

Is God really good if there is suffering and injustice?

July 21, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Our question this morning has a bit of history behind it.

You'll remember back in June, we were working our way through the Eyes to See Bible study and one night we came across a question that really stood out. "How would you respond to someone who questions God's goodness, justice, compassion and mercy in light of all the brokenness, suffering, poverty and injustice in the world?"

That's a great question and a tough one, so I got my theological thinking cap on and I said something very wise: 'Dan, why don't you handle this one.'

And then I said 'you know what, this is a really complex question that's going to take some time to unpack, so let's put it on the list of questions for Q's from the pews. And so here we are today asking ourselves "How would we respond to someone who questions God's goodness, justice, compassion and mercy in light of all the brokenness, suffering, poverty and injustice in the world?"

As I got to thinking about it, it struck me that there are actually two questions at play here – one pastoral and the other apologetic. The first one is this – Why does God allow suffering in this world? Christians suffer, non-Christians suffer. Adults suffer, children suffer – why would a good God allow such bad things to happen to us? So first question – Why does God allow suffering in this world?

And second question - does suffering mean that God is not good? Right? Does the presence of suffering prove that God is not good? Here's the logic: If God was truly good, wouldn't He prevent bad things from happening? Wouldn't a good God just snap His fingers and instantly do away with poverty and suffering and injustice? Wouldn't He always intervene and make things right? And if He isn't doing that, does that really mean that God is NOT in fact good? Those are good questions and important ones too so let's dig in and ask our first question – Why does God allow suffering in the world?

Now, right away, I want to pause and point out something that's baked right into the question. God ALLOWS suffering but He doesn't *cause* it. God allows suffering to happen but He doesn't initiate it.

A lot of people see suffering in the world and they think – 'Oh, God must be to blame. He's created a messed up world or He just doesn't care' – and then they take suffering as evidence that God must not be good. But nothing could be farther from the truth. He didn't create poverty or violence or injustice; God created a perfect world. It was only when we as people decided to ignore God and go our own way that evil appeared. Adam and Eve and every person since has said 'forget it God, I'm not listening to You' and let's be honest – that's led to suffering.

I mean, think about it – so much of the suffering in this world is caused by other people. What's injustice but the outcome of people pursuing their own interests to the detriment of others? What's poverty but the result of bad decisions and a tendency to hoard our possessions rather than share with those in need?

That's on us, not on God. So much suffering in this world flows out of human decision, not God's. God does not cause human suffering, but He does allow it.

Now here's where we get to the million dollar question – why? WHY does God allow suffering to happen? Why doesn't he step in and intervene and put a stop to all the bad things in the world in an instant?

Let me explore a few different reasons.

The first is free will. God allows suffering to happen to preserve free will.

See, God didn't make us to be good little robots who would follow His every command with perfect compliance. God gave us the capacity to make our own decisions and to go our own way, even if that meant ignoring Him. God isn't going to force us into relationship with Him but He gave us free will with the intention that we would freely enter into relationship with Him and live according to His perfect will. When we don't though and live for ourselves, we often cause suffering for others. But God is so willing to preserve our free will that He permits suffering even when it's a result of an evil decision. He COULD unilaterally intervene but that would be a violation of free will and sometimes God allows suffering in order to preserve free will.

Other times, God allows suffering to happen to maintain life on earth. I've just said that so much suffering has human causes, but you have to admit that a lot of suffering has natural causes too. Earthquakes and hurricanes and mudslides and floods; these all cause tremendous suffering too and they are not the result of someone's free will. So why doesn't God step in and stop them?

I was fascinated to read this week how important those natural processes are to the continuation of life of earth. Earthquakes and hurricanes and all those things are tremendously destructive but they also play a critical role in making the earth a habitable planet. Certainly, these things cause suffering but they also make it possible for us to live on earth. Volcanos and tsunamis enrich soil for crops, hurricanes regulate the planet's temperature and earthquakes redistribute the pressure that builds up at the earth's core.¹ Scientists are quick to recognize the suffering that comes from natural disasters, but also admit that there are benefits too. Dr. Jelle de Boer, a geologist at Wesleyan University says "Nature is reborn with these kinds of terrible events. There are a lot of positive aspects even when we don't see them" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/11/science/deadly-and-yet-necessary-quakes-renew-the-planet.html>).

If God were to step in and stop these natural events, it would upset the delicate balance of life that enables human life to exist on this planet. I think that He must weigh the consequences of natural disasters or not and allows suffering when it will ultimately serve to maintain life on earth.

Now that's great, you might say, but what about the person who's lost all that they've owned in a hurricane? We can breathe easy, knowing that that hurricane played a positive role in the long run when we're landlocked and tucked away safe from hurricanes. But what about the person who lives on the coast who just watched his world wash away in the waves.

If that person is already a believer, I would point out that God allows suffering to happen in order to refine faith. Suffering is the fire in which God refines our faith. It strips away the distractions from our hearts and teaches us to rely solely on God.

That's exactly what happens in the Bible book that most people think about when they think about suffering. God allows Job to suffer in order to refine his faith. Job has faith when the sun is shining, but

when the rain clouds come and the thunder starts, Job learns to value God for God Himself and not just for what God can give. Job learns to rely most fully and completely on God and only suffering could produce that growth. God allows suffering to refine believer's faith.

And in the case of unbelievers, I would say that God allows suffering to happen in order to point people to Him. By and large, we live pretty comfortable lives. And as long as things are good, we'll never think to think deeper about life and God and eternity. But God allows suffering to prompt us out of the status quo and look to Him for help. C. S. Lewis famously said that God shouts to us in our pains. "It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world" (The Problem of Pain). And I think he's right. God allows suffering to come in and shake up our circumstances so that when all else fails, we will call out to Him and find Him more than willing to help. God allows suffering in order to point people to Him.

Which is why it's too bad that some people look at suffering and see it as evidence that God is not good. Suffering is supposed to propel us toward God, not push us away.

If a person wants to see suffering as proof that God is not good, my immediate response would be to say 'well, wait, is it fair to say that God is not good because of all the evil in the world, if you're not willing to say that God IS good on the basis of all the good in the world?' If you're not willing to thank God for all the good in the world, you can't really blame Him for all the bad. You're being a bit like Job's wife in Job chapter 2. She's like 'if God's only giving you bad, why don't you just curse Him and die' and Job says – 'that's a little foolish.' He recognizes the good that has come from God and the trials He has allowed and says 'Shall we accept only good from God and not trouble?'

10 He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said. (Job 2:10 NIV).

And besides, even in the trouble, God has a purpose. He tells us in Romans 8:28 ~~that 28~~ ~~And we know that~~ in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28 NIV). Jeremiah 29:11 says that God's plans are not to harm us but to benefit us. That means that "All evils serve some justifiable purpose in God's economy" (Grootius, 638).

Did you hear that? If God allows some suffering to befall you, it means that He has a good reason to allow that suffering because it will cause a greater good than what would have been if you had not gone through it. If God allows you to suffer that means that He has a good reason for it that will ultimately bring about a greater good than would have been if you'd not suffered.

So let's ask the question – is suffering in the world reason to doubt God's goodness? No. God works for good even in suffering, and when He allows suffering, God has a morally justifiable reason for it.

Suffering is not evidence that God is not good; if anything, suffering is evidence that WE are not, since so much suffering comes out of our freely chosen decisions. But even then, God uses those decisions in His sovereign omnipotence to bring about a greater good than would have been before. I know that God is good because He takes the worst of suffering and uses it for the best of outcomes.

And I know that because of the Cross.

See God doesn't look down on our suffering like a distant disinterested God who cares nothing about us. He cares SO much about us that He gave up the glory and comfort of Heaven to live and die on Earth so

that we could one day enjoy the comfort and glory. He came in the person of His Son Jesus to die for the sins that we freely chose and to restore us to relationship with God. The Bible tells us that this is how God showed His love for us – 1 John 4:9 - 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. (1Jo 4:9 NIV).

But not everybody realized that. In fact, the religious elite at the time heard Jesus question their man made religion and freely chose to put Him to death. They didn't like what He was saying so they made Him suffer, the most ignoble, violent death you can imagine. And even more than you can imagine, because that death meant His heavenly Father abandoned Him, instead of us. He was alone in the face of suffering. But even that, God used for good.

He raised Jesus back to life. He raised us up and seated us with Christ in the Heavenly realms when we trust in Him. He forgave our sins and promised us life in the world the way He intended it to be.

Because there WILL come a day when God steps in and intervenes. When freely chosen evil goes out the window and sovereign omnipotent God pulls the curtain on history and everything is restored to the way it in the first place. In that moment, God will do away with every evil. I agree with the question – that a good God SHOULD do away with evil – He tolerates it now, to preserve free will and to give people a chance to freely choose Him – but when that times comes, God will wipe away every evil – every evil thought, every evil deed, every evil person who has not turned from their sin and hidden themselves in the grace of God.

Then we'll see true goodness. A world where here is no more sorrow or crying or pain. A world without poverty and injustice and violence. A world where suffering is only a distant memory that seems like a dream we might have had once. We will see the unadulterated goodness of God and we will rejoice.

In the meantime, we trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding. We trust that God is good, even when we don't fully understand it. And we know that in the face of suffering, unlike Jesus, we are NOT alone. He who suffered is there with us in our suffering and that means something. It means that God is preserving free will, renewing the earth, refining our faith, drawing us to Him and it means that God will ultimately make things right.

So what would I say to a person who doubts God's goodness on the basis of suffering in the world?

First, I would say – listen to this message – I've tried to keep it short so that's it's a quick listen.

But then I would say – "Look. I admit that suffering is hard and I admit that I don't have all the answers. This is a really tough question, crammed to the brim with emotional weight. If you are suffering right now, then this is not merely an intellectual question, but an emotional issue that goes to the core of who you are. Your pain is real. Your frustrations are real. There is no question about that.

And I can certainly identify with the impulse blame God for bad things. If He is sovereign, why doesn't He do away with evil? Why doesn't He just snap His fingers and make it all go away? Well, one day He will and in the meantime, He has promised to walk with us through the darkest valleys and the hottest of fires. There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God and Jesus suffered to prove that that was true.

So I'd invite you to reach out to Him. Maybe this trial is God's way of getting your attention. And I'd invite you to ask Him to show you if He is good.

BENEDICTION

9. Eph. 3:17-19 - (May) Christ dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

ORIGINAL DRAFT

Our question this morning has a bit of history behind it.

You'll remember back in June, we were working our way through the Eyes to See Bible study and one night we came across a question that really stood out. "How would you respond to someone who questions God's goodness, justice, compassion and mercy in light of all the brokenness, suffering, poverty and injustice in the world?"

That's a great question and a tough one, so I got my theological thinking cap on and I said something very wise: 'Dan, why don't you handle this one.'

And then I said 'you know what, this is a really complex question that's going to take some time to unpack, so let's put it on the list of questions for Q's from the pews. And so here we are today asking ourselves "How would we respond to someone who questions God's goodness, justice, compassion and mercy in light of all the brokenness, suffering, poverty and injustice in the world?"

Like I said that Thursday night, good question, and it's a tough one too. If God is fundamentally good, then how can there be so much that is NOT good in the world? Wouldn't a good God immediately step in and right every wrong and prevent every injustice? And if He doesn't right every wrong and prevent every injustice, does that necessarily mean that He is not good? Those are good questions.

So let me see if I can get into them and address them one step at a time. And I want to do it through an imagined conversation with someone who doubts God's goodness in light of evil in the world. We're sitting around a campfire, watching the sparks fly up and the other person says – 'you know Graham, I have a hard time believing that God is good when there is so much suffering in the world. I can't imagine why a good God would make such a messed up world.'

My first response would be to say 'that's a fair question; it shows you're thinking critically about God and about the world and it's great that you're doing that.' My next response would be to say 'you're right – so and so – a good God wouldn't make a world like this – and truth be told, He didn't make a world like this. When God created the world, He called it all 'good' and 'very good.' God created a world where there is no brokenness or poverty or suffering or injustice. God created a world where everyone had enough and where people lived in harmony. The 'good God' created a 'good world.'

But then things took a turn for the worse. Our ancestors decided that they knew better than God and so they did the 'one thing' that God had told them not to do. They could do anything – anything they could imagine, anything they could dream of, except that one thing – and they did it. And that's when brokenness entered the world. Suffering and injustice entered the world when we decided to try playing God and so that's why we see evil in the world today. If anything, suffering and poverty is not proof that God is not good, but that people are not good.

Well, that's fine and good, my friend would probably say but that still doesn't get God off the hook. "Maybe He's not to *blame* for the not good stuff at the world, but it sure looks like He's not doing anything about it! A good God should get rid of suffering and injustice."

Now on that point, I agree. A good God SHOULD get rid of suffering and injustice. But let's think about what that's going to mean. Suffering and injustice does not come from God. It comes from us. Right?

Think about it. So much of the suffering in this world traces back to the fact that we as a species are willing to pursue our own interests at the expense of others.

And so if a good God is going to deal with suffering and injustice, then He's going to have to deal with us. Eliminate injustice and poverty means eliminating the source of poverty and injustice... which is us... But God won't do that. Why?

Because He created us with free will and He is committed to allowing us to freely make decisions, whether they are helpful or hurtful. God has not created us to be good little robots who do His will without question; He has given us free will to make our own decisions, with the intention that we will freely choose to live for Him. When we don't though, we end up causing much of the evil in the world and God chooses to tolerate that in order to preserve our free will.

At this point though, I can imagine my conversation partner might say – 'well ok, I can appreciate that He wants to preserve free will but now this issue is not God's goodness but God's power. If God is good and yet committed to free will, does that mean that He is handcuffed and unable to do anything about suffering? Because that's just as bad. When it comes to dealing with injustice, a good but powerless God is just as bad as a not good God.'

Again, I agree. A good God who can do nothing in the face of suffering is not really helpful. But our God is not powerless in the face of suffering. He is at work behind the scenes redeeming every evil thing that happens, even when we don't understand it. In His sovereignty, God takes the freely chosen decisions of autonomous people and uses them in harmony with out freely chosen decisions to produce positive outcomes in the world.

The classic example of this in the Bible is Joseph – his brothers abandoned him, selling him to slave traders and ultimately sending him into slavery in Egypt for decades. Joseph suffered big time, no question about it. But when Joseph and the brothers were reunited, Joseph said to his brothers – 'what you intended for evil, God intended for good.' (*20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Gen 50:20 NIV)*). God took their freely chosen decision to sell off their brother and ultimately used it to preserve him, them and an entire nation. "For any evil that God allows, God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing this evil, even if we do not know what this morally sufficient reason is in some cases" (Grootius, 630). "All evils serve some justifiable purpose in God's economy" (Grootius, 638).

In some cases, it's setting up a specific good, like preserving life down the road; in other cases, it's a matter of refining and maturing people. The writers of the Bible go so far as to say that we should rejoice in suffering, knowing that it purifies us and refines our faith and will ultimately result in praise and glory. ~~6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.~~

~~7 These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.~~

And I think that explains too why God allows suffering caused by natural events, like earthquakes and hurricanes, too. There is some greater good happening. And it's fascinating even to see secular science wrestling with this – Donald DePaolo is a geochemist at U of Cal, Berkeley and he writes "It's hard to find something uplifting about 150, 000 lives being lost... but the type of geological process that caused the earthquake and the tsunami is an essential characteristic of the earth. As far as we know, it doesn't

occur on any other planetary body and has something very directly to do with the fact that the earth is a habitable planet” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/11/science/deadly-and-yet-necessary-quakes-renew-the-planet.html>). For every hardship that God allows, there is a morally sufficient reason that accomplishes a greater good.

Now, that’s a very intellectual answer for a question that has real emotional weight. And I confess that it may not be emotionally satisfying for some people. Admittedly though, even atheist philosophers who try to explain suffering struggle to adequately address heart ache and pain.

Which I think makes Christianity uniquely suited to handle this problem of suffering. If at the end of this conversation, my friend says to me ‘well, you’ve failed to convince me and I still don’t believe God is good, or maybe even there’ then I’d say ‘well, you still have to deal with suffering.’ To quote Bernard Leikind, a physicist writing for the Humanist magazine, “the universe has no purpose and that we humans have to sort out what matters... Each of us is responsible for the private and the public meanings of our own lives, as far as we can control our fate and foresee the consequences of our actions. To confront human evil, to respond to human suffering—our own or others—and to cope with natural disasters, we’re on our own” (<https://thehumanist.com/magazine/may-june-2010/commentary/the-mystery-of-evil-and-suffering>)

To which the Christian faith responds – no, we’re not alone. God is at work, even in the midst of tragedy, to bring about good, and to walk with us even in the most trying times.

And the greatest proof of that is the Cross. You may take the suffering in the world as evidence that God is not good, but if you do that, to be fair, you also need to take Jesus’ suffering on the Cross as evidence that God IS good.

Here’s what I mean.

Remember what we said earlier about a good God getting rid of suffering and injustice? That’s true. A good God WILL do that but that’s a problem for us because if God is going to get rid of suffering and injustice then He needs to get rid of the cause, which is us. The world that we live in is exactly the sort of world you’d expect from a people who ignore the perfect God and go their own way. And God would have to wipe it out to make things right.

But in His great love, God chose not to do that. He chose to deal with suffering and injustice by entering into the world that He created and suffering FOR us, in our place. Jesus on the Cross is God suffering the consequences of our rebellion so that we could receive His blessing. And you know what the Bible writers say – that’s how God showed His love for us – by suffering for us, to restore us to Him. That’s God dealing with the sin and selfishness in our own hearts, so that we can return to Him and live for Him. Suffering in the world doesn’t mean that God is not good; God Himself suffered in the world for us to prove He was good. God wants to give every person an opportunity to hear it and respond.

Because there will come a day when God will pull down the curtain on history and begin a new era; well, really, restore the era that He created, in the beginning. Remember the perfect world, free from sin and sorrow and selfishness that we ruined by ignoring God? God’s going to put things right and in that world there will be no more sorrow, no more tears, no more suffering. And He wants each of us to experience

it. And so He suffered for us, so we could trust Him and live forever. Those are the actions of a good God.

And in the meantime, He is at work in every aspect of our lives, preserving our free will and yet still working to bring good in every situation. I like how Billy Graham puts it – “Evil is a reality, but God’s whole purpose is to eliminate it and in fact that is why Christ came and died on the Cross for our sins. “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Have you asked Christ to take away the sin in your life and then to use you as His instrument to combat sin in the world?” (Billy Graham, *Answers to life’s problems*, 252). That’s a good question too.

So to wrap up, what would I say to a person who doubted God’s goodness on account of the suffering in the world? Well, if they were asking from a purely intellectual point of view, I’d tell them to listen to this message. I’ve tried to keep it short so that people who were interested could give it a quick listen. And I think I’d say – ‘God is not responsible for the suffering in the world and so it’s not fair to doubt His goodness because of it. In fact, He is actively working to redeem it even when we don’t fully understand.’

To the person who’s asking from a very emotional place though, like someone touched by violence or losing a loved one to an awful disease, I would say – ‘I admit that I’d don’t fully understand suffering in God’s economy. And I know that the pain that you are feeling is real and raw. But I know that God has plumbed the depths of that pain, has experienced that pain Himself to prove how deeply He loves you and to make a way to make things right. He promises a world where there is no more sorrow or crying or pain, which is ours, because He actively suffered for us.

4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

(Rev 21:4-5 NIV).

¹ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/11/science/deadly-and-yet-necessary-quakes-renew-the-planet.html>
<https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/hurricane-forecasts-facts/learn.html>