

Tough Questions/Real Answers:

GOOD OUT OF EVIL

Romans 8:28, 31-39

How can we cope with suffering?

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Here is the human predicament: God is good, but life is not fair, and parts of it stink. Death, disease, destruction, depression, and despair are constant companions along our journey of life, and there doesn't seem to be any pattern, any rhyme or reason for much of it to happen. How do we cope with the pain we experience? How do we make sense out of suffering? That's our tough question for today.

In his book, *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel interviewed a theologian by the name of Dr. Peter Kreeft, who used an analogy of a bear in a trap to understand our reaction to suffering. Imagine a game warden who comes upon a bear that has been caught in a trap. Being sympathetic to the bear's pain, the game warden decides to get him out of the trap. First, he has to shoot him full of tranquilizer so he can approach the beast. This is not seen as a friendly gesture by the bear. As the bear becomes sedated, the game warden comes up to release him. Because there is tension on the spring in the trap, the game warden has to actually push the bear's paw further into the trap to release the tension so he can pull the bear free. If the bear is semi-conscious at this point, he does not perceive this to be a friendly gesture, either. The actions of the game warden seem to the bear to be hostile. That is because he is a bear, not a human being, and he doesn't understand. Bears are not as smart as people.

People are not as smart as God, either. Dr. Kreeft said, "I believe God does the same to us sometimes, and we can't comprehend why [God] does it any more than the bear can understand the motivations of the game warden. As the bear could have trusted the game warden, so we can trust God."¹

God didn't cause the pain in the first place, any more than the game warden caused the bear to get trapped. But once the bear is trapped, the game warden can release him only if the bear will allow it. Likewise, in our suffering, God works to set us free. We just have to respond with faith and trust and not hostility or resentment or fear.

Last week we talked about the “Why” of evil and suffering. If God is loving and powerful, why do we experience the pain of suffering? We made three affirmations. First, God is good and creation is good. Evil and suffering are problems, aberrations in the created order. Bad is not the way things are supposed to be. Second, we explained that most evil is a result of freedom misused. God has given us freedom so we can love and believe and hope in God, but we and others have used our freedom to turn away from God. This is sin, and thus evil comes into the world. Finally, God answers evil by entering our pain. God becomes one with us in our suffering and death by Jesus’ suffering and dying on the cross. Through the suffering of Christ, our pain is redeemed.

That’s the “why” of evil and suffering. Today we want to turn to the “what now?” question. There’s nothing we can do about the presence of pain in our lives. Some will happen. But given the reality of suffering, what do we do now? How do we respond? How do we cope? What answers can we find in Scripture that will give us hope?

Suffering can either make or break your faith. It can cut either way. It’s the free will thing. Faced with suffering and death, we can decide to be people of faith, or we can turn away from God.

But there is a possibility that in the face of suffering and death, we can still decide to be a person of faith. Do you know when the church grows most vigorously? When it’s being persecuted. Where is the Christian church growing today? Not in the United States or in Europe, but in Russia, in China, in the Middle East, and in Africa—places where being a Christian is dangerous and sacrificial. It’s when we’re on the edge of destruction that we sense our need of God most acutely.

I read about a woman who was a concert pianist and organist. Playing beautiful music was her life. Suddenly she began to develop a numbness in her right hand that was intermittent at first, but then it became constant and forced her to retire. In frustration she vowed never to serve God or set foot in a house of worship again. Soon after that, her doctor told her that she would never play again.

Though she thought God didn’t care, God was working for good, to surround her with a group of loving Christian friends. They kept supporting and encouraging her, though they couldn’t guarantee that she would regain use of her hands. Finally, one day she repented and asked Christ to be Lord of her life again. She prayed a simple prayer of acceptance, “Lord, if I never play again, it’s okay.”

A week after this lady’s renewal of faith, she went to a new doctor who thought he could help her. After a series of 12 operations over three years’ time, she began to play five minutes a day. In another year and a half, she was back on the concert stage and serving the Lord as organist at her church. But more importantly, she was a person of faith who had ultimately turned to God in her suffering and had experienced his healing grace.²

Suffering can be a learning experience if we are open to it. Every great person of faith that I know of has experienced suffering. What sets them apart is their ability to learn and grow from their adversity. Pain can be a great teacher.

Paul went through all kinds of suffering, persecution and hardship as he carried the gospel to the world in the first century. Yet he was able to write to the Romans these powerful words: *“we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not*

disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."³

As a pastor for 43 years, I have seen many people suffer and many types of suffering—physical, emotional, spiritual, relational. Some have done it well, and some have not. In every church, I have known heroes of faith because of the way they coped with suffering. Four years ago, Dick Smith was diagnosed with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, a progressive and incurable deterioration of the body, but not the mind. The type he has particularly affects the upper body, especially speaking and swallowing. Yet he responded with hope and purpose and has hardly missed a Sunday since he got sick. Meanwhile, his wife Donna was diagnosed with cancer for the second time, went through chemotherapy and went into remission, all the while worrying about who would take care of Dick if she didn't make it.

A couple of years ago, we agreed that when Dick felt like he was getting closer to the end of his life, we would get together and plan his funeral while he could still communicate. Last Sunday, he was showing me his new walker, and he said, "We need to talk." So I went out this week, and we planned his funeral. Dick tries very hard still to talk, and Donna is a good interpreter for him, but when that fails, he writes his thoughts on a whiteboard with a marker. This is what he wrote, this guy who has been deteriorating for four years and knows where his trajectory is headed: "I have enjoyed my Christian faith. I love the services at our church. The most difficult thing for me was to quit the choir. I feel very blessed." No bitterness, no resentment, no questioning the goodness of God. Just faith, gratitude, and trust.

When the going gets tough, the tough trust God. When the obstacles are overwhelming, the overcomers rely on Christ to get them through. Suffering makes us depend on God.

Marc Harrienger was a young businessman in Boston several years ago when a freak accident changed his life. There had been a snowstorm, and he was shoveling snow out of the driveway. His wife asked him to watch their two-year-old daughter while she moved the car. As the car backed out, Marc and his wife were plunged into the worst nightmare a parent can imagine. Their toddler was crushed beneath a wheel, and she died in his arms.

Initially the grief was so deep that Marc had to ask God to help him breathe, to eat, to get dressed and move about the house. Slowly, slowly over time, Marc felt God working in his life to bring healing, restoration of joy, and a new purpose in life. Eventually Marc left the business world to enter seminary and become a pastor, where he uses his own devastating experiences as a connection with others who are lost in their suffering.

People want to know this Jesus, this God who enters our pain. Out of suffering has come endurance, character, and hope, not only for the Harriengers, but for many people. Marc says, "Sometimes people scoff at the Bible saying that God can cause good to emerge from our pain if we run toward him instead of away from him. But I've watched it happen in my own life. I've experienced God's goodness through deep pain, and no skeptic can dispute that. The God whom the skeptic denies is the same God who held our hands in the deep, dark places, who strengthened our marriage, who deepened our faith, who increased our reliance on him, who gave us two more children, and who infused our lives with new purpose and meaning so that we can make a difference to others."⁴

It's only when you've been through the suffering and been delivered from the brink of destruction, that you can truly appreciate the way God does work for good in the midst of tragedy or evil. Grace experienced through suffering can make us grateful to God.

Being grateful for suffering seems like the most idiotic idea ever, and it is—to the shallow, pain-avoiding culture we live in. But when you face your trials in faith, when you learn what God can teach you through the valleys of life, when you develop a dependence on God that gives your life a solid foundation, then you can appreciate what Paul is talking about when he says, *“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”*⁵

Maybe that doesn't happen for you in a mathematically proportional way; how can enough good things happen to justify the death of a child or a terrorist attack or a pandemic? But if God can work to bring some good out of these horrible situations, to leave at least a glimmer of hope and faith and love in a devastating situation, then that is a miracle of divine proportions. In the midst of our suffering, we can be grateful for that.

With grateful hearts, solid foundations in faith, and the knowledge gained from our painful experiences, we can serve God and be in ministry to others. Nothing opens up a doorway for ministry with a person who is lost and hurting better than a shared experience of pain. If a person has lost a loved one, the best comforter is a person who has also felt the pain of grief. If a person is going through a divorce, the best friend that person can have is someone who has also been through that pain. The best helper for someone battling addiction is a recovering addict. As Marc Harrienger, the father who saw his toddler run over, said, God worked through their pain and infused their lives with new purpose and meaning so that they could make a difference to others.

Ultimately the question is not “Can God bring anything good out of evil?” We know God can. Rather the question for the person of faith is “How can I use the experience of God's help in my suffering to minister to others who are hurting?” What ministry could you do with people because of the suffering you have experienced? Did you ever think about that?

There's was a comic strip several years ago called “Pontius' Puddle” about a frog who gets in theological discussions with God and his pondmates. One day Pontius the frog was sitting on his lily pad and questioning God, “Why do you allow suffering, injustice, poverty, and pain in the world?” The answer came back from heaven, “I was just about to ask you the same question!”⁶

Having been redeemed through suffering, we become partners with God in redeeming the suffering of the world. Ultimately redemption only happens through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, but we can help bring that grace to bear in our church, in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our community, and in our world.

“In all things”—good and bad—“God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.” How does this work? It works because our God is a God of love, and no evil in this world can make him stop loving each and every one of his children. Nothing cuts us off from the love of God. Remember the words of Paul from Romans 8: *“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor*

powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁷ That is an assurance we can live with. No matter how deep our suffering, God's love is deeper still.

God is good. Life is not fair; parts of it stink. So what? What now? How do we cope? Answer: We make the decision not to react in fear but to respond in faith. We learn from our experiences. We learn to depend on God. We develop an attitude of gratitude for God's help. And we use our experiences, even our suffering, as a way to be in ministry to others and to serve God. This is the life that will bring you through the night of suffering into a brand new day.

¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 32.

² Francis Cosgrove, "Serving God's Purpose in Your Generation," *Discipleship Journal*, May/June 1982.

³ Romans 5:2-5.

⁴ Strobel, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁵ Romans 8:28.

⁶ <https://anabaptistworld.org/our-puddles-loss/>.

⁷ Romans 8:31-32, 35, 37-39.