

If God Is So Good: 1. Where Is God?

Psalm 88:1-5, 13-14

April 11, 2021

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In his novel, *Rabbit, Run*, John Updike tells the story of a husband and wife named Harry and Janice. He feels trapped in a dead-end marriage, job, and life, and he reacts with irresponsible behavior. Janice sinks into depression and turns to alcohol for comfort. One afternoon when Harry is absent, she is drinking heavily and attempts to give their infant daughter a bath. The child accidentally drowns. It is their behavior that is questionable, but their daughter pays the price. That evening after the accident, Harry returns to their apartment and finds the bathtub is still filled with water. He stands there for a while, looking at the water before he rolls up his sleeve, reaches down and pulls the plug. He watches the water slide down the wall of the tub, and at last sucked away. He thinks how easy it was to do that, and yet in all his strength, God did nothing. Just a little rubber stopper to lift. How easy it would have been for an omnipotent God to lift it and his daughter would be alive. If God had the strength to do it, why would a loving God not intervene? Why?

As I've shared previously, we had our own moment in 2015 when my wife, Amanda, was diagnosed with cancer. It felt like we had been kicked in the gut. It literally took our breath away. It was the last thing we thought possible. And almost immediately, our cry was Why, God, why? Where are you? And though today, Amanda is a survivor, there were times in that journey when that was far from certain – and frankly our prayers felt unanswered. God, how could you let this happen to us?

I suspect every one of us has had such a moment or we know someone who has faced a moment of crisis when tragedy struck. Even now you might be in the midst of a health crisis, relationship crisis, parenting crisis, financial crisis. Is God really there? Does God care? And if God is there and God does care, then how can God allow such things to happen? Theologians call this theodicy: *theo* means God and *dicy* means justice. **How can God be just when there is so much injustice.** How can we proclaim a God of love and justice when more than 560,000 people in this country have died and almost 3 million worldwide? Just imagine the awe and praise the world would have if God suddenly made this virus disappear. Why not, God? Surely, you could do it!

For this Sunday and next, I want us to think carefully about God as we examine an important question that has pushed many people away from faith and left others questioning their faith. If God is so good, why? Let's begin with the Bible. If you've not read the Bible, maybe you think the Bible is saying if you just believe hard enough and live well enough, then God will give you a life of goodness, free from suffering. But instead, the Bible is the story of people who suffered. They were oppressed, forced into slavery and for 400 years they waited and cried out, "How long, O God, must we suffer." The largest category of psalms is the psalms of lament, psalms of complaint. **I cry out to you, LORD! My prayer meets you first thing in the morning! Why do you reject my very being, LORD? Why do you hide your face from me?** Some scholars think this was written by someone terminally ill or at least chronically ill. Day after day he cries out to God and there is no response and at the end of the day his closest companion is darkness. "God, you are the problem," he cries. **You've made my loved ones and companions distant. My only friend is darkness.** The Old Testament book of Job is of a man who had everything taken away and his struggle to make sense of it. In the New Testament, we find the story of Jesus, the Savior of the world, and what happens? He is tortured and executed, and from the cross he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And then his

disciples: one takes his own life, one was stoned to death, several were crucified, and almost all died as a result of this faith. The Bible does not describe a life free from pain and suffering. This is the story of people who in the face of terrible suffering held on to faith and said, "I will not let go." And in spite of the circumstances received the strength to endure. Jesus suffered and died, but last week we celebrated Easter. Even though the next chapter in your life has not been written, the final chapter already has, and that is the triumph of hope and love. Paul writes in Romans 8: **We know that God works all things together for good for the one who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.**

Last week, I turned to Kate Bowler's book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and other lies I've loved*. She is a professor at Duke University who was diagnosed with stage IV cancer at the age of 35. She writes that certain statements we often hear sound profound as if they even came from the Bible, until you stop to question them. She says that we must be Christians who engage not just our hearts but our heads. One of the expressions that she heard when she was diagnosed with cancer was – everything happens for a reason. People meant well when they said it, but where's the comfort in that? Something horrible has happened and you can't see the good right now but in time the good will become clear – because what happened was the will of God. Really? Everything that happens is God's will? Years ago, I conducted a funeral for a child (*when the special music for the funeral is "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and the "Incy Wincy Spider" you know this is a young child*). She died of a horrible, incurable disease. Her parents were crushed. They wanted a service, but they could not bear to have it here. They were so angry and felt betrayed by God. People told them their daughter's death was part of God's plan. How could the death of an innocent child be part of God's plan? At the funeral, I said, "I don't believe God kills babies. I don't believe God hurts one person in order to teach a lesson to another human being." People will say: maybe there was a higher purpose. After all, God's ways are not our ways and we cannot understand what God's plan really is. Their argument is the ends justify the means. Really?

In my two decades as your pastor, I have been with people who have been raped, who had family members murdered, people abused by members of their own family, one woman told me that as a child her father would beat her before going to bed and as he beat her, he forced her to thank God for the beatings. So, God wanted these things to happen? Really? Now, I believe God can redeem even the worst experiences of our lives. Look what happened to Jesus – tortured and killed and through his experience, I have been changed. God can take the worst and out of that, help us to find something to be used for good. The worst thing is not the last thing.

But, if God doesn't control everything, then is God really all-powerful? The first line of the Apostle's Creed says: **I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.** God called forth the whole universe of time and space. God wrote the laws of nature and brought forth life. And as the crowning act, God brought forth humanity with the ability to love and understand, to worship God, and to choose their own destiny. **Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."** Dominion means to rule. God gave us the ability to think and act and God put us in control and gave us the freedom to act. We have two daughters, and for the first 12 years of their life, they mostly listened to us and did what we expected, but about the age 13 something happened, and they stopped listening to us – and did things that we didn't want – some things that only now, 20 years later, we are hearing about.

We all do this. We use our dominion for our own purposes and often misuse and do what God doesn't want. Isn't that part of this past year's challenge? We had a plumber come to our house, but we wouldn't let him in because he refused to wear a face mask. Have you heard about Love you neighbor? It didn't matter. What mattered was personal freedom. Which is it personal freedom or love your neighbor? Which one will define you? God allows us to choose, even when what we choose can harm others.

Or we hear that every 15 seconds a child dies from a disease as a direct result of not having clean water. Is that God's plan? A few years ago, Amanda and I traveled to Kenya, and one day we went to a primary school where you provided the funds to provide clean water and a toilet facility. We were welcomed like royalty. We were given chairs on which to sit and the entire student body gathered to sing and thank us. We were given a tour, shown the source of water, and how they washed their hands. Something we take for granted. There was water 100 feet below the surface. They just had no way to get to it until you provided the way. We have a God-given choice.

What about suffering as a result of illness. Couldn't God do something about that? I remember visiting someone in the hospital following a heart attack and bypass surgery and he said, "I think God was trying to tell me something." And I was thinking (I didn't say it, but I was thinking), maybe it wasn't God, but it was your body saying keep eating cheeseburgers and don't exercise, and this is what happens. God is right here with you to give you strength, to come alongside so you can make the changes you need to live. Human body is amazing. You cut your finger or scratch your arm, and the body heals itself. Try that with your car. Scratch the side of your car and see if the paint can fix itself. The Bible tells us we are fearfully and wonderfully made. And yet some diseases are too much of the human body. There are genetic imperfections that result in birth defects. Or certain cells go haywire and start multiplying and you get cancer. God has given us ability and one day humans will find a way to overcome today's diseases and by then a whole new set of challenges will exist – and that's life.

But we are not left on our own. The first verse of Psalm 88: **LORD, God of my salvation...** And then for the next 17 verses, we hear pain and suffering of one who cries out as if God is the problem. But in the first verse, God is also the solution. Even in the writer's pain and suffering, he believes God is. William Sloane Coffin once the pastor at Riverside Church in New York City was asked how he could continue to believe in God. His son had drowned in a tragic accident when the car his son was driving left the road one night and plunged into a river. "How can you continue to believe in a God who would allow that to happen?" And he replied, the God I believe in did not take the life of my son, but the God I believe in was right beside my son and when he sank below the water it was God who shed the first tear.

God is with us. God even suffers with us. When you turn your back on God, does it make the world a better place? What is better about the world or your life when you give up on God? Give up on God, and you reject the source of hope – to know that you are not alone and will never, ever be alone. Bad things happen. But God never lets go. God's promise is to be with us. Always.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of April 11, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Loving God, we greet this new day, hungry for your word, longing for your touch, seeking your warm embrace. Breathe new life into our lives this day. Touch us and heal our brokenness. Fill our hearts with compassion and mercy. Empower us anew to be your witnesses in all the world. Amen.

Monday, April 12

Scripture: Job 1:20-22; Job 42:1-8

Job arose, tore his clothes, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshipped. He said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb; naked I will return there. The LORD has given; the LORD has taken; bless the LORD's name." In all this, Job didn't sin or blame God.

Job answered the LORD: I know you can do anything; no plan of yours can be opposed successfully. You said, "Who is this darkening counsel without knowledge?" I have indeed spoken about things I didn't understand, wonders beyond my comprehension. You said, "Listen and I will speak; I will question you and you will inform me." My ears had heard about you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I relent and find comfort on dust and ashes. After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, he said to Eliphaz from Teman, "I'm angry at you and your two friends because you haven't spoken about me correctly as did my servant Job. So now, take seven bulls and seven rams, go to my servant Job, and prepare an entirely burned offering for yourselves. Job my servant will pray for you, and I will act favorably by not making fools of you because you didn't speak correctly, as did my servant Job."

Observation: Suffering has always raised deep spiritual questions. The poetic drama of Job probably took final form some 750 years before Jesus, but its roots seem to go back much earlier. Surely, the questions that we continue to ask have been part of the human experience from the beginning. The book of Job taught that we can't always explain suffering. It showed Job struggling with great pain and loss, and in the end finding hope and meaning in a God bigger and wiser than he was.

Application: In chapter 42, Job saw that he needed more than the "why" answers he asked God for (which never came). God said Job's friends' answers had "not spoken rightly" (Job 42:7). Have well-meaning friends ever given glib explanations of your suffering? How can God's caring presence with you help more than any explanation?

Prayer: Merciful God, I want to learn to live with the same kind of trust that Job expressed. Teach me each day how to put my trust in you whenever I feel lost and alone. Amen.

Tuesday, April 13

Scripture: John 16:33-17:11, 14-17

I've said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world."

When Jesus finished saying these things, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, so that the Son can glorify you. You gave him authority over everyone so that he could give eternal life to everyone you gave him. This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent. I have glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I shared with you before the world was created. "I have revealed your name to the people you gave me from this world. They were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. This is because I gave them the words that you gave me, and they received them. They truly understood that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. "I'm praying for them. I'm not praying for the world but for those you gave me, because they are yours. Everything that is mine is yours

and everything that is yours is mine; I have been glorified in them. I'm no longer in the world, but they are in the world, even as I'm coming to you. Holy Father, watch over them in your name, the name you gave me, that they will be one just as we are one.

I gave your word to them and the world hated them, because they don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. I'm not asking that you take them out of this world but that you keep them safe from the evil one. They don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. Make them holy in the truth; your word is truth.

Observation: John writes that, on the night before he went to the cross, Jesus told his followers, "In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world." His prayer asked God to protect his followers, not from all difficulty or pain, but rather from "the evil one" who would seek to use suffering to rob them of their trust in God.

Application: The next day, Jesus quoted Psalm 31:5 ("Into your hands I commit my spirit") as his life slipped away on the cross. That Psalm ends with the words, "All you who wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage." How can Jesus' trust in God in the face of a horrible execution shape your perspective on whatever suffering comes into your life?

Prayer: Lord God, I wish all pain and suffering in our world would just go away right now—but it won't. But you promise something greater – and that is You! Give me the courage that I need to trust you. Amen.

Wednesday, April 14

Scripture: Romans 8:18-28

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience. In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Observation: Suffering was almost constant in Paul's life as an apostle (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-29). But he viewed his suffering in a way that gave him strength and hope. First, he knew he was not alone or unique in suffering. (Creation suffers, and even the Holy Spirit groans with us.) What's more, he said, God can bend even our suffering to serve good purposes.

Application: There is mystery and comfort in verse 26: "We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans" When have you faced so much pain that you felt "speechless" before God? How does it affect you to read that, at those very hardest times, God's Spirit intercedes on your behalf?

Prayer: Lord God, your servant, Paul, modeled a life of complete trust. Help me to listen to his teaching and lean on your Holy Spirit in those times when I do not have the words to express the depth of my pain. Amen.

Thursday, April 15

Scripture: Romans 8:31-39

So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him? Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them. Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us. Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, *We are being put to death all day long for your sake. We are treated like sheep for slaughter.* But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Observation: Many of the psalms are laments—cries to God for help in the face of many kinds of suffering. Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 in verse 36 as describing what he and other Christians faced in the Roman Empire. Yet, he exclaimed, we are winning a victory. Why? Because God is for us, and nothing—absolutely nothing—can separate us from God's love.

Application: Paul did not write his answers to most of his rhetorical questions here, but it's evident what he had in mind. Read the passage aloud and insert your name when the text says "us" or "we." When you hear the value God places on you, how does this shape the value you place on yourself? Choose hourly to live into God's view of you.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for showing me in Jesus' resurrection that we have won a victory over death itself. Remind me once again that nothing will ever separate me from your love. Thank you for this promise. Amen.

Friday, April 16

Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem.

The LORD has removed your judgment;

he has turned away your enemy.

The LORD, the king of Israel, is in your midst;

you will no longer fear evil.

On that day, it will be said to Jerusalem:

Don't fear, Zion.

Don't let your hands fall.

The LORD your God is in your midst—a warrior bringing victory.

He will create calm with his love;

he will rejoice over you with singing.

I will remove from you those worried about the appointed feasts.

They have been a burden for her, a reproach.

Watch what I am about to do to all your oppressors at that time.

I will deliver the lame;

I will gather the outcast.

I will change their shame into praise and fame throughout the earth.

At that time, I will bring all of you back,

at the time when I gather you.

I will give you fame and praise among all the neighboring peoples

when I restore your possessions and you can see them—says the LORD.

Observation: In Romans 8, we saw that Paul clung to God’s love in the present but looked to the future for God’s final answer to suffering. This was part of his prophetic heritage. The little-known prophet Zephaniah wrote at about the same time as Jeremiah. Even before Babylon overran Jerusalem, he looked beyond Israel’s coming suffering and exile, and found hope.

Application: After giving a strong message of judgment, Zephaniah, on God’s behalf, penned this lyrical promise of renewal and rejoicing. How did his message point to the idea that “the worst thing is never the last thing”? How can that confidence make your heart sing, even if in a minor key at times of sadness?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as the old gospel song says, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.” I lay before you all the things that worry me today, and I open my heart to your gifts of peace and contentment. Amen.

Saturday, April 17

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.” He also said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Observation: Like Zephaniah, Revelation’s vision ended not with plague, disaster and suffering, but with a world made new. Death, mourning, crying and pain were of the old order. “I’m making all things new!” the Creator and Redeemer cried in triumph. The prophet still faced a world of hatred and suffering, so God added that “these words are trustworthy and true.”

Application: Francis of Assisi wrote a prayer, asking to be an instrument of God’s peace in the world. One line says, “Where there is doubt, [let me sow] faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.” With all the suffering in our world, how can you offer God’s hope and light to others?

Prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.