

Introduction:

I want to start by saying that I have been struggling all week with what to do with the Scripture for today. It is not an easy passage, and I had a choice when approaching it; I could try to find a quick, easy lesson to draw with some kind of hopeful application at the end. And late last night, when I was still writing and trying to piece together what God would have for us today, I sort of wish I had just done that because it would've been easier, less painful, and I would've been done earlier in the week. But I decided instead to wrestle with a very difficult text that doesn't provide easy answers or simple application to what is probably one of the most difficult questions that we have to answer as Christians in this life: why and for what purpose is their suffering in this world?

If we believe in an all-powerful, all-loving God, then why do so many awful things happen in the world? I think that the deeper truth that we want to discover is not "Why do bad things happen to good people, but rather, is there meaning in this suffering? How do we understand it?"

For many, the conclusion to this question has been that an all-powerful all-loving God cannot exist because He wouldn't allow suffering. Surely, if God knew what Hitler was capable of, He would've killed him before he could lead German citizens in mass-murder of the Jewish people. If God is all-powerful, He could solve the problems of world hunger, he could make sure that no children get cancer, or that good God-fearing Christians don't suffer through Alzheimer's, mental illness, or poverty. And because these questions do not have easy answers, many people have chosen to not believe in God at all.

C.S. Lewis, remembers his life as an atheist before his conversion and poses the problem like this:

"If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both. This is the problem of pain, in its simplest form."

On the flip side, many Christians look for quick, easy answers to explain the presence of evil in the world, without acknowledging the depth of pain that they or others are experiencing. This is why many well-meaning Christians respond to some pretty horrific circumstances with aphorisms like "God has a plan" or "God will work all things together for the good." Now while these things may be true, they tend to gloss over the deep human pain in suffering and avoid dealing with the implications of suffering on the character of God.

Stanley Hauerwas professor of ethics at Duke University, writes concerning this that: "We are quite rightly, not interested in the theoretical issue of suffering and evil; rather, we are torn apart by what is happening to real people, to those we know and love."

To find answers to these questions, we turn to the Bible, which presents a whole different challenge. The Bible does not present to its readers one unified answer to the problem of pain. Instead, reading through the whole of Scripture, we get a myriad of answers, some that conflict with one another, some that don't seem to square well with the world that we live in, and none, on their own, that are especially comforting or satisfying.

Let's take a quick trip through Scripture and see how different people tried to address the problem of pain.

1) One approach is that suffering is a direct result of sin. We see this in God's interactions with the patriarchs. Because David slept with Bathsheba, a married woman, and had her husband killed in battle, the child she conceived died and God promised David that the sword would never leave his house. Proverbs were especially black and white when it came to explaining suffering. Not only were wicked people punished, but righteous people were rewarded.

Proverbs 12:21 "No harm overtakes the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble."

However, not all of Scripture explains pain and suffering in this way.

2) Another explanation is that God allows suffering, we can never truly understand it, and that if or when we question God about it, we may not receive a clear or straightforward answer.

Consider the book of Job, which can be extremely difficult to understand and problematic when compared to suffering explanations found in the lives of the patriarchs and in Proverbs. Job was called "blameless and upright" by the Lord, and yet he went through more suffering imaginable.

In Job 1, Satan poses to God that Job was really only righteous because things had been going well for him and because God was protecting him, believing that if everything was taken away from him, Job would curse God. God allowed Satan to test His servant Job, as long as Job himself wasn't killed. Instead, all of Job's children were killed, his servants were killed, his animals and crops were destroyed, and he was afflicted with boils.

Job questions God, asks what he has done wrong, and complains in bitterness, and God's response in 38:4: ⁴"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand."

*So one Biblical answer to suffering is very black and white: sinners will suffer for their sin, the righteous will be blessed. A second Biblical answer is that God allows suffering to happen and his wisdom is far beyond ours. What does Jesus have to say about it?

3) Jesus moves even farther away from the wisdom of the Proverbs, telling us that God is fairly indiscriminate about who bad things happen to, in this life. **Matthew 5:45**, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." However, we know of other teachings of Jesus that those who suffer in this life will prosper in heaven, and those who prosper in life will suffer after death.

*So, with all of these possible answers to the problem of suffering, how then do we give meaning to the pain that we experience in this life? Do we say, like the writer of Proverbs, that suffering is a result of sin? Well, many do. Well know evangelist Pat Robertson made the proclamation that the destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina was because we allow abortion in America. And this is a dangerous road to go down.

I think that there is more wisdom and understanding to be found in the story of Job and the teachings of Jesus, although I think that they are more difficult to accept, especially in times of extreme suffering.

I believe, if we look at the whole scope of Scripture, the presence of suffering in our world can be explained as the result of the fallen world that we live in. When Adam and Eve sinned, they brought death to the world. Not only that but they brought suffering, suffering through work and through childbirth. And we see that sin quickly blossoms out into other sufferings, greed, envy, murder, fighting, divorce, etc.

But why would a good and loving God then allow us to sin, if He knew that sin would result in our suffering? God loves us so much that He gives us free-will, so that we could choose whether or not to love Him in return. If we weren't given the choice to sin, then we wouldn't be given the choice whether or not to love God, and that would not, then, be real love.

And so we come to our Scripture today. In Hebrews chapter 12, the author, following the previous chapter which retold the history of many of the Hebrew Spiritual Successors, the author calls for his audience to continue in the path of the race that was set before them by the "great cloud of witnesses" and even by Jesus, and persevere in the faith, even though in that perseverance there will be suffering.

But the author credits this suffering as a direct action of God, with purpose, towards His children. In fact, the author returns to the wisdom of Proverbs, in quoting **Proverbs 3:11-12**:

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

What does it mean for the Lord to "discipline" the one's that He loves?

First, let us look at the words used, "discipline" and "chastisement." Unfortunately, some read this as "punishment," which doesn't square with Jesus' work for us on the cross. If He took away the punishment of sin through his death and resurrection, then why would God choose still to punish us?

However, if you look at the Greek, "discipline" and "chastisement" are actually the verbal forms of the noun "child" or "children." So, instead of thinking of God's discipline as punishment, the literal translation would be that God is "childrening" us. What does that mean then?

This means that beyond the fact that we have been CALLED sons and daughters of God, we are also being RAISED and being FORMED as His children. Now, what is the difference between CALLED, RAISED, AND FORMED, and why is this difference important?

CALLED as a child is a birthright; God gave us that birthright through Jesus Christ. Being CALLED His sons and daughters also means that we have been given an inheritance of eternal life. However, like any responsible parent, God does not wish to just CALL us his children without also raising us as His children. And part of raising children well is guiding and correcting in order to lead in the right way, which means that at times, discipline will be necessary.

So, what does the author of Hebrews say are the purposes of God's discipline for us?

- 1) Because He loves us: v. 6 "because the Lord disciplines the one he loves."
- 2) Because without discipline, we would not be considered God's children: v. 8 "If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all."
- 3) So that we might grow towards holiness: v. 10 "God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness."
- 4) So that we might experience long-term peace: v. 11 "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

We can understand why God would want to discipline His children. For those who are parents, you know that when you discipline your children, it's not because you enjoy it but because you really want what's best for them. And the author of Hebrews reminds us in v. 9 that we have already experienced the benefits of discipline from our own parents: "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live!"

The question we are left with is, what does God's discipline or "childrening" of us look like? Is every bad thing that happens to us God disciplining us? If we choose to follow the Proverbial wisdom, then yes, every time something bad happens it is God disciplining us. On the other hand, if we look to the story of Job, or even Jesus' wisdom, then there really isn't any rhyme or reason as to how or why or when God disciplines us. So then we are left grasping at straws to understand what lesson we should be learning.

But let's look back at the letter to the Hebrews. Remember that these verses follow the recitation of the suffering of different witnesses, and the reminder of Jesus' own suffering. And in v. 4, the author writes "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood," signifying that the readers had not yet experienced martyrdom in the persecution of their faith. So, for the immediate audience, God's discipline and the "sin" they were experiencing had to do with their struggle against their own sin and their struggle against a world that did not accept their faith. God's discipline, then, is the struggle itself, and the "childrening" they would receive would be the lessons learned through that struggle.

So What?

So what does this mean for us today? How are we to understand what it means to be "childrening" by God in the midst of the larger question, why do we suffer? Because I think it can be extremely difficult to separate out God's discipline meant to help us grow from the suffering we experience as a result of living in a fallen world.

I told you already at the beginning that I don't have a simple application for you. I think that the question of understanding God's discipline of us in the midst of suffering is something that we will work through our whole lives. I believe that we can find it through reading of Scripture and seeing the ways in

which we are falling short of Jesus' example. I believe it may come through our conscience, which is the Holy Spirit chastising us for our sins. I believe that we sometimes experience natural consequences for our sins which can remind us of why we are to live differently, although I would also caution that sometimes we don't see those natural consequences, and there are many evil people who live their entire lives without experiencing those natural consequences.

One verse that Christians often turn to when trying to understand suffering is Romans 8:28: "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." While I would say that this is a part of an answer, it is not the whole answer and cannot be understood outside of the context of the whole passage. Paul too takes the stance that we live in a fallen world and that our suffering is a result of that fallen nature. He writes in **Romans 8:20-22**

²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."

We wait along with creation for the redemption of this world; and so when Paul writes in 8:28 that God is working all things together for our good, I don't believe he necessarily means in this lifetime. Rather, I think that God is bringing the world about to eventual perfection when Jesus returns.

I am sorry to say this because I know that this is a comfort verse to many in hard times. And I know that we all want to find meaning in our suffering. But I believe our suffering is a result of our fallen world, and there is doesn't have anything to do with good or bad people and there isn't necessarily a good reason for why we suffer. And while God may be able to change our suffering into good, I don't believe that He plans for us to suffer so that good might happen. Rather, I think that in allowing suffering in the world, He will help us to make the best out of bad situations.

The real hope in all of this is that we do not suffer alone. God promises to never leave or forsake us. And we have the witness of those who have come before us, and we struggle in the midst of a group of people, the Church, who are called to love and uphold us. How do we answer the problem of pain? I don't fully know, and I don't think that we can fully know until Jesus returns. All we can do is sit before the feet of God, like David or Job, and say "even though I do not understand, I know that you are greater and I will praise you because of that."