

Text: 2 Cor 7.10

Sept 12th, 2004

St Stephen's

Sun AM

How Can A Loving God Allow Suffering?

George Barna is a public opinion pollster who did a national poll asking people this question, *“If you could ask God any one question and you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask?”* The number one question was, *“Why is there suffering in this world?”* He gave a huge compellation of all the statistics and I did find one interesting statistical quirk. It showed that *people that were **married** were much more likely to want to know why there is so much suffering!*

But I know for many of you this is not just an academic question; this is a real issue. You are in a season of **pain**. Maybe you have lost a marriage or lost a child. You are facing a sharp and painful disease. In seasons like that one question – above every other question – overwhelms us: **Why?** Why do we have to suffer like this? And **where is God?** – if he is really there at all. This is one of the very hardest questions of life, and I wish I could stand up here today and give you **the perfect answer** from God on this - but I can't. What I can do, though, is give you **some reference points** that God gives to get us through these seasons.

I think our situation in seasons like these is **like a boat looking for safe harbor** in a severe storm. The coastline is rocky and dangerous. The wind and the rain are sharp. There is a fog so thick that you can barely see 100 yards in front of you. But God has positioned lighthouses along the coast. Their beams are strong and cut through dark nights and sharp storms. If the fog is too thick, their foghorns sound loud and clear. If we will **take our bearings off these lighthouses**, we can make our way to **safe harbor**, no matter how severe the storm.

What are these points of light?

Guiding Light #1: God Does Not Create Evil & Suffering

Sometimes we ask, “Why didn't God create a world where there was no evil and suffering in the first place?” The answer is, **He did!** The Bible is clear about that, and we need to remember that when we are buffeted by a season of suffering. The scriptures say at the completion of his days of creation,

“God saw all that He had made, and was very good.”

Genesis 1:31 (NIV)

God is good and everything he does is good. He never makes evil and he never does evil. OK, we say, then where did it come from? Well, it came into the world because **God gave** many of his creatures a special gift, a good gift, but a **dangerous gift**, the gift of **free will**. There were times when I wished he hadn't done that. But he did. Do you know why God did it? **He gave us something dangerous because he wanted something worth the risk**. He wanted us **to love him**. And **love can never be love unless it is freely chosen**. He risked our rebellion to win our love. He risked pain and suffering to win our freely given loyalty and friendship. He didn't want a universe full of **robots**. He wanted a **family**. Love means risk. Always. Because love can't be love unless it is freely chosen – and maybe rejected.

And **that's just what happened**. You know the story. The Bible says that...

When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.

Rom 5:12 (NLT)

Like **an infection**, once sin got started, it infected everything and everyone and spread everywhere. You can't avoid it. That means that there are...

Two Kinds Of Evil We Must Deal With... The first is...

- **Evil That Is Unchosen**

By this I mean evil that is a part of the world that we live in, but not something that is a result of your actions. Maybe it's a random accident or disease or 3 hurricanes in a month in Florida. The Bible says...

For we know that even the things of nature, like animals and plants, suffer in sickness and death as they await [the Lord's return].

Rom 8:22 (Living Bible)

What happened was that when Adam and Eve started it off, evil **spread like an infection** throughout the entire cosmos, infecting everything: the land we farm, the stars in their orbits, the genes we inherit, the diseases we suffer... the list includes **everything**. The cultures we build, the governments we elect, the hearts and minds within us. Everything is infected. That is how pain and suffering and death became part of the human experience. You have to face it and so do I. And then there's a second kind of evil...

- **Evil That Is Chosen**

By this I mean evil that you and I cause. Scripture says that...

“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Rom 3:23

It may be something I’ve done like theft or an outburst of anger or it may be a temptation I’ve given in to like lust or lying or it may be a simple attitude that I have – like the idea that life is all about me and the sooner everyone else figures that out the happier they will be! Whatever it is, you and I have done plenty of it. **We’ve chosen it**, and if we are honest we would say that we continue to choose it with stunning regularity! Then we have to deal with it.

So first it helps me to remember as I ponder this mystery of pain and evil that God did not create them. That is a lighthouse in the storm. You have to sail by it. It doesn’t do me any good to get mad at God for what I have to face, as though it is his fault. God is not on the **cause side** of this problem, but on the **solution side**. We’ll come back to that in a minute.

Guiding Light #2: God Will Bring an End to Evil & Suffering

A lot of times you hear people say, “If God has the power to put an end to evil and suffering, why doesn’t He do it?” Well, the answer is, **he will. He promises.**

He has set a day when the entire human race will be judged and everything set right...” Acts 17:31 (The Message)

When I believe that, it sets me free from having to fix every problem I face. It gives me **room to forgive and put it in God’s hands**. That is very helpful. Because I know that he is a far better judge than I could ever be. I know he can see the secret motives of people’s hearts. He sees everything we do and don’t do. He will judge it all, and in the end will set everything right. I can **release** lots of things to his hands.

Look at what God says is coming in heaven...

God himself will be with them. He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever.” Rev 21:3-5 (NLT)

He promises! The Bible puts it all in perspective with phrases like this...

*“For our **light and momentary** troubles are achieving for us an **eternal** glory that far outweighs them all.” 2 Cor 4:17 (NIV)*

Would you circle **light and momentary** and would you circle **eternal**? When the authors of the Bible say “light and momentary”, they do not mean to discount the seriousness of suffering. The man who wrote these words was St Paul. In his missionary career he was whipped by Jewish opponents with 39 lashes 5 times. Whipped by Roman authorities with rods 3 times. He was stoned and left for dead once. Shipwrecked 3 times. Drifting in the open sea once for 24 hours. Often without food, always in danger... Paul knew pain and suffering beyond the vast majority of us. The Bible is always **blunt and honest about the reality of evil and pain and suffering**. But what Paul says is that when you **compare** it to eternity to come, even the worst of this life is just a **short and light set of temporary troubles**. That is the perspective of heaven. **That is a lighthouse in the storm. You have to sail by it.**

Guiding Light #3: God Can Bring Good Out of Evil & Suffering

He can and does use it to accomplish good. There are many ways that God does this. For example,

- **God Uses Pain To Draw People To Himself**

If you're going through good times in your life when the **sun is shining**, the family is wonderful, the job's great... it's in those seasons when we're less likely to turn to God. But when **there is pain**, when suffering comes, when heartbreak takes place, what's the first thing we do? We get on our knees and we pray, “God, help me!”

“For God sometimes uses sorrow in our lives to help us turn away from sin and seek eternal life. We should never regret His sending it.”

2 Cor 7:10 (LB)

I think **Carly Simon** had it right when she sang, “There's more room in a broken heart.” It is true. God knows this. Pain and suffering are the school where we learn more honestly about our limitations and needs.

C. S. Lewis said it like this, *“God **whispers** to us in our pleasure. He **speaks** to us in our conscience. But He **shouts** to us in our pain. Pain is **God's megaphone** to rouse a deaf world.”*

Many of you know that's exactly true in your own experience. It's true in my experience. Here's another way God uses pain.

- **God Uses Pain To Shape Our Character**

Listen to what Paul said...

“We also rejoiced in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope.”

Rom. 5:3

Paul was happy about having to attend the school of suffering – can you imagine that! He was happy because what he learned there produced character. So God was glad to have him there also; God is more interested in our character than in our comfort.

Many of you know a woman named **Joni Erickson Tada**. When she was 17 years old she was in an accident and was paralyzed from the neck down. For over 30 years she’s been a quadriplegic living in a wheelchair. From her wheelchair she learned things she probably never would have discovered if her life had been more normal. She is a singer, an artist, a sought after speaker, an author – all with international impact for Christ. She wrote these words about the pain that has drawn her to God, *“I would rather be in this wheelchair knowing God than on my feet without Him.”*

If you’re committed to God, then He promises to take whatever pain you experience in your life and to draw good from it.

“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)

He is capable of doing that. It is his promise. He can take the worst experiences of your lives and make something good – something extraordinary out of them.

But not everyone finds that out. Sometimes people have gone through virtually **identical seasons of suffering**, and have very **different results**. One person runs away from God; they become chronically bitter, always angry, and run every relationship into the ground. **Someone else** runs into the arms of God and becomes more tender and more loving toward God and other people. Their faith grows. They get healed. They turn around and **begin to help other people** who are now going through the suffering that they went through.

Here’s the deal. You decide whether your hardships will make you bitter or make you better. You have to make the choice. Will you go it on your own or will you come to God for the help you need and He will give? God is in the

business of bringing good out of evil. **That is a lighthouse in the storm. You have to sail by it.**

Guiding Light #4: God Himself is the Answer to Evil & Suffering

The ultimate answer of God to this question of why is there suffering is not words. **It is a person. It is Jesus.** It is Christ's willingness to leave heaven and walk upon this earth so that he could experience and transform the pain and sin and suffering of this life. The Psalms say...

'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.'
Psalm 34:18 (NIV)

Are you **broken**? Jesus was also; **he will help you through it if you let him.** Are you **despised**? Jesus was also. Did someone **betray** you? Jesus was sold out for a measly thirty pieces of silver. Did your friends **desert** you? Everyone walked away from Jesus in the end. Will Jesus strengthen you as you face your own private hell? St Paul wrote,

I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need.
Php 4:13 (NLT)

Corrie Ten Boom writes this while setting in a Nazi concentration camp, "No matter how deep our darkness, God is deeper still."

Lee Strobel (**The Case For Faith**) tells the story about a fifteen-year-old girl named **Dora**. When she was eight years old, her dad was a missionary in Panama in a little village, trying his best to help the people there come to know God and to serve them and help them – he and two other missionaries. Then some guerillas from across the border in Columbia kidnapped her dad and these two other men. That was over seven years ago. They don't know if these men are still alive. They haven't heard anything. They don't know if they'll ever see them again. This little girl has grown up all those years without her dad. Most of us would say she has **a right to be bitter**, to have her pastor/missionary Dad ripped out of her life. But Dora made a different choice. And as a fifteen-year-old she wrote **a poem**.

There once was a man a man I once knew,
Who told me stories every night and laughed at my jokes and held me tight.
He told me "Don't quit. Always fight the good fight."
He said, "Love the Lord with all your heart. Serve Him with all your might."
He begged me, "Do right."

There once was a man, a man I once knew
who taught me how to tie my shoe.
And he smiled gently at every picture I drew.
He told me, "When you start something, don't stop until the job is through."
And he said, "I love you."

There once was a man, a man I once knew.
I saw him in my dream and it made me scream.
I called out, "Daddy!" but he told me nothing.
He had nothing to say.
For what can you say when you're so far – so very far – away

Daddy? I said. Then a voice echoed inside my head as I laid quiet and still on
my bed.
Again the voice, "Your daddy made a choice, a choice to serve Me with all of his
might, to not give up, to fight the good fight.
He's doing a job for Me and it's not yet through. Just remember, I love you."

There's now is a Man, a Man I now know
He lived and He died to save men from their sins. He made it possible for us to
be born again.
I know, because my daddy told me so.
And even though he's no longer here, my God will always be near to fill in the
gaps and show me which way to go.
I miss my dad so much but God has a plan.
So for now I'm just going to wait and watch the work of His hand.

There once was a man, a man I once knew.
He's now just a memory, slowly fading away
"Dead or alive?" you ask. "I don't know," I say.
So I beg you. Please pray. Pray that every night my daddy knows I whisper,
"Daddy, I love you."

There now is a Man, a Man I now know.
Every day – every day – He becomes more real to me, every day I grow. Every
day I pray that my love for Him will show.
I have made a choice to serve Him with all of my might

To not give up, to fight the good fight
Here on earth I may not see my dad again
That's all right
Because when my life on earth is through
I'll finally hear them both say, "My child, I love you."

I don't know what pain you've been through or are facing today, or what dark storm you are forced to sail. But I know God is equal to the task and he can get you through it. So I urge you to reach out your hand to him and allow Him to climb into the boat with you and **set your course by the light he gives. You will not be disappointed.**