

Evil, Pain, Suffering - and God

Psalm 13:1-2 NLT

God is good all the time, and all the time God is good. Have we ever wondered - in a moment of crisis or pain or suffering or in the face of evil itself - is that actually true? Is God good? Is he *really* good all the time? Is he good *to us*? Maybe we lost a job. Maybe our parents got divorced. Maybe we were betrayed by a spouse or a loved one died too soon. Maybe we've been battling depression, or temptation, or dealing with disease. Maybe we were abused. Or, maybe we think on a bigger scale and we see starving children in the world. We see wars breaking out all over the place - innocent people suffering.

Seventy per cent of Americans say the biggest challenge they have to their personal faith in God is the presence of evil, suffering, and pain all around them. Seventy per cent say that's the number one obstacle they experience to their faith. *Why would God let it happen? If God is good, why didn't he stop it? Why didn't he fix it? Why didn't he heal it when we asked him - when we prayed so much?* Evil and suffering are not contrary to God's existence or to God's goodness, or contrary to Scripture, but are actually central to the message of the Bible.

Scripture tells us is that Christianity *alone* can make sense of, give meaning to, and offer a solution for the evil and suffering that we all experience. The Bible does not avoid pain, evil, and suffering, but documents throughout Scripture countless expressions of pain, rage, evil, suffering, and confusion - and much of it was suffered by the very heroes of the faith that we often celebrate. How about King David? David, a man described as a man after God's own heart, a man of faith, chosen by God, called and anointed, walking in the power of God, seeing the miracles of God, and experiencing the blessing of God.

In Psalm 13:1 David said, *"Oh Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way? How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day?"* Have we ever felt that way? *"God, do you care? God, are you there? God, can you even hear me?"* David, the man of faith, the man after God's own heart experienced this. David lost a child abruptly. He was chased around in the desert by enemies for years and years. He was persecuted unjustly. He experienced much evil, pain, and suffering. And yet, he was a man who walked with God and trusted him with everything he had.

How about John the Baptist? Jesus declared that there was none born among women that was greater than John the Baptist, and all the way up until the time Jesus came, none was born greater than him. John, the cousin of Jesus, literally prepared the way for the Messiah. John was an important guy who knew God, walked with God, and trusted God. And yet, while Jesus was walking the earth, John found himself locked in a prison, feeling lost and abandoned, imprisoned for doing the very thing that God called him to do. Ultimately, he lost his head over it, but before that, in one of these human moments, when he was still sitting in prison, he made a statement in Matthew 11:2.

John the Baptist, it says, heard about all the things that the Messiah was doing. He was healing people, blessing people, and multiplying things. John was hearing about all this, and yet, he's sitting in prison going, *"What going on? Did he forget about me?"* So, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, *"Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for somebody else?"* In the humanness of that moment, the very one declaring, *"This is the Messiah whose sandals I'm not worthy to unstrap"* was experiencing suffering and was saying, *"Did I get this right? Are we looking for somebody else? Because, I'm in here not feeling very blessed right now."*

Jesus sent word back to him and encouraged him - and gave him a little loving rebuke, too - saying, *"It's Me."* And he got his trust back after that. There's a prophet in the Psalms that we read about named Asaph. He was a prophet, and a worship leader of the tabernacle choir during his time. He wrote twelve of the Psalms in the Bible, and he was a man who was very close to God, and very *loved* by God. And yet, Asaph looked around at one point in his life and saw evil people prospering all around him and mocking God.

Meanwhile, Asaph himself was suffering and experiencing much pain and sorrow, and said in Psalm 73:11, *"Does the Most High even know what's happening? Look at these wicked people enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply. Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason? I get nothing but trouble all day long. Every morning brings me pain."* It's okay to take our weighty questions to God. God can handle our questions and our doubts. He can handle our moments of weakness and our not understanding what's going on. It's okay to start there. *How could a good God allow all of this evil and pain and suffering to go on?*

If love is a choice, *suffering* has to be a possibility. The only way love can be possible is for the opposite to also be possible. We have a God who declares that he wants a relationship with us. He desires that we choose him of our own free will because of who he is, and that requires our having the ability to *choose* - which means that evil and sin are a choice that we and all eight billion others of us get to make. It means because there's a choice to have relationship *with* God, there's also a choice *not* to have relationship with God - which makes evil, pain, and even chaos possible.

Choices create the opportunity for bad things. When asked how he reconciled God's divine sovereignty with the idea of our own personal responsibility, Charles Spurgeon said, "*I don't reconcile friends.*" In other words, these two things don't *need* to be reconciled - they are *friends* - they work together hand-in-glove. There isn't one without the other. They're not two separate things. They're two *integral* things. Is God sovereign and in control of ultimate outcomes? *Yes* - but also, we're given free will and are personally held accountable for our decisions.

Do our decisions have consequences? *Yes*. God does not control the "inputs." There are eight billion of us on this planet putting in all kinds of our own inputs from our own hearts and from our own free wills. God doesn't control all the *inputs*, but he says, "*I will govern the outputs.*" In other words, God governs the ultimate *outcomes* of these things. There's going to be all kinds of crazy inputs which have consequences that affect other people, but God says, "*If you walk with me, you will know me, and I will guarantee you an ultimate outcome I design for your good. I will take all of the crazy inputs and I will weave them and turn them into something that is ultimately a good output that will bring Me glory and will ultimately bring you close to Me.*"

Is God sovereign? Yes. Are we also responsible for our choices? Yes. Does God control every decision that we make? No - and Scripture is clear about this. In fact, the Bible speaks hundreds of times about people choosing and being responsible for their choices and the consequences of those choices. The Bible also speaks about God being sovereign and accomplishing his purpose, and we live in the tension between those two things. So what is evil ultimately the result of? Evil is ultimately the result of *sin*. And evil, like sin, is far more pervasive and widespread than even the news would have us believe. It's an even more comprehensive infection worldwide than we realize.

In fact, Scripture says that we're born *riddled* with the very nature of evil and sin that produces the nasty stuff we all experience. Romans 8:20 says that creation itself has been subjected to the futility of evil and sin, and is in a state of brokenness right now - that things aren't as they should be - *not yet*. But, evil can only exist as a parasite in a good thing - like rust in a car. We can take all of the rust out of a car, but we can't take all the car out of the rust. If we do that, then the rust ceases to exist - the rust can't exist without the good car.

Or, maybe we could liken it to cancer. We can take all the cancer out of a body and we'll have a healthier body - but we can't take all the *body* out of the *cancer*. The cancer couldn't even exist in the first place. This tells us that evil requires *good* and the Bible says that good requires *God*. So, rather than evil bringing us to a false conclusion that God must not be there, evil actually does the opposite. It's pointing *to* God - to a God who is *good*. Evil can only exist as a parasite to that which God created - which was *good*.

Something can't be bad or immoral unless something else is moral and good. In other words, the shadows prove the sunshine. We can't have a shadow unless there's light. Our very offense and indignation at evil when we see it, is evidence of God's homing beacon inside of us that's meant to lead us to him. The reason we're offended by evil, suffering, and pain is because we know it's not supposed to be that way - that's not the way God *designed* things to be. Our witnessing it is meant to draw us to God and not away from him. Evil is evidence *for* God, not evidence that there is no God.

Especially in America, there's this false idea that most people are good - most people are *decent*. And there's this evil out there, like radon gas, oppressing all of these "good people." *"We're all good people who don't deserve this evil, right? God knows my heart. I have a good heart."* But, the reality is that there is a very fragile set of conditions we all live in that makes us falsely believe we're pretty good people - and it doesn't take much of a push or a squeeze to reveal the true nature on the inside of us - a nature that can only be changed or redeemed by Jesus Christ.

We have this false view of the world that there's a bunch of us *good* guys being oppressed by the *bad* guys, but Scripture paints a different picture of the "bad" and the "worse" - the evil and the *more-developed* evil. Until we stop imagining ourselves as innocent and good apart from the grace of God itself, we won't understand *anything* about the truth of the world we live in. Scripture tells us *"no one is righteous - not one."* Evil is not like radon gas seeping up out of the ground and just *"affecting"* us. The Bible says that evil has an address. The address of evil is the human heart. This is where evil resides - *right here in the human heart*.

Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?"

This is what we're born with. And there's over a hundred other Bible passages that describe the natural state of the human heart, calling it *"evil, hard, rebellious, impure, corrupt, stubborn, proud, and idolatrous."* And we're like, *"Oh yeah, I know that guy. I met that guy."* But, unfortunately, we are that guy. It's *all* of us. It's a comprehensive infection. It's like an oil spill in the ocean, just leaking out everywhere and destroying all the life in it. It would have done no good to just clean up all of the mess, because if they cleaned up all of the gunk from the oil spill, more oil would just keep coming. The only way to really clean up the mess of that oil spill was to stop it at its source.

We look at evil like this and say, *"God, why don't you just fix that problem, and fix that problem, and get rid of that evil?"* And God says, *"No. I'm not here to just deal with the symptoms and the situations caused by evil. I'm here to deal with the source of evil, to stop it at its source, and that source is your heart. I've given you a solution for this called the Gospel, and I'll give you a new heart."*

Evil's source is a heart that's disconnected from the God who is good. The gospel goes to the heart of the problem which is the human heart itself - and changes it. For many of us, when we experience evil or suffering or pain because of other people's hearts, our response is to run *from* God, to hide from God, to get bitter at God, to get angry at God. But, the more we pull away from God in response to evil, the more that same evil will manifest itself in our own heart, and we'll become the very thing we say we hate. The only solution to it is to not run *from* God, but to him. Evil's meant to point us back to the only One who is good.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 MSG

"I'll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed. I'll put my Spirit in you and make it possible for you to do what I tell you and live by my commands."

This is what God's offering. He's saying, *"I will fix the source of the problem. I'm going to cut off the oil leak. I'm going to repair the oil leak by giving you a new heart. But you need to come get it."* Why do bad things happen to good people? They don't. Bad things happen to bad people. You know, something bad only happened to somebody good *one time* - his name was Jesus. And he volunteered for it on the cross to suffer in our place and for our sake so that we could have new hearts - so that we could be *transformed* by the work of God in our lives - so that he could produce the only real good out of any of us. This is the message of the Gospel.

We don't understand how bad sin really is. We flirt with it. We engage with it. We play around with it. But the same little bits of sin that we play around with and act like it's no big deal is the same root of sin that produces all of the worst kinds of evil all across the world. A right understanding of evil will make us hate *sin*, the source of it - not God, who's the solution for it. God didn't stay removed from our suffering just sitting on his holy throne watching us all suffer. He stepped *into* our suffering in Jesus Christ. He stepped into *our* experience. He became a man. He experienced everything *we* experienced.

He suffered more than we *ever* will. and he did it unjustly on our behalf. He stepped into our suffering. The cross is where God takes evil seriously enough to suffer for it himself. At the cross, God didn't just explain suffering - he absorbed it. The worst evil in history perpetrated against Jesus became the means of the ultimate greatest *good* in history. Jesus' suffering was transformed into glory and became an invitation and salvation for all of us. God can do the same thing with our suffering, our pain, and the evil we experience. He doesn't promise we won't experience any, but he promises if we'll bring it to him, he can *transform* it just like *his* was transformed - and that we're *not alone* in it - he's in it with us.

2 Corinthians 4:8-10 AMP *"We are pressured in every way [hedged in], but not crushed; perplexed [unsure of finding a way out], but not driven to despair; hunted down and persecuted, but not deserted [to stand alone]; struck down, but never destroyed; always carrying around in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the [resurrection] life of Jesus also may be shown in our body."*

Matthew 28:20 AMP *Jesus said, "I am with you always [remaining with you perpetually - regardless of circumstance, and on every occasion], even to the end of the age."*

"Where sin and evil abound, guess what? Grace abounds all the more." He says, "I'm not saying you won't experience the sin and the suffering and the evil and the pain, but I'm going to give you ten times more grace than the suffering itself if you'll run to me and not from me."

The promise isn't an *escape* from evil, pain, and suffering, it's the promise that he will allow us to have the endurance to go *through* it and have the ultimate deliverance *from* it - that he will bring good from evil and joy from mourning - and nothing and no one in the universe can make or fulfill that promise to us except for God.

Corrie ten Boom was a Christian in the Netherlands who loved the Jewish people. She and her family were known for hospitality and ministry and hosting Bible studies when the Nazis started abducting and persecuting Jews and sending them to concentration camps in 1940. Corrie and her family began hiding over 800 Jews and got them to safety until her whole family was betrayed to the Gestapo and all of them were taken away to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Her father died within a few days and she remained there with her sister Betsy. She was fifty-two years old and stuck in barracks with 1400 women in a space designed for four-hundred.

They were daily tortured and abused and starved. Their barracks were so infested with fleas that they were bitten by them all day long, and yet, her sister Betsy would say, *"There's no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still."* And, that same morning, they began to praise God for the fleas infesting their barracks because they realized that the guards didn't want to come in and check up on them for fear of the fleas, which gave them the freedom to have Bible studies. They started preaching the gospel in the concentration camp, and Jews started coming to Christ as a result of their testimony.

After Betsy died, and because of a clerical error, Corrie was miraculously released, and she spent the rest of her life preaching the gospel and talking about God's sovereignty in the midst of suffering, and his goodness in the midst of pain, until one day she came face to face with one of the guards who persecuted her in that prison and got to forgive him to his face - all because of the power of a transformed heart and the gospel and God working in the midst of suffering.

A Poem by Corrie ten Boom - Life is but a Weaving

My life is but a weaving between my God and me. I cannot choose the colors He weaveth steadily. Oft' times He weaveth sorrow; and I in foolish pride, forget He sees the upper and I the underside. Not 'til the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly will God unroll the canvas and reveal the reason why. The dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned. He knows, He loves, He cares; nothing this truth can dim. He gives the very best to those who leave the choice to Him.

At some point, we have to move past *"how could this happen to me?"* to *"what am I going to do with it and who am I going to give the pieces to?"* It's just like the weaver with the loom, and God is working the loom of his plan. Here's our life - a spaghetti-mess of good and bad and evil and junk and pain - and we have to decide, are we going to take the good things and give it to the Weaver and let him feed it into the loom? Are we also going to take the ugly things, the bad things, and give it to him? - give him the pieces of the evil and the junk and let him feed it into his loom?

Can we give him the things in-between and give it to him and let him feed it into his loom and get rid of the spaghetti - give it to God and say, *"God, whatever you want to do with this, God, whatever you want to make out of this, I'm giving it to you. Feed it into the loom."* Because the backside of a loom looks like a mess of threads and cords. Until we see the finished work and he flips it around, and all of a sudden the backside becomes like the Bible says, *"he knits our physical body bodies together in our mother's womb"* and he also knits our earthly lives together on his loom if we will bring him the pieces. God builds with brokenness. Our mess is his material, and ultimately, God can take what was our greatest *misery* and turn it into our greatest *ministry* if we will just bring him the pieces instead of running away.

Asaph, the worship-leader prophet, after complaining to God, said, *"God, did I keep my heart pure for nothing? All I have is pain every day."* He then comes to his senses later in that same passage and says this in Psalm 73:17, *"Then I went into your sanctuary, oh God, and I finally understood. Then I realized that my heart was bitter and I was all torn up inside. I was so foolish and ignorant. I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you. Yet I still belong to you. You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny. Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth."* ...and that's the conclusion that every man or woman of God ultimately comes to - *no matter what they face.*

Prayer

Father, You alone are good. Lord, You alone can fix our hearts and the source of the problem. We say, God take our hearts, and exchange our hearts for a new heart - a heart of flesh - a heart of feeling - a heart renewed by Your Spirit. Right now, by faith, we come and bring to You our mess. We bring to You our brokenness. We bring to You our pain and our suffering and our junk and the results of this world that doesn't know You. And God, we're asking, would You feed these strands of stuff into Your loom today? God, would You weave something out of our mess? God, would you create something beautiful out of something ugly? God, only You can do it. By faith we're bringing it all to You. In Jesus' name. Amen

