

“THE PROBLEM OF PAIN”
by Rom A. Pegram (1/10/21)

Why did God let this happen? Do you remember the first time you seriously asked that question? I do. It was May of 1997 when an unexpected tragedy struck. My parents had both retired to Intercession City, Florida a couple years prior, and just before Mother’s Day that year—while out for a walk with my father—Mom noticed some numbing in one of her arms. The week after Mother’s Day, she went to the doctor ... and found out she had a stage-4, fast-growing type of brain cancer located at the base of her brain. At this point, it was inoperable.

Folks, the whole unexpected experience was awful... My mom was only 67 years old at the time. She’d been giving of her life to others for nearly her whole life, as a pastor’s wife. And now retirement was going to be her turn to enjoy some of my father’s attention. But two years into retirement, here we are. She went through a very few weeks of illness, with hospice care at home, and she was gone by August 3rd.

Remember, this all started right around Mother’s Day that year.

Not that it’s about me, but I was 38 years old when Mom fell ill, just about 39—headed into a normal, healthy mid-life crisis (for men) ... and Mom’s death sent me into a tailspin...

That’s when I kept asking the familiar question: “Where is God?” In the midst of all this unexpected misery, ‘Where is God?’ And ‘Why did God let this happen?’ ‘How could He let this happen to my mom ... after all she’d given up and done for the Kingdom?’ That’s the unanswerable question that dogs us to this day. Why does God allow his people to suffer so much?

Folks, if you’ve *never* had your faith shaken by inexplicable suffering, you are rare! Be thankful. But you will someday. I think even the most dedicated believers wonder at times why God permits so much hurt in the world. And what we see as unjustified pain often shakes our faith because we can’t explain its source or understand its purpose ... and we ask questions like this:

- *Has suffering been sent by God to punish us for our sins?* There may be some truth to that, at times (i.e. Moses not permitted to see the Holy Land due to losing his temper, Miriam temporarily struck by leprosy due to undermining Moses’ leadership, or Herod eaten by worms and died because he assumed glory that belonged only to God). Hebrews 12 says that God disciplines us as a father disciplines his children—for our good. So occasionally we may experience God’s painful rod of correction.
- *Are we suffering because of our own stupid mistakes?* Some smoke for years, then suffer from lung cancer; some are promiscuous, then contract an STD. Some neglect to study in school, then fail. The Bible says, “You may be sure your sin will find you out.” We have no right to blame God for what we bring on ourselves, do we?
- *Do we suffer because of a satanic attack?* That seems to be rare, but it’s real on occasion. Satan attacked Job and he lost everything. The Apostle Paul said he was tormented by a ‘thorn in the flesh’ that came from Satan. God used that thorn, of course, to keep Paul humble ... but it originated with the Enemy of God.

- *Do we suffer because we live in the wake of other people's sins?* A drunk driver slams into our car; our parents go through a divorce; our kids rebel. The Bible tells us that the sins of the fathers are visited on the 3rd and 4th generation. A little baby born with an addiction to drugs because the mother was on cocaine. That's not the baby's fault—or God's fault. It's just that sometimes we reap the consequences of the actions/sins of others.
- *Do we suffer because of persecution?* Scripture assures us that '...everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution' (2 Tim. 3:12, NLT). Some pain will always be a direct result of our allegiance to Christ. We know if we take a stand for biblical values, there will be ridicule, rejection, potential loss of employment, and—in some cases—physical danger. From the Apostle Paul in the 1st century to Dan Cathy (Chik-fil-A's president) in our time, those who boldly proclaim their loyalty to Christ suffer persecution...

And we cannot forget this today: Some suffering is the result of simply living in a fallen world. The Bible says that the whole of creation groans and longs to be redeemed. Ever since the fall of Adam & Eve (Genesis), the world has been 'off kilter.' Listen carefully: Diseases, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, vicious animals, and even VIRUSES can bring awful pain!

Here in Wisconsin, we've had our share of tornadoes, haven't we? We've seen graphic video on the news of earthquake damage throughout the world. We've seen the destruction hurricanes can do ... and some we know might have been to places like Haiti and other destinations to help with cleanup of the devastation...

Insurance companies call such disasters ... ACTS OF GOD. We seldom label pleasant weather, refreshing rainfall, or abundant crops ... GIFTS FROM GOD. But we don't hesitate to brand nature's catastrophes as ... ACTS OF GOD.

Even if we could identify *the source of suffering*, we're baffled as to why God would permit it. The Bible tells us God loves us, doesn't it? God loves us with an everlasting love, and nothing is impossible with God. But if that's true, why doesn't God protect His loyal followers from evil? If we love our children, we do everything to protect them, don't we? If God loves us and he's all-powerful, why doesn't He show it by guarding us from such terrible experiences? Well, the truth is, *sometimes God does...*

Matt Proctor (past president of Ozark Christian College) recounts the story of a harrowing, yet inspirational, experience he had when a devastating tornado ripped through Joplin, Missouri, on May 22, 2011. Matt and his wife, Katie, were transporting more than a dozen junior high kids from a church youth activity back to their church. Katie was driving the lead van and Matt was trailing her when the tornado sirens went off.

Seconds later a vicious wind began whipping through the area where they were. Rain and hail pelted the vehicles to the point that Katie could barely see beyond the front of her van. Suddenly a large tree came crashing down right in front of her. Katie slammed on the brakes, stopping just inches from the fallen tree. Matt then came to a stop right behind her and, through the howling wind, yelled for the kids to get out of the vans.

They raced all the youth to the nearest house, pounded on the door, and asked if they could come inside for protection. The stranger hurried them all down into her basement until the storm had passed by. The Proctors learned minutes later that if they had continued 100 yards beyond the fallen tree, they would have been directly in the path of the catastrophic, half-mile wide, F5 tornado that eventually killed 161 people.

We ask, 'Why doesn't God spare his people from suffering?' Sometimes, he does. Maybe he often does, but we're usually not aware of it. Or we label it as a *coincidence*—but not an 'Act of God.' (You know I don't believe in 'coincidences'—only God-incidences.)

But the sad truth is ... God doesn't *always* intervene. What he does for one, he doesn't always do for another. That same Joplin tornado killed 161 people. Why didn't God spare them all? Why did *their* families have to grieve? That's the question, and there's no easy answer. As your pastor, I'm not so arrogant as to pretend I can answer that sufficiently either. The truth is, there are theologians much smarter and more learned than I who've not resolved this dilemma. But—even so—here's a simple analogy that might help ... and let me start with a question...

Why does a father take the training wheels off of his child's bicycle? Well, the father knows his actions will produce some suffering. A spill is inevitable. Probably a painful scrape, maybe even a little bloodshed or tears lie ahead. But the father removes the training wheels and anxiously watches from a distance because he loves the child and knows that risk, adventure, and freedom are all sources of the most fulfilling life...

If that father were overly protective, the child would never experience the thrill of the wind in his face, riding training-wheel-free down the sidewalk or driveway. In fact, if the father's main objective was protection, his child would never be permitted to play sports, drive a car, date the opposite sex, get married, or have a child. Think about it...

The risk of pain/failure contributes significantly to our maturity and fulfillment in life. We're not puppets on a string; we're human beings with free will, created in the image of God ... given the privilege of living in this fallen world. Professor Seth Wilson once said, "God is so much in charge that He can program free will into the equation if He wants to." As free human beings, we're going to crash sometimes. But, like so many things, *our response is what's important*. It's been said that 'while pain is inevitable, misery is optional.' So, God doesn't prevent us from experiencing pain, but God does make 3 promises to help sustain us in the midst of pain:

God promises he'll be at our side through the suffering. In Hebrews 13:5, God's word says: "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you."

I used the bike-riding analogy earlier, but here's another. My experience was a bit catastrophic. Dad took the training wheels off. I told him I wasn't ready, but that didn't stop him from doing what he felt was right. He did have mercy on me and didn't make me ride on a hard surface—a sidewalk or road. He let me try it in the side-lawn first. But there in the side lawn was my older brother's new pup tent—all set up. It was a big side yard, for sure—plenty of room. But, despite that, I still managed to run that bike right

through the middle of that tent. And yes, there were some bumps & bruises. And yes, I did ruin my brother's new tent. And yes, I did end up having to pay for part of that tent ... just to teach me to be more careful. But guess who was there through it all. My Dad...

Even though he probably got a big chuckle out of the whole thing, he never failed me. He was there. It was the silhouette of him standing there every time I'd look over that got me through that traumatic experience. And God promises us the same. He'll never leave us; he'll never forsake us. That's a promise. Here's another...

God promises that suffering will mature us/benefit us if we let it. The Apostle James (1:2-4, NLT) records: "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."

Jesus told the disciples to row to the other side of the lake; he'd join them later. That night, as they obeyed, a ferocious storm came up, including huge waves. The disciples battled the storm for several hours—exhausted and afraid of drowning. Scripture tells us that Jesus spotted them from the mountain where he'd been praying, and in the terror of that night Jesus came to them walking on the water. Folks, that experience deepened the disciples' faith and courage. They witnessed Jesus do the impossible, then calm the storm. Peter briefly walked on water himself. So, they battled a terrible, life-threatening storm ... and survived. Jesus came to them and their faith was strengthened...

Let this serve as a reminder, folks, that while God doesn't exempt us from pain, *his goal for our lives is not our safety*, but our maturity. The 3rd promise is:

God will make all things right one day in heaven. The Apostle John in the final book of the Bible (Rev. 21:1-7, NLT) shares this heavenly vision with us: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." ⁵ And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." ⁶ And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. ⁷ All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children."

Heaven, folks, is not wishful thinking! It's a divine promise from a God who always keeps his word! We'll be given new, glorified bodies; we'll be free from pain; there'll be

no more tears & no more separation from loved ones—a magnificent reunion someday; that's a promise!

That promise is what kept Abraham going when he lived as a nomad in tents—no place to call his own. That promise is what kept Moses going when life became nearly intolerable in the wilderness. And there's others...

Let me close though with this: When you're in process, learning to trust God and endure pain instead of searching for a reason why every time, remember two words:

- TIME – God makes all things beautiful in his time. With God a thousand years is as a day and a day as a thousand years. But God promises one day the sufferings of this world will seem but a moment in eternity. Be willing to 'wait on the Lord', won't you? And the second word to remember is...
- TRUST – Jesus said (John 14:1-2): "Don't let your hearts be troubled ... ² There is more than enough room in my Father's home ... I am going to prepare a place for you." In other words, "Trust me!"

Are you willing to do that today? Especially if you're going through a time of pain, or still trying to get over a time of pain in your life, are you willing to trust the One who understands? When I lost my mom, I had a choice of how I was going to react and, in the end, it was God's promises that kept me going—very much like the stories in scripture, including Joseph in the Old Testament. God's promise kept him going too, in spite of one disappointment after another. As we move through this series, we'll hear more about the promises in Joseph's story ... as we continue to focus on ACTS OF GOD in our lives. So, it'll be all about Joseph in the weeks to come! In the meantime, are you willing to trust the Promise Maker today—even if just to stay involved in this worship series? Are you willing to consider God's timing, and then to trust the One who can carry you through the pain?

LET US PRAY.