

## “How is God Loving and Just When ...?”

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Genesis 1:27-28

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

Job 1:13-22, 3:1-5, 11

One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother’s house, a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was still speaking, another came and said, “The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was still speaking, another came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was still speaking, another came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you.” Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing.

After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. Job said: “Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds settle upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it.

“Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?”

Suffering, unanswered prayers and the unfairness of life can lead us to question God's goodness, sometimes even to question God's existence. We watch the news in horror. Natural disaster – storm, mudslide, flood, it doesn't matter which. Devastation. Hundreds, thousands fleeing their homes. So many lives lost. Even if we don't say it ourselves we hear others ask, how can you still believe in God?

There's a word for this wondering ... *theodicy*. How can a God who is loving and just let these things happen? Either God must not be all-powerful or else God isn't as loving as we believe. How do we fit our belief in a loving God with the world's suffering?

Our expectations about how God is supposed to be leave us confused. When God's behavior doesn't match our assumptions we're confused, disillusioned. Some believe that just by being Christian God will bless them and nothing bad will happen. In truth, searching our bibles, such assumptions fly out the window. Instead of comfortable living, we find the bible's full of stories of suffering and about people refusing to let go of their faith. Moses does as God asks but at times he's so miserable he asks God to kill him. Job is about a person suffering terribly who

clings to his faith. Jesus is tortured and executed. Most of his first disciples are killed as well. Far from a life of bliss, the bible describes the persevering faith of people who trust in God in spite of everything.

Another thing the bible doesn't say is that everything happens for a reason. How often we've heard, or maybe said, such words – for the best of reasons. Someone's in a bad place. We hope the idea that this suffering is purposeful will help. And yet, if everything happens for a reason, doesn't this mean God planned for this or that particular tragedy? God willed for it to happen? And if God willed it, then, in effect, God made it happen? Think about it. Tens of thousands of people die each day from starvation-related illnesses and malnutrition.

Is this God's will? Not at all! Scripture is clear that God intends for those of us with resources to work to help those in need. Closer to home, why go to the doctor when you're sick if getting sick is part of God's plan? Why wear seat belts? If a person did some horrible thing we'd find it monstrous. Why would we believe our loving God would want such things to happen? This cannot be true and yet such words are said. People have been taught that terrible disappointments or losses are God's will. No wonder they turn from God.

Jesus says, "The wise one builds their house upon the rock." Let's look at three bedrock ideas that can help us reconcile God's love and justice with the world's suffering. The first one comes from Genesis. Whether you understand creation through a big bang, quantum mechanics or six days God is behind these processes. Our text explains that God gives human beings responsibility for taking care of creation. God gives us tools for the task – intellect and conscience to discern right from wrong. Through the ages, God sends teachers and prophets. God sends Christ to show us the way, the truth and the life. Jesus reminds us of God's intention for humankind – that we're to love God and everyone else, that we are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger. When people are hungry, God seldom sends manna from heaven. God sends us. When people are sick or homeless, God sends us. When people need encouragement, God sends us. God sends us and people like us to work for justice, to offer hope, and to practice mercy. The key way God works in the world is through people.

Our second bedrock idea is that God gives us free will. Being able to choose between right and wrong is an essential part of being human. But this freedom allows us not only to choose God's way but to choose another way that could lead to suffering – for ourselves or others. In the second Genesis creation story, Adam and Eve are free to decide whether or not they'll eat of that Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The tree represents the freedom God gives – to choose God's way or not. If we want to read a verse about God's love we don't have to look for John 3:16. This is love. To allow us freedom, knowing we might choose not to love God back.

Our third bedrock idea to help us make sense of God's love in the face of suffering is that we tend to be drawn to things that aren't part of God's hope for us. Historically this is called sin. Hebrew and Greek words for this mean "to stray from the path" – God's path – or "to miss the mark." Hence that wording in today's prayer of confession.

In that story of Adam and Eve, the serpent represents temptation. All three characters rationalize, interpreting God's plan in ways that suit them. How often do I feel drawn to do something I shouldn't be doing? I may follow God's way well sometimes but each time I take temptation's path, some part of God's paradise in my life is lost.

God gifts us with this freedom. But when we misuse it, creation suffers. Creation also suffers

through what we call natural disasters. Today, we know these are actually part of the earth's processes. Plate tectonics keep the planet from overheating. Storms cool the atmosphere. Without these systems, life would cease to exist.

When disasters strike – especially in areas of great poverty – our hearts cry for the people there. Yet did God cause these people to be impoverished? Did God set them living in unsafe locations? Isn't it rather a misdistribution of wealth that leads to loss? God's primary way of helping people in need is other people. God cares for them by sending others to offer care. Our call as Christians is to provide whatever we have to offer for those in need. Much of the world's suffering comes about because people don't listened or choose not to answer God's call to be God's hands, feet and voice.

A second category of human suffering is that caused by people's choices, as we misuse our freedoms. Those of us who are parents have learned how hard it is to stand by as our children make choices that are not good for them. God won't take away our ability to choose. But nor will God deliver us from the consequences of our choices. If God did or if God limited our freedom so tragedies didn't happen, would we really like that? If God made it so we never did anything really wrong, we would be more like pets or toys than loved ones.

Terrible things happen in the world. How could God let them happen? Yet, one person seldom acts alone. It takes others who are willing to go along with it, and more who look the other way – each exercising the gift God gives them to choose. When we look at devastations from this perspective, we begin to understand more clearly how suffering can happen even with a loving God.

The final type of suffering is the kind that come with illness. People used to believe disease was a sign of sin, but how can we think God would punish us this way. Jesus devoted much of his ministry to healing the sick. When loved ones get sick, when they die, we grieve. For a while, we may be angry. After his wife died, one man would go to her grave and shout at God. Yet even this shouting is an act of faith. It indicates you believe someone's listening.

Hopefully, you've gotten the idea that we have some misconceptions about faith. Many people reject God in the face of suffering but rejecting God takes away our best source of hope, comfort and strength. It's not a lack of faith to say that God's not in charge of everything or that everything doesn't happen for a reason. Admitting you have questions takes a strong faith. We will suffer during this life. Faith doesn't change that. It does assure us that suffering won't have the last word. Whatever bad things happen in this life, God will use, God will bend and shape to serve God's good purposes.

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This sermon is adapted from chapter one of Adam Hamilton's book, *Why? Making Sense of God's Will*.