

## **Introduction**

Some years ago, pollster George Barna conducted a national survey. He asked a scientifically selected cross-section of adults one question, **"If you could ask God only one question and you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask?"** The number one answer, 17% of the respondents, was this, **"Why is there suffering in the world?"** Most of us I'm sure wonder or have wondered the same thing. So, that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **Suffering Is Inescapable**

Job is a widely known Bible character. His name, even in the secular world, is synonymous with suffering. All of his wealth was taken from him, all of his children were killed, and he himself was stricken with a painful debilitating disease. That's a bit of his story and we learn a lesson from it. Suffering is an inescapable part of life for us all.

Many who follow Jesus though deny that. They believe instead that God always blesses them with good things and protects them from bad ones if they're faithful to Him. Three influences contribute to their belief. One is the health and wealth gospel, the prosperity gospel, that so many pastors and televangelists preach. A second is the pervasive culture of the American dream, which teaches that everyone gets what he or she deserves. And a third influence is parents who want their children to have more than they did and model and teach that they should.

As a result of those three influences, many who follow Jesus have absorbed a prosperity gospel mentality. If they're faithful to God, they think, He'll always bless them with good things and protect them from bad ones. Many who have that mentality don't even know they do. Their conscious theology derived from Scripture, has been overridden by a subconscious theology derived, unknowingly, from those three influences.

Peter Chin is a young pastor who planted a church in Washington D.C. Three months into that church plant, his wife was diagnosed with a

particularly aggressive cancer. Still reeling from that news, they were dealt another crushing blow. His health care provider determined that her cancer was a pre-existing condition and refused to cover it. As a pastor, Peter had taught that followers of Jesus aren't exempt from pain. They can expect to suffer and God can use their suffering to refine and strengthen faith. But despite his theology, he now thought God had betrayed him, and felt a deep anger and mistrust toward Him as a result.

He himself explained what his thoughts and feelings implied: **"I realized I didn't really believe what I thought I believed, what I said I believed. My conscious theology had been overridden by a subconscious theology: the gospel of health and wealth."** But it isn't just Peter Chin. It's countless others who follow Jesus as well. When they suffer, they ask, **"Why is this happening to me?"** which reflects a theology they've absorbed over the years, **"I'm faithful to God and won't suffer because I am."**

But they're deluded. Let's come back to Job. According to God in 1:8, he was the most blameless and upright man on earth, fearing God and turning away from evil. Yet, few have suffered as he did. The moral is that pain is an inescapable part of life. As Jesus tells us in John 16:33, **"In the world you have trouble."** We can expect to suffer. All of us, sooner or later, in one way or the other, will.

### **The Problem of Suffering**

But why is that? That's the question or, I should say, that's the problem. The problem is this. If God is all-loving, He always wills what is good. If He is all knowing and wise, He always knows what is good. And if He is all powerful, He always can do what is good. Suffering is bad not good. But we suffer. One of three things, therefore, must be true of God. He is not all-loving and doesn't always will what is good. Or He is not all knowing and wise and doesn't always know what is good. Or He is not all-powerful and can't always do what is good. If any of those three things is true of course, then He is not the utterly lovely and

utterly competent being of the Old and New Testaments.

That is the problem of suffering. And as that Barna survey shows, it challenges people's faith in God. It can prevent faith. To quote Lee Strobel, it is **"the single biggest obstacle for spiritual seekers."** It can also diminish or destroy faith. The 22 year-old son of a Christian was killed in a motorcycle accident. She blamed God for his death and hasn't been to church, read her Bible, or prayed since it happened.

Don't let suffering defeat you. Overcome it instead, as Job did.

Let me quickly say that he did sin against God. His three friends contended he was suffering because he had sinned and God was punishing him, which wasn't true. He, therefore, demanded that God vindicate him and became bitter because He didn't. Bitterness against God is a sin and recognizing that, he finally retracted or repented in verse 6.

But Job wasn't bitter because of his suffering. On the contrary, according to 1:22 and 2:10, he **"did not sin nor did he blame God."** He overcame, declaring in 1:21, **"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."**

Job overcame and we can too. Hear the rest of John 16:33. Jesus said, **"In the world you have trouble, but take courage; I have overcome the world."** Don't let suffering diminish or destroy your faith. Take courage and overcome it instead. To overcome it means that we trust the outcome of it to God and are at peace because we do. We aren't striving inwardly as a result of it. We feel at rest. We also aren't striving outwardly. We act clear-headedly and calmly.

That isn't just nice talk. Job wasn't a special kind of humanity. He overcame and we can too by doing what he did. It's two things.

### **Know Something about God**

First, know something about God. He allows suffering in order to achieve good. In verse 3a, Job repeats the question God asked him in 38:2, **"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"** God's

point in 38:2 was that Job was speaking out of limited knowledge, which he recognizes and admits in verse 3b-c. In verse 4, Job repeats what God said to him in 38:3, **"Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask you, and you instruct me."** God's point in 38:3 was, since Job's knowledge was limited, He wanted to teach Him things, but he wasn't listening. According to verses 2 and 5a though, he had begun listening and learned one of those things. God allows suffering in order to achieve good.

We see just that in chapters 1 and 2. God and Satan conversed in the invisible world Paul called the heavenly places. Satan attacked both God's character and Job's. He accused God of richly blessing Job so he would love Him. He accused Job of loving God only because He richly blessed him. But Job overcoming the suffering demonstrated the loveliness of God and the purity of Job's love for Him. It proved God right and Satan wrong. Job, in other words, was God's preacher to Satan, which made his suffering good. In reality, the gain it achieved far outweighed the loss. It was far more beneficial than harmful.

That teaches us something about God. He allows suffering in order to achieve good. In His infinite wisdom, He is willing to tolerate short-term sufferings, like Job's, to achieve long-term goods. An analogy helps explain this. Suppose a two year-old cuts himself on a rusty can. His parents will allow him a short-term suffering, the pain of a tetanus shot, in order to achieve a long-term good, the prevention of infection. God does the same with us. He allows short-term sufferings in order to achieve long-term goods - for Him, others, and/or us. Simply put, He allows suffering in order to achieve good.

Job knew that and it's vital that we do too. Let's go back to our analogy. The two-year old knows the short-term suffering - the pain of the tetanus shot his parents allow. He doesn't know there's a long-term good it achieves - the prevention of infection. So, he thinks his parents have betrayed him and struggles against them. Many people do the same with God. They know the short-term sufferings. But they don't know that there are long term-term goods they achieve, for God, others, and/or

them. So, they think He has betrayed them and struggle against Him. Their faith in Him is diminished or even destroyed. But knowing that God allows their sufferings in order to achieve greater goods changes the dynamics of that. It makes a strong overcoming faith possible in them.

After Jill's colon cancer surgery, she got an awful post-operative infection that has led to two other surgeries and great physical pain. I know the suffering, all the pain she and I have been through. But I also know that God is allowing the suffering in order to achieve a greater good. We may be His preachers to Satan, and we want to be good ones. Or He may be refining us to make us more prepared for eternity. Or He may be using us to witness to others. Or He may be making us more sympathetic to others and thus better ministers, and so on. Knowing that makes sense of our suffering, which makes overcoming faith possible.

So, know something about God. In His infinite wisdom, He allows suffering in order to achieve good.

### **Know God Himself**

We overcome suffering by doing a second thing. Know God Himself.

Job did. Notice a distinction he makes in verse 5. In line 1, he states he has heard about God **"by the hearing of the ear."** That is, he knows about Him intellectually. In line 2, he states, **"But now my eyes see You."** That is, he knows Him personally as well, and so must we.

Reconsider our question of God. Why is there so much suffering in the world? The answer to that is not an answer at all. The answer is the Answerer Himself, God. That is a million dollar insight. Listen to the words of philosopher Peter Kreeft: **"The answer to suffering cannot just be an abstract idea, because this isn't an abstract issue; it's a personal issue. It requires a personal response. The answer must be someone, not just something, because the issue involves someone – God."** He's absolutely right about that. The ultimate answer to the problem of suffering isn't a principle or proposition. It's a person – the infinite, perfect, living, and triune God – and knowing Him.

Ponder the testimonies of two Christians in that regard.

As a result of his negligence, Mark Herrienger's wife ran over and killed their toddler daughter in the driveway. Mark says: **"Sure, I'd like to understand more about why. But the ultimate answer is Jesus' presence. That sounds sappy, I know. But just wait – when your world is rocked, you don't want philosophy or theology as much as you want the reality of Jesus. He was the very answer we needed."**

The 18 year-old daughter of Goldie Smith was brutally raped, beaten, and murdered. Goldie says: **"In His presence, we derive freely all the things that really matter: grace, strength, love, and best of all His constant abiding. Christ's presence has made our sorrow something beautiful."**

Those two testimonies are powerful anecdotal evidence, to which I could add my own. I know it's true by experience. Having an ongoing conversational relationship with God, what we call a familiar friendship with Jesus, overcomes the sufferings of life. It does many things, one of which is this. It makes the question **"Why is there so much suffering in the world?"** irrelevant. It no longer even occurs to us to ask it.

You may be skeptical of that but it's true. So, commit yourself to an ongoing conversational relationship with God. Arrange all of your affairs around doing three things, each of which I've explained before. First, build a purposeful and thorough vision of God. Second, train your minds to dwell routinely on Him. And third, learn and practice the central activities of relationship with Him. Do those things now in the good times. You'll be prepared for the bad times if you do.

## **Conclusion**

I close with the words of James S. Stewart: **"Indeed, the fact is that it is the world's greatest sufferers who have produced the most shining examples of unconquerable faith."** Know that God allows suffering to achieve good, and know Him. You will overcome the problem of suffering, and be one of those shining examples, if you do.