

The Problem

Gen. 2, Rom. 8

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And what we are specifically going to look at and attempt to address and look at from a biblical worldview the problem of evil, pain and suffering. This historically has been the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith.

Theologian, **John Stott** – **“The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God’s justice and love.”**

The argument goes something like this:

- If God is good, he would not allow this evil, pain or suffering to take place...
- If God is all-powerful, than surely he would do/could do something about this specific issue or challenge I am facing – why isn’t he?
- If God is all-loving, why is he standing idly by and do nothing about this evil, pain or suffering I’m facing or witnessing...

The problem of evil, pain and suffering is THE problem, hence the title of the message today.

Bart Ehrman, grew up in a Christian home. He studied Biblical Languages at Wheaton graduating in three years. He received a MDiv and PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary where he studied under Bruce Metzger – one of the foremost New Testament, Greek scholars to ever live.

He began to wrestle with this problem early on in his career and it ultimately drove him away from the faith. He couldn’t reconcile...answer...find a solution to this problem and it drove him away from the faith.

He wrote: **“If there is an all-powerful and loving God in this world, why is there so much excruciating pain and unspeakable suffering? The problem of suffering has haunted me for a very long time...Ultimately, it was the reason I lost my faith.”**

Now, over the years as a pastor I’ve walked with families through some pretty devastating trials. I’ve seen up close - as you have suffering...sometimes as Stott mentioned appearing “entirely random”.

- I’ve buried infants...

- I've been there when people receive a dreaded diagnosis and their worst-case scenario becomes a reality...
- Just last weekend, I had one of my best friends in the world here spending some time with me. Just six months ago his wife suddenly passed away. They had been married for just four years. She was 39 years old.

That's up close and personal. Watch the news and you see suffering on a different level. Russia continues raining down bombs and destroying lives in the Ukraine. You read about murder and hate crimes...sexual exploitation of children...refugees running out of food...

And as Christians living in this world, we need to be able to think biblically about this problem that is keeping many from believing in God and leading many others away from God.

Maybe you're suffering right now...personally experiencing evil or pain and like Erhman, it's causing you to question your faith.

This is a problem...and it's a problem that has to be dealt with...it has to be thought through!

Notice:

- I didn't say it has to be UNDERSTOOD!
- I didn't say it has to be SOLVED!

See, we all want to understand this problem of evil and pain and suffering and have the "WHY" questions of life be answered. This way we can fit in a nice little box and wrap our finite minds around the injustices and suffering we are dealing with personally or that we see taking place around the world.

And I WISH it was that easy...I really do. I WISH it was that neat and clean. It's not though. We know this!

It's hard to understand suffering and pain – especially when it's personal. And even if we could know the "WHY" behind the evil and suffering in the world or our personal world (if we could solve it so to speak/crack the code on why its happening) – honest question, "Would it really help us?" I don't think it would.

The Bible says in **Duet. 29:29** – **"The secret things belong to the Lord our God..."**

Isaiah 55:8-9 – **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."**

1 Cor. 13:12 – **"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."**

As we get going today, I want us to remember as we wrestle with and engage this problem, there are some things that our finite mind will NEVER be able to comprehend or understand.

And if that's your goal, I want to ask you to change it. The goal is not to understand or solve the problem of evil, pain and suffering, the goal is to look at this issue through the lens of scripture and ultimately find the Lord is sovereign and trustworthy in light of the evil, pain and suffering we see and experience.

So, let's get started, and let's begin by answering some questions from the Bible. I'll call these certainties.

You know, a lot times when we are confronted with evil or go through some type of hurtful or painful situation, we tend to fixate on what we don't know:

- WHY is this happening?
- HOW LONG am I going to have to endure this?
- Did I DO something to cause this?

We fixate on what we DON'T know! There is A LOT though that we DO know as it relates to the problem of evil, pain and suffering.

And so let's tackle this – let's tackle what I'm calling “certainties” that we can “hang our hat” on so to speak regarding evil, pain and suffering.

Certainty #1 – God is sovereign and good

Now, we won't stay here long, but this is certainly a certainty in scripture! We talked about this a little last week.

Our God is large and in charge. He is in complete control over this universe he creates and all that goes on within it. Looking at this from a biblical worldview, the Bible teaches us this:

Prov. 16:33 – “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

Job 42:2 – “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”

1 Chron. 29:11-12 – “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all.”

**Isaiah 45:5-7 – “I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me,
⁶ that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. ⁷ I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity (bring judgment); I am the Lord, who does all these things.”**

The scripture tells us in Matthew's gospel...Jesus speaking: **Matt. 10:29** – “**Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.**”

The sovereignty of God teaches that God is over all and in control of all. We can be assured that whatever is happening to us or happening in the world – it hasn't caught God off guard. He's not been asleep on the job.

In fact, the psalms teach in **Psalm 121** – that the Lord who made heaven and earth (v. 4) “**he neither slumbers nor sleeps.**”

So, Certainty #1 – God is sovereign, but the second part of that is, he is good. There was an old saying in the church that went something like this: “God is good all the time...and all the time God is good!”

Churches would repeat this because they needed the reminder! Life could get bad during the week, and the church on the weekend needed to recall and reinforce that even in the bad, God is good – all the time, all the time, God is good!

Now, this brings up one of the key questions as it relates to evil, pain and suffering and that is, “How can God be good and all this evil, pain and suffering exist?”

We'll work this out in a moment, but let's just underscore what we're talking about here...this key attribute of God – he is good – wholly and morally perfect...good to the very core.

Jesus told the “rich young ruler” in **Luke 18:19** – “**...no one is good except God alone.**”

John speaks of God's goodness as “light”. **1 John 1:5** – “**This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.**”

Psalm 119:68a – “**You are good and you do good...**”

God in his nature and character is the very essence of goodness. He is the standard. He is entirely and exceptionally good.

James 1:17 – “**Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.**”

Everything he gives...everything he creates is good – just look at the creation account! You read Genesis 1 and after each day of creation...from speaking light and darkness into existence to breathing life in man - EVERYTHING God creates, is good.”

Certainty #1 – God is sovereign and good

Certainty #2 – Man is free

From the very beginning of creation, God hard-wired mankind to have a freewill. THIS is in direct alignment with his goodness.

Part of God being good is creating us and giving us freedom to make choices...to choose good OR reject it. And to reject good is to choose evil.

To say it another way...these are the words of **Peter Kreeft**, philosophy professor at Boston College. He says God didn't create evil, but instead: **"He created the possibility of evil; people actualized that potentiality.** (See, evil is not created as much as it is the absence of goodness – remove good – i.e. – remove God and you have evil – Kreeft goes on...) **The source of evil is not God's power but mankind's freedom. Even an all-powerful God could not have created a world in which people had genuine freedom and yet there was no potentiality for sin, because our freedom includes the possibility of sin within its own meaning. It's a self-contradiction – a meaningless nothing – to have a world where there's real choice while at the same time no possibility of choosing evil."**

Could God have created a world without evil and pain and suffering? Yes! But it would be a world without me and you! It would have been a world without human-beings. Why? Because man is created in the image of God and therefore has a free will.

See: Inherent in God's goodness and inherent in being created in his image, God gives us freedom to make choices. We're not robots!

We have the freedom to love – (highest value in life). He gives us the freedom to choose good or reject it. And again, to reject good is to embrace evil. As Kreeft wrote: "The source of evil is NOT God's power, but mankind's freedom.

And isn't this what we see in the Garden of Eden? God creates man and in God's goodness, he gives them a free will to choose, and in his LOVE warns them of the consequences of rejecting good.

Gen. 2:15-17 – "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Certainty #1 – God is sovereign and good

Certainty #2 – Man is free

Certainty #3 – Sin brings suffering

Adam and Eve chose to go against God's word and as a result it ushered in suffering and death. Satan's goal since his fall is to mar those created in the image of God...this was the goal behind the temptation for Adam and Eve to disobey God.

In fact, Adam and Eve reject what we are emphasizing in this series – a biblical worldview when they listen to Satan say (Gen. 3:3), "Did God actually say?"

This is a good point of application for us! ALL sin (and thus suffering) starts when we put a question mark where God puts a period. They question what God clearly spoke and when they freely make the choice to disobey God's word sin and suffering enter into the world.

You can read about the curse of sin in Gen. 3:14-19. You read about pain entering the world. You read about frustration entering the world. The ultimate cost of sin and rebellion against God is death. He speaks to Adam:

Gen. 3:19 – “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Write it down. Suffering is a result of sin. And because of Adam and Eve's sin, scripture teaches we have an imputed unrighteousness (Rom. 5). We now have this inherited sin nature and we are born with a bent away from God and toward sin.

Illus. twin babies – No one taught them to do this! It's in them!

Look, much of the evil and pain and suffering we see and experience is due to the evil propensity of men's hearts.

- We can't blame God for people murdering other people. Murder is in the heart of man because of sin.

A lot of the pain and suffering we see and experience is due to the consequences of bad decisions and choices we make. There is a law in the nature called “the law of the harvest”. You plant apple seeds, you get apple trees. If we sow to the flesh, the Bible says we reap corruption and death. If we sow to the Spirit, we reap life and peace.

- We can't blame God for the consequences of bad choices we freely made!

Sin threw mankind into chaos, and according to Paul in Rom. 8, it also threw the natural realm into chaos.

Rom. 8:18-23 – “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

So, all of creation is groaning because of sin. It is a fact of life. Because of the fall, we have earthquakes and tsunamis. Because of the fall we have wars and injustices that come in all

different kinds of shapes and sizes. Because of the fall we have viruses and cancers. It's ALL a result of sin.

And Paul writes and says this suffering...our groaning is proof of it, and there is a groaning toward something. And this leads to:

Certainty #4 – Suffering is temporary

Did you catch Paul's words in Rom. 8? (v. 18) he referred to them as "present sufferings".

Listen to **2 Cor. 4:16-17** – **"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."**

1 Pet. 5:6-10 – **"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."**

The evil, pain and suffering we experience – even if it's a lifetime IS temporary. And while we are talking about time as it relates to suffering – think about what God has done for us in Christ as it relates to our past, present and future

1. In the past – he took the penalty for our sin and bore our pain...took evil on himself...and suffered a brutal death on our behalf so that we would not have to eternally suffer – what GRACE in the death of Jesus.
2. In the present, because of the hope of the gospel, God lives in us and his Holy Spirit helps us when we are suffering and in pain. He is the comforter. He prays for us!

Rom. 8:26-28 – **"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."**

Illus. Personal testimony – prayer room at home church.

3. In the future – God is making all things new. There is coming a time when there will be no more suffering.

Rev. 21:1-5a – **"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem,**

coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

Suffering is temporary. It will not always be! So, in bringing this message to a close, let's get real practical.

As I said at the outset the goal of today is not to understand the problem of evil and pain and suffering...and it's not to solve it...the goal is prayerfully wrestle with it and see it from a biblical standpoint.

In this though, there is an innate desire to act...to do something about our suffering...to find purpose in it! So, what is it? When it comes to pain and evil and suffering, is there anything we can do?

Well, let's look at the points we made earlier, and I believe some application can flow from them.

Certainty #1 – God is sovereign and good

Application – Trust Jesus

If God is sovereign and in control...if he is good to the core, than we can trust him. Often times when life is bad (i.e. there is evil, pain and suffering), as Christians we sometimes feel like we have to fake that God is good.

Hey, God being good and life being bad can be synonymous. One doesn't change the other. God can be good and life be bad - it's reality. Our job is not to figure it all out – we may not know the answer to the “why's” of this world this side of eternity.

- I don't know why children in 3rd world countries die of basic hunger needs...
- I don't know why an entire family dies in a tragic car accident...
- I don't know why you lost your job, or house flooded, or why you were abused as a child or a victim of some sort of other injustice...
- I don't know why it has to be SO HUMID in Houston...

We don't know the answer to these things. What we have been called to do is to trust God when we don't have answers. And if God is sovereign and everything filters through his hands...and if he is wholly good, than we can trust him.

We can trust him to work **Rom. 8:28** in and through our lives: **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good (it doesn’t say all things are good), for those who are called according to his purpose.”**

Let’s remember what God wants MORE than anything is to conform us to the image of Jesus, and what is MOST precious to him is the perfection of our faith!

1 Peter 1:6-7 – “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Suffering doesn’t feel good...no one likes it...we shouldn’t go looking for it...in and of itself, it’s NOT good – but it is good in making us more like Jesus and when we steward it well, it brings him glory.

Certainty #2 – Man is free Application – Choose Jesus

We have the freedom to make choices. As Christians we need to choose God and his ways...this is THE WAY to no regrets living.

To quote Paul again, what kind of life do you want? One that is full of corruption and death OR life and peace? The ONLY way to life and peace is by choosing to walk in the ways of the Lord. If we did this a lot of pain and evil and suffering would be alleviated.

AND get this! I know that in a dark world that will increasingly get darker...people’s hearts are cold...their actions sometimes hurtful - just remember we are kept here and not raptured out at salvation for the express purpose of being the hands and feet of Jesus...to help bring suffering to an end!

We are salt and light. How much of the Bible speaks to God’s people jumping into action to stop suffering by feeding the hungry, helping meet needs, speaking up for the rights of the oppressed and poor and afflicted – this is our role to help bring the Kingdom of God down to where we live – Jesus is inside of us.

So, we choose Jesus and make the decision to WWJD – what would Jesus do in this situation, confronted with this suffering.

Illus. Cartoon (On Screen) – “Sometimes I’d like to ask God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice when he could do something about it.” “What’s stopping you?” “I’m afraid God might ask me the same question.”

We have the freedom to choose Jesus and the freedom to choose to be Jesus which is a healing balm to a world filled with evil, pain and suffering.

I would simply ask in this, “Are you playing your part?” You can’t alleviate all suffering and pain, but you can help in some ways:

- By giving...
- By helping meet needs...
- By serving in the name of Christ...

Certainty #3 – Sin brings suffering

Application – Preach Jesus

Jesus is the only answer I know of as it relates to being able to at any degree understand suffering. You know why? Because Jesus is a person and it’s his presence that doesn’t make evil and pain and suffering disappear, but it at least makes it bearable. It’s in Jesus that we can at least find purpose in our pain.

Now, when I say “preach Jesus” what I mean is we lift him up...we point people to him...and usually the BEST way to preach Jesus in suffering is to be present with people in their suffering!

You don’t have to say anything...it may be better that you don’t! When people are suffering, the last thing they need is someone preaching to them (ask Job)! Instead, just be there. We call this the ministry of presence.

I honestly don’t know what else to do...because there are no easy answers to pain. I do know that Jesus knows our pain. On the cross:

Matt. 27:46b – “...My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Heb. 4:14-16 – “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Jesus know what it is to be betrayed. He knows what it is to be forsaken. He knows what it is to be the victim of injustice. He knows what it is to experience evil, pain and suffering.

And it’s in preaching Jesus – lifting him up...pointing people to him that we are reminded of HIS identification with us in our suffering and his presence with us as we suffer.

And let me say this: When you use your suffering to put Jesus on display...to be a minister for Jesus...to bring glory to him – that’s what it means to “preach Jesus”.

2 Cor. 1:3-4 – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Certainty #4 – Suffering is temporary
Application – Hope in Jesus

1 Cor. 13:12 – “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

I’ve heard it said like this before...that the most used phrase we are going to hear in heaven is “Ah-ha!” I get it now!

Rom. 5:1-5 – “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

Whatever, you are going through...no matter how deep the hurt...no matter how great the suffering, hold on to hope. Because when you hold on to hope, you’re holding on to Jesus.

What you are in, will NOT always be. Today, we are taking the Lord’s Supper. And the Lord’s Supper is a symbol of hope.

It’s a reminder that there was no greater evil done than killing the sinless, son of God. And there was no greater suffering than the excruciating death of the cross.

BUT...in Jesus – the worst evil brought out the greatest good and out of the worst suffering, the greatest joy can be experienced by knowing Jesus in a personal way – having our sins forgiven and being restored to a right relationship with God.

THIS is the hope we have in him.

If you have trusted in Jesus...if your hope is in him, you are welcome at his table today.

Let’s pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.