

The Questions

Why do bad things happen to believers in Jesus? Aren't we supposed to reap what we sow and have the desires of our hearts granted?

I lost a good friend to cancer. I prayed for healing but he died anyway. Was I praying my friend OUT of heaven selfishly? Was what my friend needed from God was to be with God in heaven?

Some believe it's always God's will to heal but it's our lack of faith that keeps Him from healing. I have a friend who has (what I believe to be) genuine, unwavering faith. [She] prayed her heart out for healing for a family member who had a heart condition. She was devastated when he passed away. Interested in your thoughts.

Why Ask Why?

These are the questions we knew would come when we first decided to do this series. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do bad things happen at all? If God is all-powerful, then why doesn't God heal? Is God not really all-powerful? Or is the problem on my end? Am I just not faithful enough? Have *I* done something wrong? Am I being punished?

What we really want, at the bottom of all these questions, is an explanation. We want to know *Why*? What caused this? Where did it come from? Diagram it out for me. Give me the formula I need to follow to keep it from happening again.

Why? We want to understand. But here's the problem: understanding *why* we suffer doesn't change the reality of suffering. Knowing *Why* doesn't help. It's natural to search for answers. To ask *Why* is human. We crave understanding. But we have to understand that information won't bring us peace. It won't stop us from hurting.

Knowing *why* won't bring us peace. Only knowing God brings us peace.

My Grandpa Barnes (my mom's dad) died about a year and a half ago. He was 83 (?) and died at home in a hospice bed. We knew why he died - he'd smoked since he was about 11 years old and he'd developed lung cancer. We had all the charts and data. We knew exactly what was happening in his body that was killing him. We even knew down to the week when he was going to die.

And all that knowledge didn't make his death any less tragic. That we knew *Why* didn't mean we cried any fewer tears at his graveside.

The *Why* didn't help at all, even when we had it.

Pain & suffering, sickness & death - they're like that. All the knowledge in the world doesn't hide the wrongness of them. When we're confronted with real human suffering (whether it's our own or someone else's), when we experience death, we know at a deep, profound level that it's *wrong*. That we weren't created to experience these.

We weren't made to suffer. We weren't made to die. We were made to live, to flourish. To thrive. Death is a virus in our DNA. Suffering is an error in our programming.

(And even though it's our fault, even though we introduced suffering and death into the world through our sin, we still sense the wrongness at a deep level.)

When we are confronted with this wrongness, when we experience suffering ourselves, or when we see someone else suffer, and we ask that natural question - WHY!?!? - we create all kinds of answers for ourselves.

The worst theology I've ever heard is at funerals. It's good-intentioned, but all too often misguided. I've heard people say, "God needed another angel in heaven" as though God had some lack that could only be filled at our expense. Others say, "God had a reason for this," as if God kills us whenever God wants, for some inscrutable reason known only to God, as though Death is ever a part of God's plan.

More and more, our culture loves to blame suffering on Karma - bad things happen to us because we did something bad. Many Christians have adopted karma (which we get from Hinduism) wholesale into their theology. We think that God punishes us for what we do wrong, or rewards us for what we do rightly. (We saw last week that God is not a quid-pro-quo kind of God. That our Salvation and God's favor are not merit-based. God's universe doesn't operate according to karma.)

The third question we asked today has that flavor - that God always wants to heal but will only work if we have enough faith. If we're good enough. If we pray hard enough.

That's not God.

We're not the first generation to think that, though. Even the ancient Israelites struggled with these same questions, and the cultures around them believed in a sort of Karmic system of punishment and reward. The story of Job is a book-length response to the problem of Suffering, and the story is a strong No to a karmic universe.

Listen to how Job is described as the story opens: **"There once was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless-- a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil." -- Job 1:1 (NLT)**

As the story progresses, God allows Job to be tested. He specifically allows Job to suffer horribly, to test how faithful he is (we might say to see if he's a fair-weather fan). In the course of a few days, Job's children are all killed, he loses all of his substantial wealth and he is afflicted with some nasty diseases. It gets so bad his wife tells him he should curse God and die.

Next three of Job's friends come to comfort him. When they see Job, they're overcome with grief for him. You've been there, haven't you? When someone close to you has experienced loss or illness? Job's friends come to him and stay with him, grieving with him, for a week. None of them says anything, they don't try to offer him any answers. They just hurt with him.

Then...

Then Job's friends start trying to figure out Why. They spend the rest of the book arguing with Job, and it's eerie how much they sound like us in the answers they offer.

His friend Eliphaz said, "Stop and think! Do the innocent die? When have the upright been destroyed? My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same. A breath from God destroys them. They vanish in a blast of his anger." -- Job 4:7-9 (NLT)

God protects good people and bad people reap the destruction they sow. Sounds like karma, doesn't it?

His next friend, Bildad, said, "But if you pray to God and seek the favor of the Almighty, and if you are pure and live with integrity, he will surely rise up and restore your happy home." -- Job 8:5-6 (NLT)

Just have faith, Job! If you have enough faith, God will do what you ask!

His third friend, Zophar tells Job it's all his own fault: "If only you would prepare your heart and lift up your hands to him in prayer! Get rid of your sins, and leave all iniquity behind you. Then your face will brighten with innocence. You will be strong and free of fear." -- Job 11:13-15 (NLT)

Just repent, Job! Confess your sin (which is obviously the cause of your suffering) and come back to God!

And all the while, Job maintains his innocence. Over and over he claims that he hasn't sinned, that God has wronged him, that he doesn't deserve what's happened to him.

And the thing is, in the story, Job's right. He wasn't a sinner. God himself describes Job as the most righteous person on the planet. We readers have unique knowledge none of the characters does - that Job is innocent. That he's not being punished. That this really is something else that God is up to (something we don't really understand).

We would do well to learn from Job's friends. Because all too often, that's who we are. We offer up our best answer to the Why questions. And so often they come across like platitudes, cheap cliches that don't really mean anything.

I know that's not our intention. We really do mean well. We really do want to help our loved ones make sense of the tragedy that's disrupted their lives. But trying to answer Why is the *wrong* response. We don't know Why. We can't understand God, or what God does. And the stakes are high if we're wrong:

See, God shows up at the end of Job's story. The whole time Job has been arguing with his friends, Job had been asking for a sit-down with God, to prove his own innocence, to demand that God explain himself.

You get that, don't you? Haven't you ever been there? Something awful happens and you wish you could get 5 minutes with God, to get in his face and demand some answers?

(We don't like to admit we feel that way because we think it's wrong to be angry at God, wrong to tell God how we're really feeling. But if we were to be honest, we've been there. Maybe you're there right now.)

So often in our hurt, in our pain, we go looking for answers everywhere but from God. We let our anger and our pain separate us from God. We let our fear push us away from the only person who actually *has* answers for us.

What if instead, like Job, we let our suffering draw us to God? What if like Job we were honest with God about our hurts, our anger, our rage and our pain? What if we looked for answers from the one who has them?

Guess what happened with Job? God shows up and Job finally gets his chance to confront God, to demand his answers. But here's what God says:

"Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much... What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

"Who kept the sea inside its boundaries as it burst from the womb, and as I clothed it with clouds and wrapped it in thick darkness? For I locked it behind barred gates, limiting its shores. I said, 'This far and no farther will you come. Here your proud waves must stop!'

"Have you ever commanded the morning to appear and caused the dawn to rise in the east? ...Where does light come from, and where does darkness go? Can you take each to its home? Do you know how to get there? But of course you know all this! For you were born before it was all created, and you are so very experienced!

"...Where is the path to the source of light? Where is the home of the east wind? Who created a channel for the torrents of rain? Who laid out the path for the lightning? Who makes the rain fall on barren land, in a desert where no one lives? Who sends rain to satisfy the parched ground and make the tender grass spring up? Does the rain have a father? Who gives birth to the dew? Who is the mother of the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens? ...Can you direct the movement of the stars-- binding the cluster of the Pleiades or loosening the cords of Orion? Can you direct the sequence of the seasons or guide the Bear with her cubs across the heavens? Do you know the laws of the universe? Can you use them to regulate the earth? Can you shout to the clouds and make it rain? Can you make lightning appear and cause it to strike as you direct?

"...Can you stalk prey for a lioness and satisfy the young lions' appetites as they lie in their dens or crouch in the thicket? Who provides food for the ravens when their young cry out to God and wander about in hunger? Do you know when the wild goats give birth? Have you watched as deer are born in the wild? ...Have you given the horse its strength or clothed its neck with a flowing mane? Did you give it the ability to leap like a locust? Its majestic snorting is terrifying! ...Is it your wisdom that makes the hawk soar and spread its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle rises to the heights to make its nest?" -- Job 38:-39 (selections, NLT)

God's response is as surprising as it is overwhelming. God says, Okay, Job. I'll answer all your questions. As long as you can answer mine. And then God asks Job (and us) to consider the whole of creation. Can we explain how things work? Can we explain how they got there? Do we have even the slightest idea how to hold it all together?

If God stepped out of the control room of the universe and left you in charge for 5 minutes, could you do it? Keep every atom spinning, every planet in orbit, every star burning? Every animal fed, every plant growing? Would you have the slightest idea where to start?

Of course not. None of us would. Because we're not the creator. We're the created.

God's answer to Job is God's answer to us: you can't understand Why, Job. Your mind isn't vast enough. Even if I tried to answer you, your soul couldn't even start to grasp it.

We weren't made to understand Why.

Job is left humbled, practically speechless before God's majesty. Even though Job feared God before, he is even more in awe of God now.

But surprisingly, God isn't mad at Job for asking his questions. In fact, God is angry at Job's friends, those who thought they had God figured out, those who dared to speak on God's behalf. God says to them:

"I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has. So take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer on your behalf. I will not treat you as you deserve, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has." -- Job 42:7-8 (NLT)

When we encounter pain and suffering, we're tempted to look for explanations. But that's not the proper response. When those we love are hurting, we should keep our mouths shut and hurt with them. Be angry with them. Don't try to explain it. Don't assume you can speak for God.

Instead, our pain and suffering ought to bring us to a place of awe before God. Just like Job, we must remember that we are the created, the creature, and not the creator. We can't know why God does what God does. We can't understand all the ins-and-outs of God's plan to redeem and restore everything.

So where does that leave us? Hopeless? Helpless with our pain? Do we throw up our hands in despair because we are small and God is big and that's the end of the story?

No. Because the God we serve is fundamentally a good God. The God we serve is Love. The God we serve is just. The God we serve is Holy.

This is the God who didn't abandon us to our pain and suffering. This is the God who refused to let us bring destruction on ourselves. When we introduced Death into the world, this God we serve became one of us. This God knew suffering. He walked with us, knew the pain of loss. Knew what it felt like to be hungry, to be betrayed. Knew the sweat of a hard day's work. Knew what it felt like to be abandoned by his family.

He experienced the pain of death for us. He took all our sin on himself and gave himself up to be killed.

God knows your pain. Through Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion, when you suffer, God suffers with you. God says, "Me too. I know how you feel."

And better yet, God resurrects. That's how Jesus' story ended - not with a tomb, but with a resurrection. And so even in the midst of your suffering, God whispers

"I know it hurts right now. But this pain is the seed of your redemption. Something better is coming. I'm working on it right now."

And we can believe because the God we serve is trustworthy. We can't know why these things happen. But we can know that God is faithful. Suffering is an opportunity for us to know God better. To approach God with all our pain and anger and find understanding, acceptance, love and assurance.

Knowing why doesn't bring peace. But knowing God does.

So if you are suffering, if you are in that place of pain and anger, I don't have any answers for you. I wouldn't dare try to tell you why this is happening to you. Because I can't know. Neither can you.

What I can offer you is an invitation. Your suffering is an opportunity to know God better. Don't run from God, run *to* God. Be honest about all your thoughts and feelings. God can take it. God won't judge or condemn you.

Today we end our time together with Communion. This is the meal that remembers Jesus' sacrifice for us. This is the table where we come to participate in Jesus' death, to look forward to the promise of our resurrection.

The bread we eat is Jesus' body that was broken for us. He endured pain just like you and me. The juice we drink is Jesus' blood that was spilled for us. He died - experienced that fundamental wrongness we introduced into the world. He died for all of us who've been hurt by death, all of us who fear death.

Come to Jesus' table today and meet with the God who suffers with you. Bring all your hurt, your anger, your despair. Bring those before God. Come and hear as he whispers, "Me too. I know how you feel."

And as you eat and drink, taste the promise that this is not the End, that resurrection is coming. That better days are ahead. Come find peace, not from answers, but from knowing God.

<Prayer of Consecration>