

Why Do The Innocent Suffer?

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 03/01/20

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In the land of Uz there was once a man, a great man, famous the world over, named Job. Job was even famous in heaven. Even God was proud of his most noble of His servants -- until one day a tough question is raised, right there in chapter 1, verse 9: Does Job fear God for nothing? You have blessed him, his possessions have increased. Does Job serve God for nothing? Awfully good questions -- not just about Job, but about you and me, and about the simplistic, idea that says the righteous are rewarded, and the wicked are punished. If you serve God, if you love God, the question is, Why?"

Why do the innocent suffer? People feel some need to give neat, tidy answers -- usually false: "God needed her in heaven" -- but what kind of God has such selfish needs? "He's in a better place." If heaven is so much better, why are people lining up, rushing to get out of here?

Then there are those, who portray God as vindictive, who say that the 49 massacred at the PULSE night club in Orlando was God's punishment on gays. Job's friends offered this kind of nonsense, and he rightly waved off their counsel.

Here is a good starting point: God is not sadistic. God is love. A God who childishly gets even, lashes out, strikes back is no God. I will not serve that kind of God.

God could have created a perfect world, with perfect people, no illness, no evil, no flaws. But God is more interested in relationship than in perfection. Robots cannot love; love can never be programmed into computer code. God runs the risk of pain and suffering, hoping for love.

Of course we bring some suffering on ourselves. This week my nurse practitioner told me that if I could avoid some problems if I exercise a bit more. A gun fired in bravado, drugs peddled to kids. And it's not just that we make a bad choice or two. We sometimes make poor choices,. Maybe we overestimate our goodness just a little.

Plenty of bad things happen because we are just plain fallible, snafu-prone. We are smart enough to design airplanes that defy gravity -- but human as we are we need not be surprised when an occasional plane malfunctions and crashes. As a society we choose to hurtle heavy automobiles at one another, inches apart; little wonder that now and then one blows a tire and crashes.

This week, in getting our nation geared-up to the the coronavirus threat, we are discovering the results of cutting staff and funding for the Center for Disease Control and the National Institute of Health. Plenty of things can be traced to this mingling of human ingenuity and human fallibility.

Adam Hamilton and I both agree that God does not will bad things to people. I hear this occasionally -- especially as family gather at a death of a family member. Someone well-meaning will say, "It was God's will."

Elie Wiesel, who survived the holocaust and taught for many years at Boston University, imagined Job, surviving his catastrophe, hurling a barb at God; "Very well, I forgive you, but what about my dead children? Do they forgive you?"

The Bible doesn't explain suffering. But in the Bible, people frequently cry out in agony, storming heaven with their protests. Maybe that's what we need; being faithful in the midst of suffering might mean more of this defiant spirit. Never stop being outraged at what is evil! Suffering is not a philosophical problem. And never stop resisting evil. Jesus didn't explain evil, he resisted it!

And Jesus took that evil on himself. In Job, God answers in a whirlwind.

In the New Testament, Jesus answers beneath a darkened sky and a trembling earth with His life, His blood, His love. On the cross, Jesus took on Himself, He felt all the hurt, all the pain, all the tears, the

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agony, the emptiness, the loneliness, all the hurt of all people. Jesus knows our pain.

And God refuses to leave us alone in our pain. Somehow God redeems our suffering. We are not alone. And having endured the cross, and having been locked up tight in the grave, Jesus nevertheless was raised up, to glory, to be with God forever. Here is the beauty, the power of the Christian faith. Jesus is there when we hurt.

Does Job fear God for nothing? Do we serve God for nothing? No, we serve God, not because there is some payday at the end of the line for us. We serve God because God is God, and because God is love, because God is with us through all of the crap life can serve up for us. And Jesus will be there beyond the pain, redeeming the hurt, never letting us go.

C. S. Lewis, when he stopped lecturing about suffering and faced the real-life suffering of his own wife, wrote these poignant words: " I find it hard to take in what anyone says. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. "

What can we do? We can show up. Not like Job's friends, with trite answers to our hurt. And I believe that when we are there, together, we'll discover that God is there, in our midst, in our suffering. That's when God is really there and that is God's will.