God loves us, and is all-powerful, then why do bad things happen to us?

We need to start by understanding God’s providence and sovereignty. Hamilton defines providence this way:

...God’s involvement in superintending, governing, guiding, directing, and caring for the universe and, more specifically, the affairs of this world and the people who live in it.  
 p. 220

Because God does all these things, God is sovereign—God has supreme power and authority over his creation.

And because of God’s providence and sovereignty, some Christians believe that everything that happens in our lives and world is caused by God—it is his will. Hamilton calls this the “God the micro-manager” model. By this model, the person’s comment about God having the boy killed

is right on target. We also have to accept that war, cancer, drug addiction, and child abuse are a part of God's plan. Do you have a problem with that? I do too, so let's look deeper.



What does the Bible say about this? We have to imagine the mind set of the Biblical authors. Three thousand years ago, everything that no one understood was believed to have been caused by God. Why was there a drought? No one knew about the atmosphere, humidity, the impact of temperature or prevailing winds; therefore, God must have caused the drought. Your mother is dying? No one knew the mechanisms of cancer or asthma or heart disease; so, God must be behind her illness and death.



This is the reason there are many passages in the Bible that reflect the God as micro-manager model. The authors' view of God's providence was based on what they saw at the time. So, if you were unfaithful to God, you suffered. If you followed his laws, you were rewarded.

We read things in the Bible like Deuteronomy 7: 12-13:

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your ancestors. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land—your grain, new wine and olive oil—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you.

And the opposite is also true in Deuteronomy 30: 17-18:

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.



But over time, even Biblical authors began to question these ideas. We see this very clearly in the book of Job. You remember the story. The opening setting is the heavenly court, where God meets with “the accuser.” The accuser has been unsuccessful in finding anyone to accuse. God proudly holds up his servant, Job, saying:

“Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” Job 1: 8

The accuser shares that Job is only faithful because God has done good things for him. If bad things happened, Job would curse God. A deal is made. The accuser reverses all the good God has done in Job’s life to see what would happen.

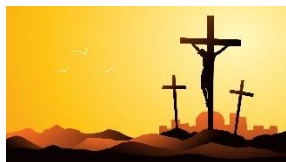


The bulk of the book is a conversation that Job has with his friends. They hold to the common view that Job must have done something wrong to deserve his misfortune, and he needs to repent. But Job insists he has done nothing to repent for.

This story teaches us many things, but I want to raise up just three. First, the prevailing view that God rewards the good and punishes the bad is challenged and refuted. So I’m pretty sure that makes it OK for us to challenge this view as well. Second, Job remains faithful and trusts God despite all he has lost and suffered. I think we are called to do the same. Third, Job’s understanding of why God allows suffering is that if it’s not punishment, then it is part of a test of faith. Both mean that it is God who inflicts the pain.

I don’t think the idea of suffering being a test really helps us. It’s still being dispensed by the God who is supposed to love us. And we’re still stuck with the idea that God caused my daughter to be abused, or caused my father to die so that my faith can be tested. We’re left thinking, “What am I supposed to learn from this? And why did my loved one have to suffer in order for me to learn it?” That is a lonely, painful place to be. It tends to make people more angry than thoughtful, and it’s the cause of many people losing their faith or leaving the church.

I think we need to look for a better way, and scripture helps us do that.



In the New Testament, we are told that Jesus took our punishment for our sins. So it says in 1 Peter 2: 24-25:

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

And in Romans 5: 9-11:

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Hebrews 9: 26b:

But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.



Here’s the point: ***God doesn’t punish us for our sin because Jesus took the punishment for us.*** “Whatever punishment we think we deserve from God has been borne by Christ on the cross.” (Hamilton, p. 225)

That’s not the same as saying our actions don’t have consequences. Punishment is God sending us pain as a direct result of what we do. Consequences are the natural outcomes of our sin. God doesn’t torture us because we did something wrong, but he also doesn’t necessarily save us from suffering the consequences of our bad choices.



I once knew a woman who I met when she wrote my church, which was in her home community. She said she was imprisoned for selling drugs, which she turned to in order to support her own addiction. Her family had cut off contact with her. Her purpose in writing was to ask for a Bible and devotional literature. She had no other way of getting them. I gladly sent a Bible and a couple other books to her, and this began a correspondence. She shared that she

wasn't angry at society or her family. She understood her incarceration and loneliness were direct consequences of the bad choices she had made. I never heard her blame God for punishing her; rather, she suffered the natural outcomes of her behavior.

It happens to everybody. Fail to study for your exam and you'll get a bad grade. Neglect your bills and your credit rating will go down. Neglect your marriage and you could end up in divorce court.

God doesn't punish us—Jesus already took our punishment. But we do suffer from natural consequences of our bad behavior.



I don't think God sends us pain and suffering to teach us anything, either. Would you do that to your own child? Would you purposefully send them pain and calamity to make them suffer to "teach them a lesson?" Then how can we think that the God who loves us more perfectly and profoundly than we can ever love each other would do so?

So if God doesn't cause our pain, if he isn't sending it to us to punish us or to teach us, why does it exist? Here's the answer I've come up with after years of study, prayer and experience.



The Bible tells us that after God created us, he put us in a beautiful garden where we would have everything we needed and no evil would touch us. In this place of peace and beauty, we lived with him in innocence and perfect union. But, we weren't content with simply accepting what we had been given. We wanted to live on our own terms. And so God set us free. I know we often talk about this as "the fall," and that God "turned us out" of the garden. But I like to think of it as setting us free. We became free to make our own choices, live by our own rules, follow our own will. The problems though, is that ***the world where we are free of God is also the world where there is sin and chaos.***

Sin—violence, hate, greed, jealousy, selfishness. Chaos—illness, accidents, earthquakes, wildfires, mudslides.

***God tried to give us a perfect world where we would never suffer, but we chose this world, where we are free, including free to suffer.*** It's not about God allowing bad things to happen to us, it's about God allowing us to make our own choices. And *we chose this.*



But...God loves us. We are his beloved children. He may give us freedom to live on our own terms, and freedom to suffer, but **he never abandons us. Even when we suffer, God is working for our good.** Hamilton quotes a newspaper clipping that might help us make sense of this.

Suffering is not God's desire for us, but it occurs in the process of life. Suffering is not given to teach us something, but through it we may learn. Suffering is not given to punish us, but sometimes it is the consequence of our sin or poor judgment. Suffering does not occur because our faith is weak, but through it our faith may be strengthened. God does not depend on human suffering to achieve his purposes, but sometimes through suffering his purposes are achieved. Suffering can either destroy us, or it can add meaning to our life.

**God is not the author of our suffering, but through his mighty and merciful grace, he can pull good out of anything.** In the times of our worst suffering, loss, sin or pain, God is with us. God knows our suffering. His son has been where we are. God is present to us in the midst of it, and God can redeem us in spite of and because of it.



That woman who was imprisoned? She was released, and she came to church a few times. During her time of suffering God worked in her life. He used her brokenness to get through to her. When she came home, she was able to reconcile with some of her family, including her children. She came to a stronger faith. The last time I saw her, she was moving to another community where she hoped the temptation to abuse drugs would be less. She sinned. She suffered for it, but God was present in it, working for her redemption.



God is sovereign. He has supreme power and authority over his creation, including us. But that doesn't mean that everything that happens is his will. It does mean that **sin, chaos, evil, illness, accidents, disasters and even death will never have the final word in our lives.** Through our Savior Jesus Christ, there is always hope, always growth, healing and new life. As Jesus said in John 16: 33:

***“...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”***