

“Why does God allow suffering if He is good?”

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10/27/2019

Opening Prayer

Good morning and welcome here to Kasson/Pleasant Corners UMC. I am Pastor Jacob Hanson, and it is a joy to be here with you today. If this is your first time here, or your first time here in a while, a special welcome to you. We are at the end of our sermon series regarding the difficult questions in Christianity. We have worked our way up from the 7th most requested question to today, where we tackle the most asked question from you in the pews. It is appropriate that this is the most asked question by you, because it is probably the most difficult question in all of Christianity to answer and answer well. The question of course is “Why does God allow suffering if He is good.?” Knowing that there is no way we can cover everything related to this topic in just twenty minutes, please do not hesitate to come and find me outside of service. Talk to each other in Bible Study, our Small Groups, or me whenever it works for you, because there will probably still be questions after today. With that being said, we are going to start talking about this topic by looking at the Psalm we read as our “Prayer of Petition”, Psalm 70.

Psalm 70 is a short Psalm that is attributed to King David from a time when he was in serious trouble. Many times throughout his life David was tested and tried. When he fought Goliath, when he was pursued by Saul, when the Philistines and other nations battled him, when he sinned greatly and slept with another’s wife and murdered her husband, when one of his sons tried to overthrow his rule... it goes on and on. We think about David as a great king, and truly for the most part he was. But David was very human, susceptible to other’s oppressions, susceptible to his own sin, we can probably relate. In his

time of suffering, this is what he writes: “O God, hasten to deliver me; O Lord, hasten to my help!” By the time we are fifteen years old all of us know suffering that makes us want to cry out in the same way. The deaths of loved ones, the loss of a job, the pain of watching our sons go off into the military, the hurts from a terrible diagnosis from the doctor, the difficulties of aging or growing up, the list goes on and on and on. We understand David’s cries here. In a world filled with sin and despair and pain (no matter how rich, how poor, how intelligent, how strong) we all experience suffering and anguish. It is part of the life we live, but why does it have to be this way? Couldn’t an all powerful God just snap His fingers and make it all disappear? Couldn’t it be sunshine and rainbows? Couldn’t we all be happy, joyful, at peace, and without pain? David gives us a hint into how our real life response should be when he closes this short Psalm with a prayer that we should all echo in our times of need: “Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; and let those who love Your salvation say continually, ‘Let God be magnified.’ But I am afflicted and needy; hasten to me, O God! You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay.” Our right response in suffering is to seek out the Lord and to seek out His help... but aside from the practical, why would God still allow suffering? Well, when we talk about suffering we all have painful things that we remember, so before we talk about the nitty gritty, it is important that we take into account that the Lord understands our suffering. This is a point that is often overlooked.

Isaiah 53: 4-6 reads “Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have

gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.” Beloved, you may have figured this out already, but these verses from Isaiah 53 (mentioned them last week too!) are direct prophesy about Jesus. When we encounter suffering in our own lives we often picture God as aloof, as uncaring, as up in the sky. We might see Him as showing pity, but we don’t often remember that Jesus Himself suffered much for us. Hebrews 4:14-16 reminds us that Jesus was fully human, and was tempted and tried in every way we are. So as we talk about why suffering exists, don’t forget that God suffered for us, for our sins, so that we might be with Him in eternity. “Our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried.” With that being kept in mind, there are a couple of reasons why suffering exists. Most notably, our free will allows for major suffering.

Beloved Congregants, our greatest gift and our greatest curse is our free will. The freedom to choose right or wrong. The freedom to choose how our lives are going to play out in major ways. The freedom of choice has many gifts for us of course, especially here in America. We are in the land of choices. We can choose what foods to eat, what job to work, what we want to do with our free time, who we want to marry, etc. However, the freedom of choice also can have horrific consequences. Some of these are fairly innocuous, and perhaps don’t have huge implications. If my wife gives me a “honey-do” list on my day off and I choose not to do it, then she may be displeased when she comes home. If a child chooses to not clean their room or do their chores, they might be grounded for the day. However, our free will choices affect more than just the unpleasant little things in life. They can also have real consequences. If I choose not to study for a major test, I might fail and have to retake the class. If I choose to sleep

around with a bunch of women before getting married, there will be fallout with my future wife. If I decide to drink to excess and get into a car, I might hit someone on the highway and kill them in my drunken stupor. These actions all cause suffering, for the person who initiates it and maybe for others. The question there is, who is responsible? Is it God, or is it me, if I choose to do what I know is wrong and foolish and another suffers? The answer of course, is that I am to blame. This makes sense to us, at least at first. But what about “why do bad things happen to good people?” That is the most common way to phrase the question, and it implies that the people who are suffering are the good ones. Why would God allow bad things to happen to them, especially things that are not the result of someone else’s free will? Cancer, strokes, hurricanes, landslides, volcanoes, plagues, crop failures, droughts, starvation and so on... what about those? Beloved, if we are going to be absolutely honest, we have to first understand that none of us are good... but that God cares for us anyways.

In Luke 18 we read the story about the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus. “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” In response Jesus says to the man “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.” Jesus continues by saying to follow the commandments. The man’s response here is very curious, he says “All these things I have kept from my youth.” Beloved, does this conversation strike you as strange? First and foremost, the rich young man who comes to Jesus asks the right question with the wrong person being emphasized. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Beloved, if you know the Gospels then you know that it isn’t about what you and I do... it is about what Jesus does. But we will give the guy a pass there, because he certainly wouldn’t have known that yet. Jesus’s response to this question is strange because instead of first talking about the man’s

question, Jesus first questions why this guy would call Him “good.” Now the irony here of course is that Jesus is actually good, since He is actually the Lord incarnate, but the rich young ruler doesn’t seem to grasp that. It is a good question for us too... who really is good?

The sad and sorry truth is that none of us are good. We often talk about how a good kid could get mixed up in bad things, or that the person who is being a jerk is good at heart, or how every person ever at the funeral is remembered as a good person. The thing about good, is that we make it a relative term. My kid is better behaved than their kid, so he is good. My test grade is better than what my friend got, so I did good. I am a better human being than Hitler, or Stalin, or Pol Pot, so I am a good person. In this scripture though, Jesus doesn’t refer to good in relative terms. The only one who is good is the one who never sins... the Lord. In that light, all of a sudden our deeds and who we are is put into question. Have you lied? Then you are a liar. Have you hated someone within your heart? Then according to Jesus you have murdered them within your heart. Have you lusted after someone who is not your spouse? Then you are an adulterer. Beloved Congregation, we are entitled to nothing but the fires of hell because we are sinners, because we choose (willingly!) to do what we know is evil. Yet God loves us and makes a way for us. The Genesis for suffering, is sin, even the sufferings that come “naturally” in life. Why? Because we are told that we are deserving of destruction, Beloved, and so when we talk about suffering and we expect God to owe us something, we are sorely mistaken. Out of His grace and mercy He has made a way for us, and He has promised great things for us if we trust in Him, but we are sorely mistaken if we think that God owes it to us to allow us to live an easy life. But even so, why do these difficult things need to happen? Couldn’t we be free to follow the Lord or not, yet still have an easy life?

The truth is that the world we live in have suffering, and the Lord is not revealed in His full glory so that we do have that choice... at least that is the argument that is made by folks far more intelligent than your young minister.

There are many arguments out there relating suffering and free will, but I will just share one with you this morning. C.S. Lewis might be the most well known Christian from the last one hundred years other than maybe only Billy Graham. One of C.S. Lewis's arguments for suffering that he addresses in "The Problem with Pain" is that it is only because the Lord is not fully revealed to us in all of His glory that we are able to have free will at all. It makes a lot of sense, so much sense that when we talked about this in Confirmation our students understood. The idea is that if the Lord was standing 1,000 feet tall looking over our shoulder at everything that we do that we would not have free will at all. We wouldn't be able to choose, much like if when you were a kid and your parents told you to do the dishes and then stood right behind you while you did them, it wouldn't be your choice on whether or not to obey, you just would. By not being fully present, at least in extremely outward ways, we are able to have free will on whether to follow our Creator or not. There are many other arguments like that out there about why suffering that isn't directly attributable to sin exists, but I wanted to give you just one basic one to let you know that there are answers. Come and speak to me, or your small group leader, or with another Christian leader to learn about some more answers. With that being said, we are not going to end our sermon on suffering with something as droll as arguments about why suffering exists such as this. Instead, as we finish this sermon series and this sermon, we are going to finish on a high note.

Beloved, we know where we came from with the perfection of the Garden of Eden (as far as being in complete relationship with the Lord is concerned) and we know where we are going in the perfection that is heaven. 1st John 2:17 reads “The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.” If this world and its suffering is tough, know that we do have eternity to look forward to. Philippians 4:4-7 reads “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Suffering is real, Beloved Congregation, but it isn’t for forever. We can have peace, we keep from being anxious, we can rejoice in knowing that the Lord is near. He gives us the future we desperately hope for! Our final reading is a good reminder for us about what we do have to look forward to. Revelation 21:3-6 says to us “And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’ And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ And He said, ‘Write for these words are faithful and true.’ Then He said to me, ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.’” What a joyous and peace giving thought for us to close with today, knowing that no matter what suffering we encounter now, whether it be by sin, or nature, or our own action, that for those of us who place

our faith in Christ we can look forward to an eternity where suffering is no more. Beloved, go in peace today and be blessed, let us pray.

Closing Prayer