

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW PAIN AND SUFFERING?

SERIES: EXPLORE GOD



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Various Scripture

The problem of pain

When I heard about the Explore God sermon series and saw the list of questions that the series would be covering, I saw the question, “Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?” and my first thought was, I want to preach that sermon. Not because I have all of the answers about pain and suffering but because I have been dealing with chronic pain for 20 years. And that has meant that I have also been wrestling with the question, Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering? for 20 years. But that’s not the only question I have been wrestling with. I’ve also been wrestling with the question behind that question. The question of, “Is God really a good God?” If he is really a good God, how can he allow so much pain and suffering to exist, not just for myself but for the others I see suffering around me, and across the globe, and throughout history? That’s a lot of pain and suffering to try and make sense of!

Shortly after I heard about the Explore God series and the sermon about pain, I was visiting my friend in Los Angeles, who is a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, and she asked me what my theology of pain is. A theology of something just means a system of religious beliefs and theories about a certain topic. So what she was asking me was, “What are your beliefs or theories about God and pain?”

Even though I hadn’t thought about it that way before, of course, I already had a theology of pain. I already had a set of beliefs about God and the existence of pain in the world. The truth is we all have a personal theology of pain. You have a personal theology of pain. We have all encountered pain in the world and had to decide what to make of it. If we believe that there is a God, then we have had to decide how to reconcile who we think God is with our experience of pain, as well as the pain that we see others experience.

And if you don’t believe that there is a God, chances are that your understanding of where pain fits in the world is at least part of what brought you to that conclusion. Perhaps it seems to you that the world is

too chaotic and broken to have an intelligent and good being behind it. It is easier to believe that everything that exists is completely random. But, it is important to acknowledge that to believe in God or to choose not to believe in God both require a degree of faith. As humans, we do not get to know everything. We desperately want to know everything. We desperately try to know everything. Especially here in Silicon Valley, where education is prized higher than almost anything else. But, there are limitations to our understanding. And so we must choose whether we believe that God exists or not based on the limited information we have and by what we have experienced. Either way, it requires faith.

Regardless of whether you believe there is a God or not, we all have built systems around how we deal with pain (both our pain and the pain of others). If you have been alive for more than five minutes, then you have had to figure out what to do with the problem of pain. When you were five minutes old, actually when you were less than five seconds old, you didn’t really like the process of being born, and you dealt with that by letting other people know by crying. Hopefully, you had someone who helped you to deal with that pain, confusion, and shock and comforted you. Hopefully, you had someone who continued to help you throughout your childhood when you encountered pain in the world by comforting you and helping you meet your needs - physically, emotionally, and relationally.

But the thing is that our parents are only human. They are not omnipresent like God. It is impossible for them to always be with us. They are not omniscient like God. They don’t know everything, so they don’t always know exactly what we need. That means that, at some point, we had to figure out what to do with our pain on our own. As a kid, when you fell and scraped your knee, and no one saw it happen or even noticed, what did you typically do? Were you the kid who would cry even louder to get the attention and help you needed? Or maybe you had learned that crying more wouldn’t really get your needs met, and so it was better to try to hold back the tears and keep it all inside? However we respond to pain as a young child tends to carry over into our adult lives.

There are good ways to cope with pain and there are bad ways to cope with pain. Bad coping mechanisms are patterns of dealing with pain where we hurt ourselves or the people around us. There are three categories of bad coping mechanisms. The first is easy to spot, like using alcohol or drugs to numb the pain or taking our frustrations out on others with yelling or violent behavior.

The second category of bad coping mechanisms are ones that might not seem too bad at first but, over time, can end up causing problems. These include over-indulging in unhealthy food, too much retail-therapy or online shopping, and too much time immersed in media (like movies, TV, video games, or social media). Over time, the over-indulging and over-spending catch up with us and start affecting our relationships, our work, and our health.

The third category of bad coping mechanisms can actually look good at first glance, like distracting ourselves from our pain by overworking, over-achieving, or even over-exercising. But over time, these also start having a negative effect on our relationships, our health, and our quality of life. If we were that quiet little kid who tried to keep it all inside, we might gravitate toward this third category and drown our pain in work or achievements. If we were that loud little kid looking for some kind of response to our pain from the world around us, we might gravitate towards the first category and lash out at others with words of even physicality. All of these patterns and behaviors are simply ways that we are seeking to deal with the pain we encounter in life. The need for that little kid to have their pain seen and acknowledged is a good and valid need. But sometimes, the ways we try and get that legitimate need met end up hurting us more in the long run.

Some of these three types of bad coping mechanisms have shown up in my life as I've tried to deal with my chronic pain. I was born with a condition called hip dysplasia. Most people know that term because golden retrievers and labrador retrievers often have it. But people can have it too, and for me, it started causing me consistent pain in my mid-twenties. That was 20 years ago, and I have tried many, many ways to deal with having to live with that constant pain. I've learned from experience that these bad coping mechanisms only increase my struggles in life and do not actually make my life any better.

Good coping mechanisms, on the other hand, are self-soothing ways to deal with pain that do not hurt ourselves or those around us. These include things like

spending time in nature, talking with a friend, creative outlets like art, writing or music, attending therapy or support groups, and healthy amounts of exercise. They bring health instead of hurt to both ourselves and those around us.

All of us engage in a mixture of good and bad coping mechanisms. The question is, can we build good habits around responding in healthy ways to pain over time? Can we learn to tend to that little kid inside of us who is looking for attention and comfort in healthy ways? It turns out that it's a good thing that bad coping mechanisms end up causing us more pain in the long run. This is a built-in safety mechanism. This kind of pain can actually end up steering us back in the right direction if we will listen to it. When you make a mistake, this kind of pain is there to let you know that you made a mistake and that you should do something differently next time. This kind of pain isn't a punishment; it's a protector. This kind of pain can actually lead us to healing. When you are cooking, and you are chopping vegetables too fast, and you accidentally cut your finger, it hurts. When you cut your finger and it hurts, you stop what you are doing and you look at your finger. When you look at it, you notice that you are bleeding, so you go clean your wound, and you get a bandage to cover it, protect it, and help it to heal. Your pain pointed you toward healing. Your pain is protecting you from making the same mistake again. Next time you chop vegetables, you will go slower and will pay more careful attention to what you are doing, and then you will be less likely to get hurt again. This kind of pain is a protector and a healer.

We could call this kind of pain "protective pain." With protective pain, our personal choices can make a difference and reduce our experience of pain. Most people can understand and appreciate protective pain. That's because we have some amount of control over it. If we want to hurt less, we can do something different. This doesn't really call the existence of God or the nature of his character into question.

But there is another type of pain. This kind of pain is the result of living in a broken world. It's not protective; it doesn't lead us toward healing. It just hurts. The death of a loved one, illnesses that are beyond our ability to prevent, loss of work due to an economic downturn, unstable governments, oppression and other kinds of systemic injustices and imbalances.

In the second kind of pain, our personal choices do not have an immediate effect on our experiences in life. We can call this kind of pain "powerless pain." We don't really have any immediate control over this kind of

pain, so it does call the existence and goodness of God into question. We hurt and we feel powerless. We want the one with the power (God) to do something about it. What do we do with this kind of pain? If God exists, how can he be good if he allows this type of pain in the world? Isn't he in control? Couldn't he stop it? If he can stop it, then why doesn't he? Is he good or not?

The question of God's character

The questioning of God's character when we face pain or suffering or any kind of lack or frustration is not a new phenomenon. Humans have wondered, "Is God really a good God?" for thousands and thousands of years. In chapter three of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, we already see humanity grappling with this question. In fact, the very first conversation we see appear in Scripture is about this question. God created the earth and put Adam and Eve, the first humans, into a lush garden filled with fruit trees. He said:

Genesis 2:16-17:

"You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

The reason for this limitation was to protect them from harm. But in the next chapter, we see a new character enter the scene, a serpent, who has a conversation with Eve and says:

Genesis 3:4-5:

"You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

The serpent is claiming that God did not put the limitation in place to protect Adam and Eve but to deprive them of something good. He is calling into question the character of God. Eve has to decide what she believes about God's character. Was God trying to protect her, or was he holding out on her? Is he a good God? Can he be trusted or not? Her conclusion is evidenced by her behavior. She eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

When we are faced with realities about the world that we do not like, we must decide what we think about the character of the one who created it. Is God good? Is his

design of the world good? Is his ultimate plan a good one? Couldn't he have done better? We again see humans grappling with these questions in the Bible in the book of Job—job experiences and catastrophic loss. In one day, Job loses all of his wealth and all of his children. Then, he becomes very, very ill.

Job's first response to his loss is an amazing one.

Job 1:21:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

However, as time goes on, Job gets worn down by his suffering and by chapter 27, he concludes that God has denied him justice.

In essence, he is saying that when facing the bitter realities of his life, the only way to make sense of it is to conclude that God is not a just God. From Job's perspective, if God were a just God, these things wouldn't be happening to him. So, the only thing to conclude is that God is not a just God. This is similar to Eve's conclusion. Given the current situation, it looks like God must not really be good.

I have wondered how God could be just and good in my own journey with pain. I have had three reconstructive hip surgeries. These are much bigger surgeries than hip replacements. They required me to be on crutches for two months after each surgery. After my first surgery, I tried to come off of my crutches after two months, but when I put my full body weight on that leg, my hip actually fractured. So, I had to go back onto crutches. I was on crutches for six months that year. My surgeries did relieve some of the intensity of my pain, and they did give me healthier hips that will allow me to be mobile as I age, but they did not take away all of my pain. Chronic pain affects how your nervous system functions, and so the pain from my hip issues ended up combining with other factors of my life to create systemic chronic pain all over my body that will probably never go away. Why would God allow me, starting at 25 years of age, to be in chronic pain? If I live to be 75, that will be 50 years of chronic pain. Can life be good when I experience pain every moment of every day? If God loves me, and if he is all-powerful, then why would he allow this kind of pain to be a constant presence in my life? Couldn't he have created the world in a way where I wouldn't have to go through this?

These questions of the goodness or justice of God are the same as Job's question. God responds to Job's accusation in chapters 38-41. His response manages to be both challenging and comforting at the same time. Have you ever had a really good coach or teacher who pushes you to new levels? They challenge you, they push you, they lean into your weak areas and your sensitive spots, not to shame you, but to invite you into something better. It's challenging and deeply comforting at the same time because you know what they are saying about you is true, and they are showing you a good path forward. This is what happens between God and Job. God responds to Job's accusation:

Job 38:2-7:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

3 Dress for action like a man;

I will question you, and you make it known to me.

4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone,

7 when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

God goes on and on like this for four chapters. I encourage you to read it when you go home. It's a literary tour of the wonder of God's creation. It puts everything back into perspective in a way that is comforting and calming. It's like when a young child is reminded that they are, in fact, not the one in charge. Such a correction allows the child to return to rest in the comfort of their parents' care. A young child cannot be in charge. They can't take care of themselves. They can't provide food and shelter and safety for themselves. That job is too big for them.

Job responds to God:

Job 42:3-5:

“Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?”

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did

not know.

4 ‘Hear, and I will speak;

I will question you, and you make it known to me.’

5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;

I love this passage because we see that Job's questioning of God's character actually led to a greater intimacy with God. He said, 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you (Job 42:5).

Job had to grapple with the question “Is God really good?” to be able to really see God. This wasn't just a religious theory he intellectually assented to. This was faith lived out in the trenches. In the middle of life's messiest, most painful season, Job came face to face with this question and with his creator. We all hit seasons in our lives when we come face to face with this question and our creator. It's inescapable.

Even Jesus did not escape this question. In Jesus's most painful moment, as he hung on the cross, we hear him say these words from Psalm 22: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22:1) Psalm 22 goes on to say, Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest (Psalm 22:1-2).

The Psalms are full of God's people bringing him their laments over the pain they experience in the world. The Psalms give us both the permission and the space to grapple with the suffering we experience in the world. God is not afraid of this question. He is a big God. He can handle our confusion, our anger, our despair. To be human is to, at times, feel like God has forsaken you.

The response to pain—God's and ours

What is God's response when we come to him with this kind of pain? When I ask myself this question, the story that immediately pops into my head is the story of Lazarus. Lazarus was a close friend of Jesus. He became very ill, and at the time, Jesus was away on a trip. His friend, Mary, sent word to him to let Jesus know. Instead of coming back to heal his good friend Lazarus, Jesus remains where he is. By the time he gets back, Lazarus has already died and has been buried. As Jesus approaches the city, Mary comes out and basically accuses him of letting Lazarus die. At this, Jesus starts to weep. When Jesus sees his friends experiencing the pain of losing a loved one, he joins them in their grief.

In Matthew, the first book of the New Testament in the Bible, chapter one, it says that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy for a savior, and that the people would also call him Immanuel, which means “God with us.” Immanuel. “God with us.” God’s response to human suffering is to be with them in it. He grieves with us. We may feel like we are alone like God has forsaken us, but he hasn’t. He grieves with us. Even though he knows how the story ends, he grieves with us in this moment. This space and this time is important. It matters. Our grief matters. Our pain matters. Our suffering matters.

At the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21, it says that our story ends in this way:

Revelation 21:3-4:

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Even though God is in the process of restoring creation in this way, bringing creation to the full development and conclusion of his original, good plan, it doesn’t mean that the pain we experience now doesn’t matter.

Do you know what Jesus doesn’t do when Mary comes out to him weeping for the loss of her brother? He doesn’t tell her that there is no reason for her to cry. Jesus doesn’t say this even though he is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, and the story indicates that this was his plan all along and is part of the reason he did not come right away when he heard Lazarus was sick. Jesus doesn’t go and raise Lazarus at this moment. Instead, he stops what he is doing and he shares in Mary’s grief in that moment. He doesn’t immediately “fix it.” Amazingly, he isn’t just weeping with her to be kind to her. Jesus is weeping because he himself is grieved by human loss and human pain. He’s not just grieving her pain. He is also grieving his own pain at being misunderstood by those he loves. He is grieving that Mary thought he didn’t care about her or her brother.

If this is Emmanuel’s response to our pain. If this is how “God with us” responds to our pain. Then, this is how we, too, should respond to pain. We should grieve it.

For ourselves and for others. We should not tell ourselves just to get over it. And we should certainly not tell others to get over it. When a young child gets stung by a bee or a wasp, we don’t reprimand them for crying. Even though we know that they will feel better in a couple of hours, we comfort them in the meantime. We sit with them in their pain, even though it’s momentary. We grieve with them.

I’ve learned that with my chronic pain. There are healthy ways to cope with the pain that I can get better at, such as relaxation techniques, strength exercises, and talking with friends. At least then, I won’t be making my life harder with alcohol, overspending or overworking. But no matter what I do, I am powerless to make the pain go away. I was a super athletic kid. I loved being outside and playing sports. It’s where I would lose myself. Why did God have to take away one of the greatest pleasures of my life? I can’t play sports with people anymore. My husband and his friends are marathon runners. I have to sit by and watch. In those moments, I’ve learned that it is important to grieve my loss. It’s the only way I can get through.

I’ve learned that going to the psalms and learning how to lament, how to bring my grief directly to God is actually an act of worship because I am turning towards him instead of away from him. If we skip this step of lament in our faith, our faith becomes weak and shallow. God doesn’t want only our happy moments. He wants all of us. You wouldn’t have real relationships with your friends or, spouse or children if they never shared with you when they were hurt, or upset or angry—even when the one they are mad at is you.

God created us for deep relationship with him. The kind of relationship where you can say what you really think. The kind of relationship where you don’t have to put on a happy face. When you think about the problem of pain, is this your understanding of how God expects us to respond to both the problem of pain and what it implies about his character? When you are going through the hardest seasons of life, does your expectation of how your relationship with God is supposed to look like in that season include space to say what you really think? Think about the stories of Job, Jesus, and Mary. They each believed there was enough space in their relationship with God for them to come to him with their raw responses to pain. When they brought the truth about how they were responding to their searing pain at the moment, God met them where they were. He engaged with them, he talked with them, he wept with them, he took the time to work it out with them.

There are only two ways to relate to God in the midst of pain. We can turn towards him, or we can turn away from him. If you happen to be one of the many people who don't believe in God because of all of the pain in the world, my question for you is, "In the middle of deep pain, don't you long to have someone to be mad at? Someone to take your anger, your frustration, and your confusion to?" This is the kind of relationship that the God in the Bible invites you into. The Bible doesn't paint a picture of "high church" where the only version of you that is welcome is the one that is well dressed and in control of your emotions at all times. The Bible is full of messy stories of messy people and a good God that can handle it.

(Job 42:5 - paraphrase). Now I know you. And this is exactly what I have been looking for all along.

You don't have to suffer alone. All you have to do is bring to God your real thoughts and feelings and ask him to help you understand both him and the world he made. When you do this, he will respond. It may not be in exactly the way you thought he would, but he will respond. And you will continue to get to know him and understand him better over time.

You also have a community of people here that are on this same journey of getting to know God and his character better over time. None of us have it all figured out. But what we do know is that it's better to not be alone when we are suffering. If turning towards God in the midst of pain is new to you, let someone at the church here know. We would love to support you in whatever way we can.

Conclusion

I didn't want to preach this sermon because I have all the answers to our questions about pain and suffering. I wanted to preach this sermon because I have learned how to find intimacy with God in the midst of pain. I have learned that it's important that I take my anger, my despair, and my confusion about pain and suffering directly to God. He can handle it. And I've found it to be a doorway to the full life I have been looking for. I don't find this full life when my life looks perfect or when there is an absence of hard things. I find this full life when I hurt, when I hurt deeply, and when I take that deep hurt directly to God and let him minister to me in the midst of my suffering. Like Job, I come out of these seasons and these moments saying, I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now (now) my eye sees you