

What About the Bad Stuff?
That's A Great Question Series: Week 3
11/5/17

Welcome/Intro/Vision

This is week 3 of a 5-week series called "That's a Great Question"

Where each week we're tackling some of the top questions that we get from people who are exploring faith, considering faith, or questioning faith

Our hope is that for those of us who are Jesus-followers, we might learn respectful, gentle, thoughtful ways of fielding and affirming people's great questions that come our way

But more importantly, we want to be a place where people who are on a journey of faith can ask their great questions and know that they'll be respected and taken seriously

And hopefully get some answers that will help remove obstacles to you engaging with a genuine life of faith

Here's our series outline, where we've been and where we're going

NEXT week, we'll be asking the question: "What about other religions and spiritualities?"

What does Christianity have to say to a world full of all kinds of religious expressions and spiritualities

And as Reminder: week 5, we're going to open things up to your questions

Throughout the course of the series, we're going to invite you to submit YOUR questions and for week 5 we'll tackle the questions that come up the most frequently that you give to us

In your bulletin is this tear-off comment card, write your questions, feel free to do some ballot-box stuffing by getting your friends and family to write your question in as well, and we'll tackle those week 5.

This week, we're tackling the question "What About the Bad Stuff?" In a world full of so much pain and brokenness, how can Christianity claim that there's an all-powerful good God?

This is a question that is very applicable for most all of us, whether you've been a committed Christian your whole life or this is your first time ever in a church or considering faith

For a couple of kids soccer seasons I hung out on the sidelines with another soccer dad named Larry who was born into a practicing Jewish family

But after he studied the holocaust in college he decided that if something as horrific as the holocaust could happen, there couldn't possibly be a God and he abandoned the idea of God altogether

At some point in our lives, most of us will either see something painful or awful around us that makes us question how could God exist

OR we'll experience some level of pain personally that will make us question how or if God could possibly exist

This is a very difficult topic to address, it's often VERY personal and for some of us it's very emotionally loaded.

And philosophers and theologians along with poets and artists and all kinds of other people have wrestled with the problem of pain and suffering and evil for thousands of years

Now what happens when people come up against something that's very complicated and sometimes very emotional is we all get a little uncomfortable, we don't like uncertainty, we don't like things we can't control or understand

And so we look for ways to try to gather up all the complexity and all the emotion into a simple box or a package or explanation that we can understand and sort of consolidate it so that it doesn't overwhelm us

And for religious people of all types, we're very uncomfortable with uncertainty because we feel like we're supposed to have answers, we're supposed to know the God answers!

And so there are a number of attempted answers in circulation in Christian circles that some of us have heard along the way

And that many of us have tried to use in response to the problem of evil or pain and suffering—including me.

But I want to suggest to you that all of them fall woefully short of fully answering the question

They usually have a kernel of truth to them BUT they either say too much, more than the Scriptures actually teach, or they say too little and leave too much out

Here's a short list of some of the go-to **Attempted Christian Answers** for the problem of suffering in this world, in no particular order

and again, if you've shared these before with other people, I have, too, no shame here, but I think it's important for us to out these to start with, and we'll list these and pick them apart one at a time, this will be fun!

- **God will never give you more than you can handle**—this is based on a Bible verse, but it's actually NOT what the verse says, it's not talking about suffering in that verse but TEMPTATION, and it's been taken out of context in order to help us to try to handle the challenges of suffering and pain

Now, does God have an awareness of what we can or cannot handle and does he sometimes work to guard and protect us from more than we can handle? Yes, Christians believe that to be true most of the time

But at the same time it is obviously and clearly possible for a person who is following Jesus to be overwhelmed by suffering to the point of death--whether we're talking about martyr's dying for their faith or people who die after long bouts of sickness of all sorts

- **It's your fault/all your fault/all their fault**—you'll hear this sometimes after a hurricane or other natural disaster from some Christian with a microphone who says that the people there are so evil they deserve this natural disaster to fall upon them

is suffering sometimes our own fault? Yes, for sure. For some people who bring their suffering upon themselves but who are constantly prone to externalize and blame other people for their own problems

For some of them it's the healthiest and best thing that could be done to own that they bring their own pain and suffering upon themselves

But is it ALWAYS someone's fault that their own pain or suffering happens? No, no, and no.

Hurricanes don't come because someone in that area lied to their grandma, okay? There's not always a one-to-one causality between bad things happening and a specific action that someone did

- **It's the Devil's fault**—in some particular Christian traditions, the devil has a ton of power to muck everything up all the time and just about anything that goes wrong is the devil's fault

From a biblical view, the answer would be YES, sometimes. Some of us kind of laugh at the idea of a guy in red tights and horns running around causing trouble

But from the Scripture's description of the world, there is a spiritual power with a small army by his side who is intent on bringing destruction and evil to this world that God created and God loves

So yes, sometimes it is the devil's fault. But the Bible says it's clearly not always the devil's fault.

Sometimes it's people causing their own problems or causing problems for others, sometimes it's just the weather--sometimes the cells just started over-replicating and produced cancer, no devil involved

sometimes there's other things that have happened or gone wrong that leave people beat-up and broken in the process

- **You have to know/experience darkness in order to know and appreciate the light**—this is the more poetic response and it has a nice ring to it, and the idea is that goodness is only really known if we know what badness or pain or suffering feels like.

Now do I appreciate the joy and relief of the light after a period of darkness and pain? For sure, yes, I do.

There's just one problem: Christians say that God is all light, all goodness, and in him is no darkness whatsoever. God knows and is pretty amped about goodness without having to experience or know badness or darkness.

And Christians say that some day we'll NEVER know darkness or pain ever, ever, ever again and we won't be sad about that. We won't miss sorrow or suffering. We'll always love and appreciate the light and we'll never again know or experience darkness.

Biblically, thank God, NO! We won't always have to know darkness in order to know the light!

- **It only looks bad, it'll really all turn out good (“grander purpose” explanation)**—in this explanation, evil and pain and suffering barely exist at all, it's only bad on the surface, but it'll all make sense in the end, and there's always this grander purpose in the end.

Thank God that the Scriptures say that God can redeem and use bad stuff in our lives for his bigger purpose

But that statement attempts to minimize the bad stuff by saying that God's got a plan. YES God's got a plan, but that doesn't make the bad stuff any less bad! Evil is still evil, even if God can use it for good.

- **Free Will Defense: God Can't Do Anything About It**—this argument was made most famous on the popular level by the book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” published in 1981 by a Jewish Rabbi named Harold Kushner. It spent many months on the New York Times best-seller list and continues to shape much of the thinking in some circles

He essentially says that God is at his best when he's coming alongside people who are suffering or in pain, but can't do anything about it. His hands are tied, he's sort of started things and put them in motion but things now pretty much run on their own

without God's intervention or help, so when bad things happen it's outside of God's control.

Now do we have the ability to make decisions that have consequences? Has God given us the ability to make choices that hurt each other and hurt ourselves? Yes, the Scriptures indicate that he has given us what philosophers call agency

It just means that our actions have real consequences, sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes those consequences are intended and sometimes they're un-intended

Agency is simply saying that how you treat your spouse day after day, week after week, month after month, year over year in many ways will dictate the quality of your marriage. OR if you don't do your homework in school, you fail the class—the devil didn't make you fail the class, you failed the class by not doing what you had to do to pass the class--that's agency, you have the ability to shape the future.

But in the midst of that, is God utterly powerless to do anything about pain and suffering? Nope.

The Scriptures and many people's testimonies ring out over and over again about how God moves and intervenes in very practical and specific ways to stop evil, stop suffering.

And yet, sometimes God doesn't do that. And we often don't get many explanations as to why.

All of these explanations have some kernel of truth in them, have something about them that resonates with what the Scriptures say about how God works and how he made the world to work

And yet all of them fall short of the full definition of what the Bible says about who God is, how God works, and how he made the world to work.

We're going to look at some Scriptures in just a minute that will hopefully help us to identify what we can say and what we can't say with certainty

We're going to start with what we don't know and that starts at the very beginning.

The first few chapters of the Bible are in the book of Genesis and it tells the story of Creation,

All kinds of ways Christians have understood or interpreted or wrestled with this story, we can talk more about that at the Question and Answer in a couple of weeks if you're interested.

But in these first few chapters what we get is a description of who God is and what God's up to and it starts with ***"In the beginning"***

and the way that the Bible describes the world that God makes is all good. ***It's good, it's good, it's good, It's good, It's good, it's good, it's very good***—that's the repeated refrain throughout the creation account

And when it comes to people, God goes all out: (Gen. 1:26)

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God creates everything and it's good and good and good and then he creates human beings in his own image, they're named Adam and Eve and they have nothing to do with a lingerie store, in fact, they're totally naked and unashamed!

And what God does is hand them the keys to the whole thing

You, humans, you will have authority over this place, to bless this place, to cause it to become more fruitful and more alive

Humans are placed in paradise and given the authority to go and make it more paradisaical, to make it more beautiful, more rich, more wonderful

And then we get our first hint that it might be possible for something bad to happen, even in the paradise God created

¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.

So God sets up a world where human beings can make choices and if they make bad choices, bad things happen

DEATH here is short hand for all the bad stuff that will get introduced if and when Adam and Eve ignore this command, fall for the lie, and eat from the tree

But let's back up and ask the question: where did death come from? And for that matter, where did the possibility of a bad choice come from?

God and the angels are the only things that existed! God doesn't make bad choices, where did the possibility of a bad choice come from? God doesn't die, angels don't die, where did death come from?

It's like you're baking a batch of chocolate chip cookies and you HATE nuts

In fact, you don't just hate the taste of nuts, you're deathly allergic to nuts, they make you break out in hives, cut off your airways

and even worse, they drive you to chanting those annoyingly brilliant Duke basketball cheers

So you so hate nuts that there are zero nuts in the house—none ANYWHERE--and so while you're making your chocolate chip cookies there shouldn't be any nuts in the cookie batter

And yet somehow, impossibly, when you pull the cookies out of the oven, there are those dreaded, hated, nuts—there were no nuts anywhere in your house! Where did that ingredient come from?

In God's kitchen, BEFORE "In the beginning" there were zero nuts, there was no sin or pain or death in him

So where did bad choices, sin, pain and death come from??

MIND BLOWN BOOM!

Do you know what the answer is? Neither do I! And neither does anyone else!

And so here's our first thing we can say with utter confidence is the Christian answer to what about all the bad stuff: ***ultimately, the Bible doesn't tell us where evil and pain originated.***

We do not know or understand how the nuts got into the batter and caused so much damage to a world that was created by an all-powerful, all-good God who declared over his beloved creation that it was good, it was good, it was good, it was very good over and over again.

But we DO know that **God created human beings** in his image and gave THEM the keys to the store—we have authority over God's good creation to bless it and make it even more beautiful

But what the Bible tells us is that instead of using that power to bless and cause things to flourish and come more alive

INSTEAD what we did was we believed a lie that God was holding out on us—and that lie has lived inside of us ever since, that's the essence of every temptation, that God's holding out on you

And when we believed that lie and every time since then that we have believed that lie we introduce a spiritual darkness and corruption into our own hearts and into God's good creation that we were supposed to be blessing and leading to be more and more beautiful.

So we don't know where evil and pain originated but #2. ***We do know that humans (who have been given authority over the earth) are the ones who introduced it and continually re-introduce it into God's good creation through sin.***

Hear this clearly: this doesn't mean that every little bad thing that happened is the direct result of something wrong that someone did—hurricanes don't come because someone lied to their grandma

But it does mean that the soup we swim in here on the earth is full of toxins like pain and heartache and sadness in a way that it was not intended to be

and how this soup got so toxic is because we were given authority over this place and we opened up the wrong door and let the toxins come on in.

And if it stopped there and if the whole conversation ended there, then that would just be depressing and maybe you shouldn't give this whole Christianity thing a second thought.

But the story doesn't stop there. There are a couple of more things that we do know.

In the biblical story of what's happened in the world, humans have introduced pain and suffering and sin and death into a world that was intended to be good, good, good and very good

And if you're a parent and one of your kids spills something, what do you ask them to do with the mess that they've made? You make the mess you what?

But here's the problem, Adam and Eve have introduced a mess that cannot be cleaned by human hands or activity.

It is too pervasive, too all encompassing, and the genie that they let out of pain, suffering, and ultimately death is too powerful to be defeated with our own ingenuity

And so the Scriptures tell a story of God doing something that changed everything

The biblical story is of God himself putting on flesh and coming to do what we couldn't do for ourselves

One of the writers of the New Testament calls Jesus the SECOND ADAM, sent to essentially reclaim humanity by passing the test that Adam and Eve failed.

And when Jesus comes, he comes in order to do a very specific mission: to reclaim humanity, buy them back from sin and death that were reigning and ruling and wreaking havoc on God's good, good, and very good creation

And he does so through his death, where he takes on all the sins of the entire world, and then through his improbable, wondrous resurrection

A literal new, real body given to Jesus that was recognizably him but it was never going to grow old, fade, or die ever again

And as the first followers of Jesus are working out what it all means, they declare that God has done something wonderful:

that in Christ's death and resurrection, God has dealt the decisive blow to sin and death, and all the bad stuff that piles up on us that was introduced at the very beginning of the story way back in Genesis

Here's what the apostle Paul writes in a letter to a church where the people there were struggling with the great question of how anyone could be raised from the dead.

Here's what he writes about how the resurrection of Christ seals the deal on God's answer to the problem of death and all the pain that got introduced as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve

This is from 1 Corinthians 15, a really dense passage that I hope I can do justice with here and explain it as best as I can

again, this a group of people who are asking the question how could Jesus have been raised from the dead? That doesn't happen normally! Here's what Paul says:

¹⁷if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins... ¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive... ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death...

Remember, DEATH is shorthand for all the bad stuff, all the pain, all the brokenness in the world—if you can overcome death, all the smaller threats to people can and will also be overcome

And so here, we come to the second thing we can say confidently about God's role in the problem of pain and suffering as we ***ask what about the bad stuff:***

- 1. Ultimately, we don't know where pain and death originate.***
- 2. We do know that humans (who have been given authority over the earth) are the ones who introduced it and continually re-introduce it into God's good creation through sin.***
- 3. We do know that God has dealt with it once and for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.***

We don't know where the bad stuff came from, but we know what God has done to deal with it once and for all—there is an empty tomb in ancient Israel that bears witness to what God has done

In a world riddled with pain and all sorts of challenges and disappointments, we point to a bloody cross and an empty tomb and declare that God isn't far off, not at a distance

And he's not incapable of doing anything about it

God got his hands dirty, got his feet dirty, came and lived among us, and did for us what none of our technology or progress can ever do for us or will ever do for us:

He has secured for us eternal permanent victory over sin and death, into a future that will have none of the bad stuff that so haunts us now

And one day, the Biblical promise is that all the pain and sadness and brokenness will be gone. Jesus will return to reclaim this earth, a new heaven and a new earth, and we'll live here in this place in its perfected and redeemed form

Every tear will be wiped away, and the lie that God is holding out on us will be gone forever, we will delight in God, love and serve each other, and use our borrowed authority from God over this place in ways that will finally cause it to flourish fully and all the way

You and I have all at one point or another longed for a better world, a world that was better, healthier, less painful, less broken, less unfair, haven't we?

All of our other longings point to a reality that exists and that we were made for:

you get hungry for food because you were made for food, food does indeed exist and it's necessary for your survival. You get thirsty and long for water because you were made to run on water, it exists and it's necessary for your survival

You long and get hungry for a better world because you were made for a better world, it exists, and it is necessary for your eternal survival

And every longing you ever had for a better world will be utterly surpassed by the beauty and glory that is to come

All of this is very theoretical and for all of us at some point the thing we need isn't theory it's practical, it's specific: if you're struggling with pain and heartache and bad stuff RIGHT NOW

So we're going to add one more little thing that Christians say we can know for sure that hopefully might help those of us for whom the conversation about the bad stuff isn't theoretical, it's painfully real as you're walking in and walking out of here this morning.

The authors of the New Testament universally celebrated Jesus's resurrection as the turning point in human history of God overcoming all the bad stuff, and the writer of Hebrews reflects on it this way:

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

In my deepest, darkest moments, what I've most wanted was for all the bad stuff to just go away and disappear forever!

But given that that couldn't happen, what I wanted was someone to be in it with me. Just to walk alongside, listen, pray, help me to process

most of our worst situations aren't fixable, no one can change what's happened or happening

What we CAN do is walk together through it.

Some of us struggle to let others in when we're suffering, but together is one of the most important gifts God has given us in the midst of pain and suffering and I want to invite all of us to get a little better at learning how to do this together thing well in the midst of all the bad stuff we come up against in this life

But ultimately, the Scriptures say that the greatest hope we have is in Jesus himself, God in the flesh, the one who empathizes with us, who is for us, alongside us

he's experienced temptation and all the rest of the bad stuff that the world can throw at us and yet responded perfectly at every turn over and over again

And he's been raised from the dead by God his good Father and we're invited to approach God in his name, because of his grace, because of his sacrifice, because of his resurrection, to find grace and mercy in our times of need, whenever they might be

And so the fourth and final thing Christians can say with confidence about all the bad stuff is this:

4. *We know that God is in it with us and has the resources to help us in our times of need.*

God with us, in the flesh, to overcome all the bad stuff, knows what we face, he loves us, and is the source of strength to navigate all challenges we face, no matter what they might be

And so this morning as we close, we invite everyone to lean in, Christian or not, into the good news of a God who is for us and with us in the midst of all the challenges of this life

Given these four things, the Wildly Important Take-Home today is simply this:

What would it look like for you to lean in towards God rather than away from God in the midst of a world full of bad stuff?

Look, bad stuff is going to happen, to all of us. It's not distributed equally, some of us get it much worse than others, but none of us gets a pass on it

This morning, the invitation for those of us who are kicking the tires and asking very big questions about a good God in the midst of all kinds of pain and brokenness in the world

is to hear the good news of a God who so loved the world that he goes to great lengths to overcome all the pain and brokenness

and to hear the good news answer to your longings for a better world: you are hungry for it because you were made for it—and because there is one. It is coming.

We have a definitive sign from God in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that the world we long for is on its way

We invite you to trust in what God has done in Christ to meet all of our longings for a perfect and good world

And we invite you to explore by stepping into our imperfect community as we work out this good news in our own lives and try to build our community around it.

And for those of you who are already Jesus followers, this morning we engage in our monthly celebration of the victory of Christ for us as we take communion

On the night Jesus was betrayed to the death that would set us all free, he had one last supper together with his closest friends

He took the bread and said, "This is my body, broken for you, eat this remembrance of me."

Then he took the cup and said, "This cup is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." His death would forgive the sins that introduced the toxins into this world and cut us off from a relationship with a good and perfect God

And so we celebrate this meal as we do the first Sunday of each month. If you're already a Jesus-follower, Jesus invites you into this meal

If you're not yet a Jesus-follower, so glad that you're here, but this meal isn't yet for you. We invite you to pray and consider what God has done for you in Jesus

And if you're ready to trust it, walk in it, and put your faith in it, there will be prayer ministers in the back, they'd love to pray with you to receive the grace God has for all of us in Christ