

John on Jesus - Why Do We Suffer?

Sign Title: Why Do We Suffer?

November 11, 2012

Last week, Hurricane Sandy pounded the east coast of our country. It was the largest Atlantic hurricane on record and the second costliest Atlantic hurricane in history, surpassed only by Katrina in 2005. The current estimates are damages will reach \$20 billion.¹ Why does God allow these disasters?

While global disasters are catastrophic, there are biological disasters that are worse. In the 14th century, the bubonic plague killed almost half of Europe. In the influenza epidemic of 1918-19 between 30-50 million people died. Why does God allow so much suffering?

One particularly difficult type of suffering is the suffering of children. Babies born with birth defects or special needs tear the fabric of a parent's soul. When children are born deformed, we can't help but ask God one question, "Why?"

If God is good, why does he allow suffering and evil? If God is powerful, why doesn't he stop it? In the passage we will study this morning, Jesus tips God's hand and we learn one reason why God hasn't yet brought evil and suffering to an end. This is a very important topic. Each of us will face suffering. It is not a question of if, it is only a question of when. The time to prepare for that suffering is now. That is what this message will help us with this morning.

If you are new, my name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors. As a church, we are studying our way through the Gospel of John. This morning, we arrive at

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Sandy

John 9. In this chapter, we find a man born with a birth defect. He was born blind.

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some said, “It is he.” Others said, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” So they said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” John 9:1–12 (ESV)

Jesus walked by a man born blind. He was probably begging outside the temple. The disciples saw his suffering so they seized the opportunity to ask Jesus about suffering. From the disciples’ perspective, suffering is simple. The only question they needed answered was, “Whose fault is it?”

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” John 9:1–2 (ESV)

They thought suffering in general was always the result of sin in particular. What was the particular sin that caused this particular suffering? There is some truth in their thinking. Suffering does come from sin, but why God allows suffering is not a simple answer.

Suffering doesn't have a simple answer.

Sometimes I suffer because of the sin of others.

If a mother chooses to drink while pregnant, there is a good chance her child will be born with fetal alcohol syndrome. A child will suffer because of his or her parent's sin. Sometimes we suffer because of the sinful choices of others. The alcoholic who chooses to drink and drive so their driving is impaired runs a red light and kills a teenage girl, making someone else suffer on account of his sin. Executives at Enron lied on finance reports and, as a result, thousands lost their life savings.

The disciples were looking for someone to point the finger at. If they were lawyers, they were looking for someone to sue. Our culture loves this. If we suffer, we want to pin it on somebody so we can blame them and make them suffer because we suffered.

This is called a victim mentality. We see this among young adults. "I am not successful and it is my parent's fault. My parents didn't love me enough. My parents didn't give me enough toys at Christmas. My parents messed me up. The problems with my life are their fault."

Sometimes I suffer because of my own sin.

The other possible reason the disciples gave for this man's blindness was that it could be the result of his own sin. The Jews remembered Jacob and Esau wrestling in the womb of their mother, Rachel. Since those babies were in active conflict in the womb, they reasoned that babies could sin in the womb. If a baby sinned in the womb, they reasoned God might let them suffer the consequences

of their in-utero sin. According to this view, there was really no compassion needed for this man. The reason he was born blind was his fault. It was all because of his own sin.

We have a version of this going around today that originated in India called karma. Karma says everybody in life gets exactly what they deserve. Hinduism teaches this. Karma says that if you were born in poverty and suffering, it is because you deserve it from a past life. If you are born in wealth and comfort, it is because you deserve it from a past life. What this does is it removes all incentives for showing kindness. If someone suffers, it is because they deserve it. It is because of their own sins. The only way to atone for their sins is to let them suffer.

There is some truth to this. The truth is not in that we should let others suffer for their sins. Jesus told us to love our neighbor as ourselves. If our neighbors suffer, we should help them. The truth is not in reincarnation. In the book of Hebrews it says that after death comes judgment. Nobody is reincarnated. The tiny bit of truth found in karma is that when we sin, we will usually suffer. When we speed, we suffer the consequences of a ticket. We see this in the Bible. In John 5, we saw the beggar was an invalid as a result of his sin.

Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." John 5:14 (ESV)

Paul talks about people suffering because of treating the Lord's table with contempt.

That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. 1 Corinthians 11:30 (ESV)

So there is a little truth here. When we sin, we will suffer. When we sin, others suffer. The mindset of the disciples was to find fault and blame the suffering on somebody. Jesus told his disciples to look at this man's birth defect differently. The question they needed to answer was not, "Whose fault is this?", rather, the question we should answer is, "What will God do with this?"

God uses suffering to work in and through our lives.

Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." John 9:3 (ESV)

The reason this man was born blind was so Jesus' works might be displayed in him. His blindness was an opportunity for God to work in and through him. Part of that work of God involved physical healing. He was born blind so he could be healed. This man's blindness was ordained by God so he could be healed by Jesus.

God uses suffering to open our eyes to Jesus.

Another part of this was his spiritual healing. We will study this more next week. God used his blindness to be what brought him to see Jesus. It is better to be a blind man whose blindness is used by God to open your eyes to see Christ's true identity than to be a seeing Pharisee whose pride blinds you to Jesus. Why does God allow suffering? It is one of the ways he brings us to see the true identity of Jesus.

Many of us have stories of difficulty and despair. Some of us have times of sickness or disease when we prayed and called out to Jesus asking him to

heal us. I talked with a man in the hall a few weeks ago who had a heart blockage and God miraculously cured him of the blockage. In God's grace, God used his physical suffering and subsequent healing to open his spiritual eyes to Jesus.

Why hasn't God eliminated all suffering? Sometimes suffering and healing is God's chosen instrument to bring us to see Christ.

God uses suffering to teach us to rely on Christ rather than ourselves.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV)

I don't want us to think that healing from suffering is the only way God uses suffering to bring glory to himself. We are reminded of Paul and his thorn in the flesh. Paul prayed three times that God would remove the thorn. Paul wanted to be healed but God said, "No, my grace is sufficient for you because my power is made perfect in your weakness." God brought glory to himself by *not* healing Paul. Paul's suffering led him to a greater reliance upon God's strength. As Paul relied on God in his suffering it became obvious that Paul's strength was not from himself but it was God working in and through him. God brought glory to his name through Paul's life via his suffering.

God uses suffering to give us a time of close connection with him.

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me! Job 19:25–27 (ESV)

In this part of the book of Job, Job is in the dumps. Life doesn't get much worse. It was during that time when God drew Job close to himself. Job had a vision of Jesus. From that vision he knew that Jesus lived, that Jesus would come to the earth in the flesh and that Job would one day be resurrected to stand before him. Incidentally, this is Jesus showing up in the Old Testament. It is one book with one savior.

I want us to notice is that it is in Job's darkest moments that God revealed himself to Job in an especially powerful way. It was in the darkest moment of Job's life that God showed up in an especially real and personal way through a vision of Jesus.

In July of 2007, the Taliban held 23 American missionaries hostage in Afghanistan. Two of them were executed before a deal was reached with the government of South Korea and the missionaries were released. Recently they gathered in Seoul, South Korea and one of them said the strangest thing, "Don't you miss our time with the Taliban?" All of them talked about how God was more real and present in their lives during that time of intense anxiety and suffering in Afghanistan than he was now that they were living in comfort.² When God brings suffering into our lives, he is not pushing us away, he uses suffering as a time to draw us closer to himself than anything we would experience in times of comfort and ease. Our closest times with God will be in our darkest hours.

² Chan, F. (2009). *Forgotten God*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.

God uses suffering to comfort us so we can comfort others with the comfort we received from God.

...who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. 2 Corinthians 1:4 (ESV)

The resume of every encourager and counselor contains suffering. When God allows suffering into the life of a Christian, he will comfort us so we can comfort others.

I know many of you have gone through deep valleys of suffering. I do not know why God allowed that time of suffering into your life. I do know what you are to do with it. Comfort others with the comfort you received from God.

Suffering is the instrument God uses to grow our perseverance.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Romans 5:3–5 (ESV)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2–4 (ESV)

Adversity itself doesn't produce joy. God doesn't ask us to cheer if we lose our jobs or a loved one is diagnosed with cancer. He tells us to rejoice because he promises to use that adversity to produce in us something that money can't buy and ease will never produce --- the precious quality of Christ-exalting perseverance. Last week, we saw Christ said, "If you abide in me, you are truly my disciples." God uses adversity to grow our perseverance.

Perseverance is abiding in him. The Christian life is not a 100-yard dash; it is a

marathon. We rejoice in suffering not because we enjoy it but because we know it will produce the perseverance we need to finish well.

Josef Tson, a pastor from Romania put it this way, 95 percent of Christians will fail the test of prosperity, while 95 percent of Christians will pass the test of adversity.³ When suffering comes into our lives, it is not because God hates us. It is because he loves us.

God uses suffering to train us in holiness.

...we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Hebrews 12:8–11 (ESV)

I spent many years in wrestling. I loved training for the sport. Athletes don't train to solve a problem; they train to improve their condition. God will occasionally put us through times of suffering not to correct us from sin but as a matter of training to improve our spiritual condition, to grow us in holiness. I know it sometimes feels like God is putting us through training that is too difficult. Remember what the Bible says. God disciplines us for our good. He doesn't miscalculate, he doesn't make mistakes. He will never look back upon our lives and say, "If I had to do it again, I would have done it differently."

Christians are better off eternally because they suffer temporarily.

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 2 Corinthians 4:17 (ESV)

God uses our earthly suffering as his chosen instrument to refine our character and build our eternal reward. This is a mind bender. When God brings

³ Randy Alcorn, If God is Good, pg. 419.

suffering into our lives and we endure that affliction in a God-honoring way, we will be rewarded in eternity with a glory that far outweighs any earthly adversity we face. I am not minimizing suffering. I realize life contains some very difficult times of suffering. We are just putting our fingers in the text. Honoring Christ in our suffering results in a great eternal reward.

We can truly say that when God brings adversity into our lives, it is not that the adversity is good but what God will do in us through it is good.

A Christian's suffering is not payback for sin.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
Romans 8:1 (ESV)

We need to keep separate the earthly consequences of sin and the eternal condemnation for our sins separate in our minds. For Christians, Christ died for our sins. He paid for them in full. While we may suffer consequences, the condemnation for our sins, which is infinitely worse, is already paid for by Jesus. God does not pay us back for our sins. Jesus took all the punishment we deserve.

As a loving father, God may choose to discipline us for our sins. Hebrews 12 talks about this. He disciplines us not because he hates us or because he has a morbid delight in punishing us but because he loves us. His discipline is not punitive in nature, it is always corrective. It comes purely out of his love.

Conclusion

For the disciples, the only question in their minds was fault. Who sinned that caused the suffering? Jesus, wants us to change the way we look at our

suffering. The big question is not, “Whose fault is it?” The big question is, “What will God do with it?”

As a Christian, the suffering he allows into our lives may not be fun, but it is not purposeless. He uses it to draw us to Christ and to mature us in Christ.

Jesus paid the most costly price in the universe to eradicate sin and suffering once and for all. His son died in our place for our sins. The greatest injustice of the world was perpetrated upon Jesus. The most heinous evil in the universe was done to Jesus. The most excruciating suffering in the universe was poured out upon Jesus. It was the suffering we deserved. Jesus took it to conquer Satan, sin and death once and for all. While God allows evil and suffering for the time being, he takes it seriously and he hates it. One day, he will apply the full victory that Christ accomplished to our lives and to the planet. Suffering and evil will be done with once and for all.

In the mean time, why does God allow suffering into the lives of his children? *Suffering for Christians is always used by God for our good and for Christ's glory.* Each one of us will face tragedies. Are they sad? Of course. Do they break our hearts? They will. What question do we ask God? Why? *The suffering I allow into your life is for your good and for my glory.* Only a Christian can say that. It is only to those who know and love Jesus that God makes that wonderful promise that we hold on to in our darkest moments. *Suffering for the Christian is always used by God for our good and for Christ's glory.*

Prayer

Jesus, life is tough. Suffering breaks our hearts. Thank you for promising that what you will do in our life through the suffering is always something good. I

ask that when we suffer, like the crushing of a flower gives off the sweet aroma of perfume, when we are crushed, help us to give us the sweet aroma of Jesus that lives within us. Amen.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the EFCA. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics of study are ancient rhetoric and preaching. Feel free to contact him at ktruck@gmail.com or visit his web at www.christ2Rculture.com

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