

14 January 2018

## **Where is God When I Am In Pain? - Why Is There Pain And Suffering?**

### **Opening Prayer**

At various points in our lives, we all suffer and have pain. It may be the pain of cancer in ourselves or someone we love. Our pain may be relentless guilt. It may be the pain of various chronic diseases or chronic back or joint pain. It may be the pain of loneliness or failed relationships. It may be the pain of failing to obtain the job or promotion or college placement that we believe we deserve. We may feel the pain of betrayal by someone we loved and trusted. It may be the pain of chronic mental illness. It may be the pain of poverty and exploitation suffered by many around the world. There are so many types of pain and suffering. And most of us are guaranteed to experience some of them during our lives.

It is very natural for us to ask why? Why God, are we suffering so?

This question has been asked for thousands of years. We humans cannot come up with the complete, the perfect answer. So if you are here today expecting a clear and complete answer to be revealed, you will likely be disappointed. What we do is try our best to understand why there is pain in a world created by a loving God, and we try to help each other cope with the pain in and around us.

### **What beliefs about pain and suffering, and God's role did you bring with you today?**

The Christian writer, Philip Yancey, tells the story of his friend Claudia a beautiful young woman in her early twenties who had been married two years when she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease, a form of cancer. As she aged and deteriorated before his eyes under the weight of the cancer and the cancer treatment a number of people in the church visited her. A church leader told her that she must have sinned in some way for God to allow this to happen to her. A woman whom she barely knew from the church came and told her she needed to be more cheerful. One church member told her she would be healed if she only had enough faith...because faith can move mountains. Someone else from the church said she should praise God for the gift of suffering. And the pastor told her that she had been "appointed to suffer for Christ," to be an example to the church of holy suffering.

**Do you think any of Claudia's visitors helped her to cope with her suffering? If so, how?**

## **Pain can be useful**

**Talk about some of the uses of pain.**

**Are there times when pain is not useful? Explain.**

**In the biological warning system what could be an alternative to pain?**

## **The will of God in pain and suffering**

There are two major Christian approaches to the relationship between God and pain and suffering in our American culture.

One is that God is Sovereign over all things, including suffering and appoints or allows suffering for his purposes in the world. A corollary to this idea is that humans brought suffering into the world when we ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. This is often called “The Fall” by some Christian groups. In essence, we cursed ourselves and all of nature. A second corollary is that God uses suffering to gain our attention and teach us when we have often strayed, and become satisfied with the pleasures and successes of our lives.

The second approach is to state that our understanding of suffering and its relationship to God is very imperfect. We understand that God does not cause us to suffer or select certain people to experience suffering...does not want to see us in pain (**God's Will**). We acknowledge that most suffering in the world is actually caused by us. We are the cause of most human suffering and much, if not most, of the suffering in the natural world. We are the cause, and we can be the solution. Then, we are left with what is called “innocent suffering,” the suffering that does not appear to be the result of human action or inaction. Why should babies or small children suffer? Why should the person who exercised, ate healthy foods, never smoked, and was loving and giving to all others suffer from heart disease or cancer? Why should we suffer in natural disasters? Could the Creator have made **God's World** without suffering as a part of it? Could we have had a different set of physical and biological laws in God's World?

There are numerous intellectual theories about this, but in the end, we just don't know. Episcopal theology has no simple answer for this question of innocent suffering, as none

is contained in the gospels. But the gospels do tell us over and over that God loves us and we should love each other.

### **What are your thoughts?**

We can say that we understand some things, if not perfectly. God loves the world (*John 3:16*). God suffers with us, and does not sit apart from us on some throne in the sky. Emmanuel, that is, God is with us, if we welcome him, in the times of success and in times of suffering. God loves the world so much that he experienced extreme suffering and death on a cross (*John 19:28-30*). And, the grace of God does not prevent our suffering, just as it did not prevent the suffering of Jesus, but it supports us through our suffering. God wants our love and wants us to love each other (*John 15:13*). When we suffer, God does not want us to suffer alone. God want us to love and support our suffering brothers and sisters and wants them to support us in turn when we suffer.

There is a tendency in us to want clarity and certainty, even about things which may be beyond our understanding. The gospels and the epistles don't always offer clarity or answer the why questions, but call us to have faith, "... the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.\*" (*Hebrews 11:1*) We are called to have hope: "Through 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.\*" (*Romans 5:2*) We are called to show love: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.\*" (*John 13:34*) "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.\*" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

\*English Standard Version

### **Closing Thoughts**

### **Closing Prayer**