

## **Why Do People Suffer?**

John 9:1-7

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There is an old story about a construction worker who attempted to lower a barrel of brick by means of a rope and pulley. The bricks however, were heavier than the worker. The man went up as the brick came down. The two collided in mid-air, injuring the worker's shoulder. Upon impact, the bottom of the barrel ripped open. The brick spilled out. Now, the worker was heavier than the brick. As the man came down at high speed, he collided with the barrel coming up, causing injury to his shins. This time the man landed in a pile of brick, causing great pain to his lower back. The pain was so intense, he turned loose of the rope. When the barrel came down it struck him on the head, causing further injuries. From his hospital bed, the worker called his employer and said, "I quit. The suffering is just too much on this job."

Suffering happens. Never morning wears to evening but some heart breaks, a heart just as sensitive as yours and mine. The number one question Americans would like to ask God if they were certain that God would give an answer is: "Why do people suffer?" Today at the crossroads of faith, I want to pose that question. Why does suffering happen?

### **WHY DOES SUFFERING HAPPEN?**

Let me suggest some ways to get at that issue. Sometimes people suffer because we make bad decisions. Let's just face it, we bring a lot of pain and suffering on ourselves. If we fill our lungs with smoke, soak our lives in alcohol, abuse our bodies by overwork, and fail to employ ethics in our sexual lives, can we really blame anybody for the outcome and the injury that happens?

I think one of the saddest visits I have ever made was to a classy lady in her early seventies who was tethered to her house by an oxygen tank and battling bouts of depression. We talked about her medical prognosis, which was not very good, and her faith in God which was wavering. Finally, through her tears, she looked at me and said, "You know, I have no one to blame for this but myself. As a young woman I thought it was so cool to smoke. I was so wrong. Tell all the young people, don't do what I did." Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, so for God's sake and your sake, take good care of yourself. It is a task of being Christian.

Sometimes we suffer because you and I make bad decisions about our own lives. Sometimes we suffer because others make bad decisions that radically and dramatically affect us. I rejoice in human freedom. I would not want it any other way. However, God took a gigantic risk when he chose to make humans free moral agents. People fail to realize their place of freedom stops at the fingertips

of another. O what pain we often bear by the foolish and wrongful actions of others.

David was a man after God's own heart. When Samuel anointed him king of Israel, David was as pure as newly fallen snow. But power corrupts. Absolute power absolutely corrupts. Foolishly thinking he needs what he wants, David pursues an affair with Bathsheba, then has her husband, Uriah, killed in an attempted cover-up. This ancient soap opera, as current as today's television programs, stands as a biblical reminder that people, even good people, can cause a lot of pain in the lives of other people. Maybe they meant no harm and maybe they have just been lonely too long, but no explanation could remove the damnation that caused a whole country pain.

If you are being abused today, being taken advantage of by someone in power, being mistreated by a parent, spouse or boss, it is not your fault. Find refuge and seek justice. It is not your sin; it is the sin of another that is causing your pain. As David discovered, albeit late, in the 51st Psalm of Confession, God desires truth and wisdom in the inner most parts of our beings. Some suffering is a result of other people's bad choices.

All suffering is not the result of my sin or someone else's sin. It does not have a logical conclusion to it. It is at these two points that suffering causes us a lot of perplexity and concern. Sometimes people suffer because the system failed to function. I stand amazed at the precision of the universe. Let the sun creep a little closer to the earth and we all burn up. Let it slide a few degrees further away and we all freeze to death. I am amazed that it rises every morning without my help or without my concern. Whether I see it or not, or take any interest in it or not, there is a rhythm and order in this universe that is amazing and powerful to me. But, sometimes it rains too much and sometimes the winds blow, where they ought not to be blowing. Is God expressing his displeasure and anger at such times? I think not. After all, God repented of that kind of behavior following the flood. Sometimes the system just fails.

In Louisville every year, there is a gigantic fireworks called Thunder Over Louisville. It is supposed to be the largest fireworks display in the world. It is the first activity of the Derby festival, which is a religious rite if you happen to be a Kentuckian. Sandy, my wife, loves fireworks. In fact, she is a borderline pyromaniac. The spring before we moved here, we accepted an invitation to a party on the 32nd floor of a bank building in downtown Louisville, where we could have a glassed-in view of the fireworks. It was a Saturday night. I do not like to be out on Saturday night. We resolved to be the first out so we could beat the traffic and get a good night's rest before the Sunday service. As soon as the last fireworks exploded, we shot for the elevator. There were 20 other people who had the exact same idea at the exact same moment. Stuffed together in intimate communion on this elevator, we start down. It was one of those elevators that shoots from the twenty-fifth floor to the first floor all at once. So, it propelled us from the twenty-fifth floor and when it began to stop at the first, it

did not quite make it. You could hear the hydraulics screeching and you could feel the thud when it finally stopped. For the next two hours we became intimately acquainted with people we hope to never meet again. What was going on there? Was God trying to teach Howard a lesson on patience? I do not think so. Did God refuse to hear my prayer, “Lord, let me out of here,” and if not my prayer, the prayers of a couple of children saying, “Oh Jesus, please get me out of here now!” Yes, he heard our prayers, but not on our time schedule. The problem was simple. The system failed to work. As orderly and wonderful as this world is, occasionally the system fails to function.

There is another reason why people suffer. Being human is risky business. Life has an “if” right in the middle of it. Many of you know that much better than I because you live in the “iffy-ness” of life. Suppose God came to you before you were born and said, “I will give you a choice, here’s the deal. I will make you into a human being with a soul that lives forever. I will put that soul into a body and you will have wonderful relationships with people in all kinds of ways, but I need to tell you I have not perfected this body thing yet. It has the potential to bring you great pleasure and great joy, but I need to be honest with you about this deal, it may cause you great pain. When bodies break down, they are costly, troublesome, and they bring tremendous sorrow to other people. So, how about it, do you want to run the risk or not? It is up to you.” What would you choose? I would run the risk.

I know life is iffy. We learn by experience as well as by language. But I will take the risk because life is worth the living anyway. If one out of four people get cancer, why should I complain that I happen to be one out of the four? If most families are going to have a prodigal son or daughter, why am I going to complain that I happen to be one of the families that face one? Furthermore, let us never boast. Let us only remember the “almost” of life. We “almost” got the things we missed and we “almost” missed the things we got. In the card game of life, maybe you always know when to hold and when to fold, but I do not always know that. Life is risky. Because life is risky, we face pain and suffering.

#### WHAT CAN WE DO WHEN SUFFERING HAPPENS?

I move now to the second question, which is much more critical than the first. What can we do when suffering happens? May I suggest three things. We can embrace God’s grace. Jesus says, *Come to the waters, stand by my side, I know you are thirsty, you won’t be denied. I felt every tear drop when in darkness you’ve cried, and I’ve come to remind you, that for those tears I died.* There is one who suffers beside us. You do not have to die with a guilty conscience, nor live with one, either. Christ has already paid the price for your sins. God’s grace is greater than anything wrong you have ever done. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. In the name of Christ, we are forgiven.

No, grace does not cure all our cancers, right all our wrongs, or even turn back the tides of time making everything all right. Grace does remove our sins. May

you know today, whether you have messed up or caused other people pain, that in the name of Jesus Christ, you and I are forgiven. Let it soak into your soul. Embrace the grace of God. Embrace the grace of God for your sins and find the grace of God to carry on in the midst of life.

The apostle Paul had a thorn in the flesh, a tormenting problem that would not go away, causing him much pain. You can read about it in II Corinthians 12. Paul shares, how he pleaded with the Lord about it, asking him to remove it. But the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (II Corinthians 12:9)

For 45 years, Russ Blowers preached sermons from the pulpit of East Christian Church on 91st street in Indianapolis, Indiana. Those who heard him said he was a great preacher. But the greatest sermons Russ has preached have been over the past two years when he gets up every morning and goes to Sunrise Assisted Living to visit his wife of 53 years who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. There, he holds her hand, feeds her lunch, and says to her over and over again, "I love you, I love you. You are my wife," though she does not have a clue as to who he is. Russ Blowers says, "I have peace knowing that God loves my wife even more than I do. He is not blind nor deaf to our pain. I don't thank God for the circumstances; there would be no love in that. I thank God that he gives me the grace to carry on." Embrace the grace of God. There is grace sufficient for the tremendous pain some of you feel. Let the grace of God see you through.

What will we do with what happens to us? We can go to work to stop suffering in our world. I do not like pain, I want it ended. There is a similar instinct in every soul of every human being on earth. It is a God-given instinct. So Jesus comes into town and there was a blind man in this town. They are there by the hundreds and thousands, one crippled, another lame, one with leprosy; they come in multitudes to him. A compassionate Jesus cannot ignore them. He turns, touches, and says it is time for the light of God to come. I need to work for their healing. So, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes, and said, "Go wash in the pool of Siloam." The man returns seeing his healer. You who heal our diseases, right the wrongs of society, and work for the wholeness of humanity, are doing the work of God today. Many of us owe our very lives to you. I for one, am deeply, deeply grateful to you. One way you deal with suffering is to give your life to stop it. You are doing the work of God with that.

There is a story about Abraham Lincoln as a young man witnessing his first slave auction. He was in New Orleans where he saw a mother auctioned off like a piece of property. Then he saw her children separated from her and bought by different owners. Watching the atrocity of human beings being treated like property, Lincoln said to a relative, "If I ever get a chance to hit this thing, I am going to hit it hard!" There is a lot of pain in this world that you and I, my friends, need to hit hard. Again, that is what you do with suffering. You stop it whenever, wherever you can. *O save us from the weak resignation to the evils*

*we deplore.*

What can I do when suffering happens? I can use it for good. For most of my life I have lived by a simple philosophy of suffering; “Never let a trouble go to waste.” I never knew then, that I would be asked one day to live what I believe. But, I want to tell you after living some of it, I believe it more today than I have ever believed it in my life. Never let a trouble go to waste. Redeem it. Isn’t that what Jesus did on the cross? He took the worst that could happen and transformed it into redemption for the world. About a month ago my family threw a party for me to celebrate five years of being cancer free. Many of you wrote cards and letters and for that I am deeply, deeply grateful. One of my sons wrote me a note on that occasion, which says, “Dad, you are a better person and a more effective preacher after cancer than before.” And I said to God, “I hope so, I hope so.” Never let a trouble go to waste.

You see, as one of life’s crossroads, suffering will change you by doing one of two things to you. It will either make you bitter or it will make you better. Put it to work. Let it transform you into a better person. Some of the most compassionate, compelling, creative, and complete people I know are people who have walked through the dark valleys of pain and suffering and found God to be present in the shadows. They have come through on the other side walking by faith. When suffering comes, put it to work for the good of others.

I will leave you with one simple statement by which I have lived my life. ***It is not what happens to you, but what you do with what happens to you that makes all the difference!*** Amen.

Note: Some concepts in this sermon were stimulated by the writings of Lewis Smedes.















