

Session 1

January 12, 2020

WHY DOES SUFFERING EXIST?

Genesis 3:16-19; Romans 8:18-25

Early in my ministry (and late one night), I was called to the local hospital by an ER nurse who was dealing with a man who had just lost his mother in a tragic accident. The man asked me one simple question: “If God is supposed to be so good, then how could He let my mother die?” In some form or other, that question has been raised throughout human history. If God is good, then why is there evil? And if God is all-powerful, then why doesn’t He stop it? As you can see, that “simple question” is not so simple after all! While I don’t remember everything I said in the hospital that night, I do remember sharing with that hurting man three important truths from God’s word.

Truth #1: All suffering is a result of sin (Gen. 3:16-19). Let’s face it: sometimes our suffering is the direct result of direct sin! If you play with fire, you will eventually be burned; and if you play with sin, you will eventually reap the consequences (see Gal. 6:7-8). But that doesn’t mean that all personal suffering is the direct result of personal sin. Job suffered unimaginable anguish, not because he had sinned, but because he hadn’t! (see Job chapters 1 and 2). And the poor man “blind from birth” in John 9 so suffered not because of his sin, but rather as a means to bring glory to God (see John 9:1-3). Yet in every case, the only reason that suffering exists in the first place is because of the fall of man. Notice the strong language and new vocabulary introduced with the penalties imposed on Adam and Eve in this section of Genesis 3. In contrast to the “good” of Genesis 1 and 2, we see words like *pain* and *anguish* in verse 16; *cursed* and *painful labor* in verse 17; *thorns and thistles* in verse 18; and the *sweat of your brow* and a *return to the dust* in verse 18. Here’s the point: *when sin entered the world, suffering entered it as well.*

Truth #2: All suffering is ultimately alleviated by Christ (Rom. 8:18-22). Dr. Adrian Rogers used to say, “Man only has three problems: sin, sorrow, and death. The good news is that Jesus Christ and His cross provide the solution to all three of those problems.” In the first part of Romans 8, the apostle Paul contrasts life controlled by the flesh with life controlled by the Spirit. By the time he reaches verse 18, he is contrasting the suffering of the present life with the glory of the life to come. All of creation was corrupted because of sin (v. 20); all creation awaits its deliverance, which will be signaled by the resurrection and glorification of God’s children (vv. 21, 23). The world’s “groaning together with labor pains” (v. 22) pictures not only the suffering of the present time but reflects the joyful expectation of what lies ahead. So where does this deliverance come from? From the same God who pronounced the curse in the first place. In fact, God’s provision to restore fallen humanity by a blood atonement was demonstrated just after the sin was committed and the curse pronounced. God’s declaration to the serpent, “I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3: 15) is a foreshadow of Calvary, while His covering Adam and Eve with the skins of freshly killed animals (as opposed to their own futile fig leaves) indicates the means by which atonement would be granted. Here’s the point: *the same God who allowed sin and suffering to enter the world also made a provision to overcome it.*

Truth #3: All suffering has a purpose in God's greater plan (Rom. 8:23-25). Like Job in the Old Testament and "the man born blind" in the New (see above), God actually uses suffering for our benefit and for His glory. First, suffering helps shape us and conform us to Christ (see Rom. 5:1-5; James 1:2-4). Second, our suffering points us to Christ. Remember, it was in Peter's sinking despair that he cried out "Lord save me!" (Matt. 14:30). Third, through suffering we discover the blessing of hope (vv. 23-25). In their hour of great anguish, Jesus reassured His disciples, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world!" Here's the point: *while suffering is never fun, it is always a purposeful part of God's plan.*