

Why? – 1. Why Do the Innocent Suffer?

Genesis 1:27-28

December 18, 2022

Pastor Tami Luckhardt

Today we begin a four-part sermon series seeking to make sense of suffering, tragedy and the will of God. Suffering, unanswered prayer, and the unfairness of life naturally leads us to questions God's goodness and sometimes to question God's very existence. If you ask an atheist why they reject the idea of God, this would be one of their reasons. But ask thoughtful a Christian, and you will find that they too, have wrestled with the same questions throughout their lives. Some have said, "if God is loving and just, God must not be all powerful." Or, "if God is all powerful, God must not be loving and just." Because if God were all powerful, loving and just, God would stop the evil, pain and suffering in the world. Over the next few weeks, we will be wrestling with questions like, why do the innocent suffer, why do my prayers go unanswered and why can't I see God's will for my life? We'll challenge ourselves to re-examining our assumptions about God and how God works in the world and see how the biblical authors and the leading characters in the Bible wrestled with and ultimately answered those same questions.

Let's start with one of the most common assumptions about how God works in the world. If I believe in God and try to be a good person, God will take care of me and bless me and nothing bad will happen to me. This is a predominantly American form of theology called the prosperity gospel that teaches this - good things happen to good people. In her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, Duke divinity professor, Kate Bowler, who at the age of 35 was diagnosed with stage four cancer writes about this. She says, the prosperity gospel boldly promises that God wants you to prosper. If you are good enough and faithful enough, God will reward you. Think positively. Speak positively. Nothing is impossible if you believe. This kind of belief serves you well until you can't manage your way out of a sudden death, a tragic accident or devastating medical diagnosis. And the truth is, we are all just a breath away from a problem that can destroy something that is irreplaceable in our lives or can alter our lives completely. If you follow this line of belief, every time something bad happens, you have to wonder what you did wrong to deserve it. Had you been bad or had your faith not been strong enough?

There are also many Christians who believe that God has predetermined everything that will happen in your life, in everybody's life, before you were born and before time began. God has determined where you will live, what job(s) you will have, where you'll eat dinner tonight and even when you'll get sick. Everything is planned for us. We are just here on this earth to fulfill a role in God's master plan. In this plan, we have no free will or choice in anything that happens. If we think about that for any length of time, it just doesn't make any sense. Yet, when people are suffering, in an attempt to ease their pain, we say things that seem to support this idea. Things like, "it's all a part of God's plan", or "it must be the will of God", or "everything happens for a reason."

But by saying *everything happens for a reason according to God's plan* then that means God has caused every war, every genocide, every evil, inhumane and cruel act that has happened in this world. That would mean that God caused that small boy to be thrown over the railing at the Mall of America a few years ago, or that God orchestrates school shootings, or that God caused COVID or our economic downturn. Were those all a part of God's master plan? If we believe that, how in the world do we ever invite someone to follow Jesus if God just took their young

child or parent or caused their company to go bankrupt and for them to lose everything they had? Is that God's will for our lives? Is that the loving, caring, compassionate God we read about in scripture? Let me ask you this, would you do any of these things to someone you love? You'd never choose that for someone you love and God would never choose that for us. If we read the Bible carefully, we'll see that is not what God is calling us to do. God calls us to act with kindness and compassion. Micah 6:8, to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Throughout scripture we read that we are to *love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself*. I could go on. But *everything happens for a reason* just does not align with the will of God that we read about in scriptures. I think our disappointment with God in the face of suffering or tragedy or injustice typically stems from our assumptions about how God is supposed to work in the world. I want to share with you three essential ideas that can help us reconcile God's goodness with the suffering we experience in the world.

God has given human beings dominion over the planet. Genesis 1 tells us that the earth and the entire universe as we know it was created by God but while God is the source of all that exists, God created human beings and then gave us the responsibility and authority to act on God's behalf in managing and tending the planet. God also gave us an intellect, a soul, and a conscience to help us know right from wrong. And when in doubt, God sent Jesus Christ to show us the way to live. To show us how to love God and love our neighbor. That we do unto others as we would have them do unto us, that we love our enemies, forgive those who trespass against us, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger. God's primary way of acting in this world is through people. When God wants something done, God sends people to do it. That is why in 2 weeks on Sunday, January 22, we are working with Midwest Mission to sponsor a Rice Packing party here at Messiah Church. They reached out to Messiah because they needed a church that was large enough to support this kind of effort. While we don't know exactly where these meals will be sent, many of them have already been sent to Ukraine. But what we do know is that they will go to feed people in need. We are in need of 200 servants that day to pack 3,600 meal bags. Our 2nd mile offering this month will go to cover the cost of the meals. So there are two ways to support this effort to be the hands and feet of Jesus. I hope you'll bring a family member, a friend, or your faith group and join in accomplishing this goal.

To be human is to have free choice. God gave us the ability to make choices but with freedom, comes responsibility and the possibility that we might choose a course of action that will lead to suffering, for us or for others. Our freedom can be used to do what God wants us to do but it can also be used to do what God does not want us to do. We see that freedom of choice played out in the second chapter of Genesis when God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to "till it and keep it." And in the very next verse God says, "*You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.*"

Have you ever stopped and wondered why God put the tree in the garden in the first place? God could have easily left the tree out of the garden and Adam and Eve would have never listened to the voice of the serpent and chose to disobey. That tree, that tree represents that freedom of choice God gives to human beings. As Americans we value our freedom is. We are willing to fight for it, defend it, even die for it. In our personal relationships, we want the other person to choose to love us, not to be forced to love us. So God giving us the ability to choose right from wrong is an expression of God's love for us. But that freedom of choice can lead to pain and suffering.

Humans are predisposed to sin. Human beings tend to be drawn to what is not God's will. It is part of our human nature to sin. The Greek word for sin is *hamartia*, which literally means to miss the mark, to stray from God's path. Adam and Eve knew God's will for their lives, don't eat from that tree. But they ate it anyway. I know this happens in my life daily. I don't know about you but every day I can hear that voice calling me, convincing me it's okay to do what I should not do, the sin of commission. Or to not do what I should do, the sin of omission. That is why I start everyday with this prayer, "Lord, I offer my life to you. Help me to walk in your way." In other words, keep me on your path! Help me hit the mark! Everyday I have the choice to follow God or not to follow God and this tendency towards sin is a constant battle, it's a part of our lives. So, what God intends as a gift, we often misuse, and it leads to suffering.

With these three ideas in mind, (God gave us dominion over the earth. God gave us free choice and humans beings are predisposed to sin) let's consider three categories of suffering and how we might think about the relationship of the God of love, justice, and mercy to these realities.

Suffering caused by natural disasters. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and earthquakes. Some folks see these things and ask, "How could anybody believe in God when things like this happen?" So, let's again examine our assumption of how God works in this world and ask... is every earthquake, flood or hurricane ordained by God?

Before our advanced understanding of science, it was understandable for people to think God must be punishing them. But today we understand the forces of nature and why things happen and how those forces of nature sustain the homeostasis of our planet. We understand this and so we are no longer believe God sends earthquakes or floods but also God does not intervene to stop them either because to do so would be destructive to our planet. Knowing we live on such a planet makes it our human responsibility to adapt to living in these conditions. And God's provision for human beings who face natural disasters is to send people to provide care. In November, Messiah members Jon Kehrberg and Anne St. Angelo went to Fort Meyers, Florida as a part of the MN Disaster Response team to help folks who are picking up the pieces of their lives after Hurricane Ian. They spent time mucking out homes; sorting out what could be saved; preserving items of personal meaning; gutting interiors of homes; and cleaning debris around the exterior of homes. They also spent time with the survivors to hear their stories and offer them hope and support. As human beings, we are meant to hear the call of God to provide food, clothing, shelter to those in need. To wrap our arms around them and help them piece their lives back together. When God wants to bring hope to people, God sends other people.

Suffering caused by human decision. Because God gives us freedom to make our own decisions, sometimes we make the wrong decisions, and those decisions have painful consequences. In the case of the Holocaust for example, it was not simply Hitler who did this terrible thing. It was millions of people who actively supported the Nazi efforts and then tens of millions of other people who remained silent rather than stand up for the Jewish people. Each of these folks exercised their freedom of choice in a way that broke the heart of God. But we also see God's response to the Holocaust, the ending of their tyranny and violence that came through millions of people who responded to the call and fight for justice and bring an end to the Holocaust.

Suffering caused by illness. In Psalm 139:14 we read, "Our bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made." Just think about your amazing body for a minute. Our kids gave Jerry and I a set of Cutco knives for Christmas. We've never had a set of good knives and so on New Year's eve, I was cutting up an apple, don't you know, I nicked the top of my thumb. It wasn't a deep cut but it hurt pretty bad. That was just 8 days ago and now, my thumb is almost

completely healed? Our bodies are amazingly resilient. But sometimes illnesses attack our bodies, or a cell goes haywire. Cancer happens. Heart disease happens and mental health issues take hold of our lives. Scientifically, medically, we understand why all these things happen to our bodies and what we can do to treat them. So, when we get sick, it is not because God gave it to us to punish us or teach us a lesson but... neither does God intervene in the laws of nature to stop us from getting sick. But we have doctors, nurses, people who come alongside us and sustain us during our illnesses. And, we can know that sickness is not God's will because when Jesus walked the earth, what did he do? He healed the sick. He had the power to heal the sick and raise the dead and that reveals to us the heart of God.

And sometimes, our diseases are going to win and when that happens it's our human nature to try to comfort people and say, it's going to be okay, but sometimes, it is not going to be okay. And the story of the resurrection is that Christ triumphed over the grave and ultimately, for us too, it's going to be okay. God promises to redeem whatever suffering we experience in this world, to force something good to come from it. And in the end, we know that however terrible things may be, they will not have the final word in our lives. The worst thing is never the last thing.

So what does faith in God do for us? It's not what the prosperity gospel teaches, a kind of insurance policy that nothing bad will ever happen to us. It's that God comes and walks alongside us in the pain and suffering of this world. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God promises to be with you. Jesus' name is Emmanuel, which means God with us and so we can trust in God's comforting presence.

Over the Christmas holidays, our son and his family stayed with us for 7 days. I just love it when our kids and grandkids sleep over. One night in the middle of the night, our grandson, Parker, came into our bedroom and crawled into bed between Jerry and me. I asked him what was up and he said he had had a bad dream. I asked him if he wanted to talk about it and he said no. So, I just snuggled him close and held him and within a minute, he was back to sleep. That's what I think God does for us. He holds us close, guides us, leads us and comforts us so we can believe and trust. The apostle Paul said it this way, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) God has a way of wringing good out of the most horrible of tragedies.

On August 30, 2000, Messiah members Lyle and Cindy Hilbrands began a journey that is every parent's worst nightmare. While visiting family in Iowa, they received a phone call that their 27 year-old son, Brent, had suffered a terrible fall while working on a pole barn on his property. Naturally, they rushed back to Minnesota and were escorted to the trauma unit at HCMC. Cindy said they knew the situation was grave when they gave their names to the hospital staff and saw the expression on their faces change to one of deep concern. In the fall, Brent sustained irreparable brain damage and severed his spinal column. He died three days later. This strong, vivacious, young man who had just bought his first home and just started his own business, in the prime of life, gone, in the blink of an eye. I asked Lyle and Cindy how they survived this, how did their faith survive this? They told me that is was (and still is) the hardest thing they have ever done. But instead of turning from their faith, they leaned into it.

In the beginning, they forced themselves to attend the Compassionate Friends and the West Suburban Grief Coalition where they could share their story with folks who had suffered a similar loss and they've been attending ever since. They relied on friends and Brent's friends who stayed with them through the very tough first few years who even when they did not know what to say, just showed up with a hug. And they took their grief and their pain and invested it in creating a space of healing for themselves and for others, a space that would honor Brent's life. Their labor of love resulted in the Celebration Garden located just behind our building. They wanted to make a place where others could find peace and healing and place to celebrate all aspects of life. I asked them if their faith was shaken by this tragedy. They said that they never blamed God for Brent's death. In fact, they believe that in the moment Brent fell, God caught

him and that God has been with them walking with them, comforting them and guiding them for the last 22 years.

Friends, life can break your heart and life may take everything you have and everything you hope for. But I believe that even in the darkest of times, there will be beauty and there will be love God promises to walk with us. Rejecting God doesn't change our situation it only removes the greatest source of hope, help, comfort, and strength that we have. God does not bring unjust suffering upon God's people but God will force such things to serve God's good purposes. God will walk with us through the fires and the floodwaters. And God promises that "the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us." Romans 8:18

Let's pray: Lord God, help us, even when we don't know the "why" of suffering, to know you are there to sustain us. Keep teaching us to view life your way. Help us learn to value the ways you use even in the tough, painful times to help us grow in endurance, character, and trust. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 8, 2023

Weekly Prayer: Almighty God, across the ages you have guided your people through the wilderness, assuring us of a home in your eternal city. Strengthen us along the way; help us to trust in your unfailing presence amid all our fears. Grant us wisdom to discern your way in this world and trust in your faithful love. Amen.

Monday, January 9

Scripture: Isaiah 56:9 - 57:2

All you beasts of the field,
 come and eat, all you beasts of the forest!
The lookouts are blind;
 they all lack sense.
They are all mute dogs that can't bark,
 dreamers, loungers, loving to sleep.
But the dogs have monstrous appetites.
 They never have enough.
 They are shepherds who don't understand.
All of them have turned to their own ways,
 every last one greedy for profit.
"Come! I'll get some wine!
 Let's drink beer!
 Tomorrow will be like today, or even much better."
The righteous person perishes,
 and no one takes it to heart.
Loyal people are gathered together,
 and no one understands that because of evil
 the righteous one passed away.
They will find peace;
 those who walk in straight paths
 will find rest on their burial beds.

Observation: Many Christians explain tragedies by assuming that "God has a plan." But if we say that, then what we are really saying is that "God willed for this thing to happen." If God willed it, then God actually caused it to happen. The prophet Isaiah said Israel's failing leaders

in his day were letting “wild beasts” hurt their flock. The self-serving, lazy leaders, not God, caused people’s suffering — “because of evil the righteous one passed away.”

Application: Have you, through inattention or even out of anger or frustration, ever made a choice that caused you or one or more people you care about psychological or physical pain? Do you believe that you didn’t have a choice - that God wanted you to do that? What about when someone else’s choice causes you pain? Isaiah was clear that God didn’t want Israel’s leaders to act so destructively. How can his outlook deepen your insight into how life works?

Prayer: Lord God, you are not a God who infuses your children with cancer cells or sends cars careening into one another. And even when we face the results of things like that, you stay with us. Thank you for your steadfast love. Amen.

Tuesday, January 10

Scripture: John 9:1-3; Luke 13:1-9

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. Jesus’ disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?” Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God’s mighty works might be displayed in him. Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. He replied, “Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.” Jesus told this parable: “A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’ The gardener responded, ‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’”

Observation: People asked Jesus to explain the “why” of a man blind from birth in one case, some Galileans killed by Roman soldiers in the other. Jesus’ reply in both instances showed that he knew evil often strikes at random. Those who suffer were not “singled out” to endure pain or loss. The open-ended parable he told in Luke 13:6-9 suggested human responsibility to “bear fruit,” not passive acceptance of anything that happens as “God’s will.”

Application: We could call Jesus’ story in Luke 13:6-9 “The Unfinished Parable.” The gardener asked for one more year to help the tree bear good fruit—but Jesus never said whether the tree did or didn’t bear fruit. In 13:5 he challenged his hearers to “change your hearts and lives,” so it was clear what type of “fruit-bearing” was on his mind. So, what about you – how will you finish Jesus’ unfinished parable in your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want my life to bear the kind of good fruit you desire and that you are willing to grow in me. Keep me responsive to your guiding voice in my heart. Amen.

Wednesday, January 11

Scripture: Psalm 13:1-6

How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?
How long will I be left to my own wits,
 agony filling my heart? Daily?
How long will my enemy keep defeating me?

Look at me!
 Answer me, Lord my God!
Restore sight to my eyes!
 Otherwise, I'll sleep the sleep of death,
 and my enemy will say, "I won!"
 My foes will rejoice over my downfall.

But I have trusted in your faithful love.
 My heart will rejoice in your salvation.
Yes, I will sing to the Lord
 because he has been good to me.

Observation: Some writers call the Psalms the "prayer book" of the Bible. Many of those prayers were laments like this one, which began with the psalmist feeling as though God had forgotten all about him. But Psalm 13 returned to the heart stance that makes prayer possible at all: "I have trusted in your faithful love."

Application: In what parts of your life have you felt the pain and frustration reflected in the psalmist's opening question: "How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever?" The Hebrew phrase about God "hiding his face" meant God had withdrawn divine favor. Are there ways in which you are waiting for God today? What choices can help you sustain patience and trust in God's unfailing love as you wait?

Prayer: Lord God, whether I've been brave enough to say it aloud or not, you know the times when my heart asks, "How long?" I thank you that your faithful love is always with me—that I never have to wait for that. Amen.

Thursday, January 12

Scripture: John 16:28-17:1

I left the Father and came into the world. I tell you again: I am leaving the world and returning to the Father."

His disciples said, "See! Now you speak plainly; you aren't using figures of speech. Now we know that you know everything and you don't need anyone to ask you. Because of this we believe you have come from God."

Jesus replied, "Now you believe? Look! A time is coming—and is here!—when each of you will be scattered to your own homes and you will leave me alone. I'm not really alone, for the Father is with me. 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.

Observation: John wrote 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.” He began his prayer (chapter 17) remarkably, saying, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son.” Until we stop to reflect, we may completely miss the fact that “the time has come” pointed to the cross as the setting in which God would “glorify” Jesus.

Application: Many people in Jesus’ day, and in ours, think (perhaps subconsciously) that “being good” should be a kind of “suffering insurance.” Jesus didn’t see it that way. How do you react to his honest words: “In the world you have distress”? How can you live into the flip side of his teaching—to “be encouraged” because he’s overcome the world?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me, even when I can’t fully know the “why” of whatever suffering I face, to know the “who”—you!—who is with me, and who sustains me and gives me hope. Amen.

Friday, January 13

Scripture: Acts 14:19-22; 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, 17-18

Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived and won the crowds over. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing he was dead. When the disciples surrounded him, he got up and entered the city again. The following day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the good news to the people in Derbe and made many disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, where they strengthened the disciples and urged them to remain firm in the faith. They told them, “If we are to enter God’s kingdom, we must pass through many troubles.” We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren’t crushed. We are confused, but we aren’t depressed. We are harassed, but we aren’t abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren’t knocked out. Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison. We don’t focus on the things that can be seen but on the things that can’t be seen. The things that can be seen don’t last, but the things that can’t be seen are eternal.

Observation: Paul reflected Hebrew history and Jesus’ example in what he taught some of the first Christians he converted in Asia Minor. A crowd who thought they had killed Paul with stones had dumped his body outside the town of Lystra! With utter honesty, and perhaps a dash of defiance, he said, “If we are to enter God’s kingdom, we must pass through many troubles.”

Application: The Acts 14 “troubles” came from unbelievers. Next (Acts 15), Luke showed a Christian conflict: must Gentile men obey the Hebrew ritual of circumcision? Scholar N. T. Wright said, “Paul meant what he said in verse 22: it is through much suffering that we shall enter God’s kingdom. And sometimes the suffering comes in the form of terrible, church-dividing controversy.” As United Methodists face a church-dividing controversy, how can Paul’s words give us courage?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you sent Paul and Barnabas bravely traveling through hostile foreign territory. Sometimes you just ask me to be a good neighbor, or to be your presence in my neighborhood, workplace, or school. Give me the courage to do whatever you ask of me. Amen.

Saturday, January 14

Scripture: James 1:2-5; Romans 5:1-5

My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. After all,

you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing. But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask. Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Observation: Every life has challenges. Some are minor; others test the very fiber of our being. Jesus' brother James urged Christians to meet life's tests as "occasions for joy." And the apostle Paul sketched the spiritual growth process through which every Christ-follower can develop a character that meets challenges, not with despair, but with hopeful awareness of the holy moments they might lead to. God, both apostles said, has the power to bend even bad things to good purposes in our lives. God can give us the wisdom to bring endurance and hope out of our hardest experiences.

Application: Neither apostle wrote through naïve, rose-colored glasses. Human nature is not at all inclined to view tests as "occasions for joy," as something to "take pride" in. That's why they focused on God's wisdom and love as the divine gifts that can turn our hard times into occasions for growth. When has God given you wisdom to face a tough challenge, or surrounded you with love and support for the strength you needed? In what ways does God's ability to "grow you" through life's challenges help you view hard times differently?

Prayer: Lord God, keep teaching me to view life your way. Help me learn more and more how to value even the tough, painful times you can use to help me grow in endurance, character, and trust. Amen.