

*If God Loves Us Why does He Allow Us to Suffer?©*

Romans 8:18-30; Rev. 21:1-4

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A few Sunday's back I asked those who were here in worship to write down one thing you might have doubts about regarding the Christian faith. Many of the answers that came back to me had to do with why people suffer.

It is really an age old question: why do bad things happen to good people? If God is a God of love, why does he allow us to suffer? Why would little children be allowed to suffer? Why does God let us go through troubles and have so many problems?

One of the things I hear people say, that is a possible answer to those questions, is that "everything happens for a reason." But I just don't think I buy into that way of thinking.

If everything happens for a reason then does that mean that God made my granddaughter have Neurofibromatosis – a genetic condition that can cause tumors? Did he cause her to need to wear her brace, because of her bowed leg, so her leg won't break and probably have to be amputated? What possible reason would God have for making her have that condition?

And if everything happens for a reason, then did God put that man in the Flint airport and make him stab that police officer multiple times in the neck? What would God's point be in doing that?

I think that belief makes God look like a master puppeteer and we are the puppets. I can just see God in the sky with these long invisible strings connected to all of us humans. And God just moves us around and decides this is going to happen today.

If that were the way it really is, I would have a difficult time not be pretty angry with God.

Paul says in his letter to the congregation in Rome that God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. He also talks about those he foreknew being predestined to be formed in the image of his son.

Of course that "p" word is the cause of much confusion and is a catchword for Presbyterians. We tend to use the word predestination and the word "elect," which are both from Scripture. But the confusion comes with wondering just what it means. Does it mean that some are predestined ... elected ... to be saved, and does that mean some are not?

And does predestined mean that everything happens for a reason? Maybe that's where that thinking comes from. But my understanding of predestination is that God knew ahead of time who was going to be open to hearing his call and who would be ready and eager to receive it.

I do not believe it means that some people are born to never be saved. I think God knows who will answer the call to follow. I think God may have elected those who will be leaders for the gospel. Of course God knows who will resist but eventually come to believe, too.

See, I think we have this thing called “free will.” God created the world and all that is in it and God said it was good. But God also created the wind and the rain and the sun but God and set them in motion to do what they do. We call it science today. One thing causes another thing to happen. Like storms, tornados, hurricanes, blizzards. It all has to do with conditions, right?

It’s also the way with disease. One thing causes another thing. My granddaughter has a genetic condition. No one knows of anybody else in the family who has her condition – NF. It could be that she is the first to have a gene mutate and develop this disease. But because she has the gene, her babies have at least a 50/50 chance of also having NF.

What I’m trying to say is that God created everything and set it all in motion and the creation is doing its thing. And God is not micromanaging it all – even though ultimately God is Sovereign. God is still ruler over all.

You might say, yes but God has the power to block something bad that is going to happen. After all, Jesus performed miracles that were supernatural. Why doesn’t God do it now?

I don’t know the answer to that. God would have to pick and choose who to save from disasters, wouldn’t he? Out of billions of people, I would hope to be one of the choice few to be saved. Wouldn’t you?

In other words I don’t see God up in heaven saying – that one is going to get cancer and that one is going to have a stroke. This one over here would be hit by a car but I’m going to steer that car in the other direction so it doesn’t happen to this person.

Over the years we’ve seen an Abundance Theology develop. There are some television evangelists who preach that if you are obedient to God and serve and follow him, you will have riches and health and your life will be without struggles. All I can say to that is: BALONEY!

We follow a Savior whose very life and ministry was about suffering. He himself suffered greatly for our sakes and so did his disciples – for his sake and for the sake of spreading the gospel. The church was born out of suffering and persecution. Many people in the early church lost their families, lost their privilege of being in the temple, lost their safety. And many lost their lives – not just out of poverty and hunger but because they were tortured and killed because of their faith.

So, what good is a loving God if he allows all these things to occur? And how can we sing *Victory in Jesus* when things look so bad? Where is the victory? How do we have a

belief that in Jesus' death – evil and suffering has been conquered? And where do we see God working together all things for good?

Have you ever known someone who had a disease and who suffered greatly, yet they were so full of faith and hope and perseverance that they inspired many because of their strength?

When I do funerals, most of the time I am impressed with the family of the person who died. I've seen this tragic, sad thing bring people together who hadn't talked to one another for years. I've seen them laughing and crying as they shared memories. I've seen faith become stronger through the loss of a loved one. I've seen people in deep grief ministering to one another.

When someone you are so close to passes away, usually there is a pull to seek God in a new way, trying to understand what has happened. Trying to get comfort. Talking to God more. Many people get close to God through their suffering, grief and pain.

God has not promised any of us that we will not suffer here on earth. Suffering, unfortunately, is a part of our human condition. But God has promised to be with us; to never leave us; to never let us go through our trials alone. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come to us, and he called the Holy Spirit the comforter, the encourager, the advocate.

Paul says “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.<sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Sometimes, in our deep suffering, we have a hard time putting into words how to express in prayer what we are feeling. We don't know if we should pray for God to take this away from us, or if we should ask for God to heal us.

But here is where our faith and trust come together. We don't have to know what to pray for. The Spirit knows just what we need and intercedes for us, says Paul. Most of our faith is about living in trust. Trusting that God is with us.

And then, the other part of it is that ultimately, we trust that, even though things are not perfect while we are in this life on earth; while we are living in these earthly, mortal bodies, Jesus has conquered evil and death.

While we are here, the evil one turns things upside down for us. But because of Jesus own suffering, his willingness to suffer and die, and because of God's power to raise Jesus from the dead, we have this great hope and faith that we too will be raised from death to eternal life and that is a safe place where there is no more suffering or pain.

I do think that God uses things that happen to us as opportunities to work in us in different ways. Here are some things we might ask, and become aware of, when we are going through something:

1. Is God using my current situation to redirect me? While I am in this pit of suffering, is God trying to show me something, teach me something, set me off in a new direction?
2. Is God taking this time to inspect me? To test me and see where my faith is? What is my present spiritual state? We are a little like tea bags, in a way. You never know just what is inside until water is seeped through it. Or like fruit that is squeezed. It's hard to tell if it is ripe or not until it is cut open. Is God inspecting me? Testing me?
3. Will God use this time when I am down to correct me? To help me see places in my life where I need to change? Or repent and go a new way? We shouldn't look at it as a punishment from the past, but as a correction so that we will be stronger for the future. God may be using my predicament to correct me.
4. Perhaps God will use what is going on with us to protect us. Maybe our suffering isn't as great as what we might have fallen into if it hadn't happened. Remember the story of Joseph whose older brothers were jealous of their father's obvious preference towards young Joseph. They sold him to passersby from Egypt and he was taken as a slave. But he ended up with a lot of power and eventually saved his brothers and father from a great famine. When they were lamenting over what they had done, he said, "You intended harm to me. But God used it for good.
5. God can use our current sufferings to perfect us. Of course, we know people who simply cannot accept what has happened and are not open to trusting God to use that for good. But, there are so many people who have grown in their faith, in their character, in compassion for others who are suffering because of their own experience. If we allow it, if we lean on God to work in us, God can perfect us – that is, God can use that suffering to make us stronger, to make us more aware of others, to want to do things to help others. And to lean on God, to talk to God even more.

John writes, after seeing the vision God gave him (while he was suffering in prison on the island of Patmos) that when Christ comes again and the kingdom of God is finally established, there will be no more death. Crying and grieving and pain will all be in the past. God will live among us and he will wipe away every tear.

All of creation waits for this final event. We will suffer and have problems until that day when Christ returns to reign. In the meantime, let us ask ourselves in those times of suffering – how is God going to work in me while this is going on? What will God do in me during this time?

And always trust that we are never alone. The Spirit of God is with us in every storm. Not just calming the storm, but using it for our good.

Amen.