

Why We Suffer (Part 2)

Amos 3:2; 4:6-12; Genesis 50:20-21; Ephesians 6:10-12

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Prayer: *All-knowing God, who knows us fully. As we proclaim, may our hearts and minds be receptive to you and your way. Amen.*

Last Sunday, we began a sermon series on the problem of suffering. Philosophically, the core issue is: *If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why is there so much suffering in the world?* This classic question is called *theodicy*, the problem of God's justice.

We looked at some traditional, yet ultimately inadequate, answers:

- Suffering is due to **free will**. This is the most popular explanation.
- Perhaps **God isn't truly all-powerful**, as Rabbi Kushner suggests in his book *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*).
- Perhaps **God isn't truly all-loving**, the position of Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor.

Then, we introduced a surprising perspective from science:

The tectonic plate shifts that cause deadly earthquakes are actually *necessary!* These geological processes shaped our continents, mountains, and seas, creating the diverse climates that allow life to thrive.

As interesting as the plate tectonics theory is, it still raises the question: Why can't an all-powerful God create life *without* the need for destructive earthquakes?

Today, we're shifting our focus to biblical explanations of why there is suffering. We'll look at three perspectives.

- *Suffering as Punishment for Sin*

Let's start with a major theme we see in the Bible: the idea that *suffering is punishment for sin*.

I must say up front: I don't necessarily subscribe to this view. It presents many problems on many levels. But to understand the issue, we need to recall the historical context of this belief.

Ancient Israel believed they were God's chosen people. God had established a special covenant, a deep relationship, with their ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.

This God was Yahweh, the Lord God Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, sovereign over all. The deal was straightforward:

If Israel kept God's commandments, this powerful God promised to protect them, defend them, and make them prosper in the promised land.

But what happened when life didn't go as expected? How could a chosen people explain military defeats, political losses, or economic hardship? How could they explain famine, drought, or pestilence?

And beyond the national troubles, how were they to understand personal suffering—when they were hungry or wounded, when children were stillborn, or when they faced poverty and loss?

These questions were asked—earnestly and often—by the people. The clearest answers came from a group of thinkers known as the prophets.

The prophets maintained that Israel's national sufferings came because it had disobeyed God, and it was suffering as a punishment.¹

One of the clearest portrayals of the “prophetic view” of suffering came from Amos. Amos argued that Israel's suffering was a punishment for the nations' sin. Here's a passage from Amos (Amos 4:6-12)

⁶ *I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities and lack of bread in all your places, says the LORD.*

This doesn't mean that God literally performed dental prophylaxis on the people or handed out toothpaste for them to brush their teeth. Their teeth are *clean* due to a lack of food to eat.

God continues in verse 7:

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: NY, HarperCollins, 2008), 31.

⁷ And I also withheld the rain from you when there were still three months to the harvest...

⁹ I struck you with blight and mildew; I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees and your olive trees; yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.

¹⁰ I killed your young men with the sword; I carried away your horses, yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.

For Amos, God starves the people, destroys their crops, and kills their children—just to get them to return to God. Really? No loving parents would starve their children so they would behave. You might ground them, take away some privileges, but you would not starve them. But according to Amos, the God of Israel in the Bible does.

God continues in verse 12: *Therefore, thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!*

And meeting God in this context is not a happy outcome, but a terrifying encounter.

In effect, God is saying: You've already suffered—drought, famine, disease, death. But worse is coming. And the worst came in the form of an invasion from the Assyrians. Israel fell, and many were carried off as captives.

Why is Israel suffering? Because God is calling the people to return—but they refuse. And so, the punishment goes on.

The idea of suffering as punishment for sin isn't limited to the prophets like Amos. It runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were punished. Later, when the world turned wicked, God sent a flood and wiped out everyone except Noah and his family.

We see the same idea in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians, Paul warns that taking the Lord's Supper "in an unworthy manner" shows disrespect for Christ's sacrifice. That, he says, brings judgment—"For this reason, many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor. 11:30).

And in the Book of Acts, Ananias and Sapphira lied about the money they had pledged to the church. They kept part of it—and were struck dead by God (Acts 5:1-11).

Can we really believe that a loving God would kill us for lying to the church? If so, I might be in trouble myself. I probably have lied every time someone catches me napping in my office. “Oh, I wasn’t sleeping. I was praying.”

Seriously, what are we to make of this view? Is it really true that we suffer because God is punishing us for our sins?

Still, many people think this way. When tragedy strikes, they ask, “What have I done to deserve this?”—as if they must have done something wrong. Or they cry, “Why me?”—assuming there must be a reason.

But is that true? Is God really punishing people for their sins? According to UNICEF, 13,000 babies die of hunger every day. God is punishing the parents of those babies. Really?

There is, however, one positive side to this view—it takes God seriously. It insists that God is deeply involved in the world.

But this view also has serious problems. It can create false confidence—or needless guilt. If suffering is punishment for sin, does that make those who are not suffering more righteous?

- *Suffering is Caused by Cosmic Powers*

There is, however, another biblical answer to the question of suffering. It’s called the *apocalyptic view*. If the prophets said suffering comes from sin, this view says the opposite: we suffer not because we sin, but because there are cosmic and evil forces in the world opposed to God and hostile to human beings.

There were times when Israel did exactly what the prophets commanded. They returned to God, stopped worshiping idols, repented, and kept God’s laws. Yet they still suffered—often through invasion and military defeat.

The word *apocalyptic* comes from the Greek, meaning “to unveil” or “to reveal.” Jewish apocalyptic thinkers believed that God had revealed to them heavenly secrets that explained earthly suffering. They saw that the

righteous were not suffering because God was punishing them—but because God’s enemies were.

So why do the righteous suffer? The apocalyptic view says it’s because there are cosmic forces opposed to God and hostile to humanity. God has personal enemies—the devil and his demons—powers far too strong for humans to resist on their own.² Consider these passages from Scripture:

- Luke 13:16: In this passage, Jesus heals a crippled woman whom he describes as being bound by Satan for 18 years.
- Ephesians 6:12: *for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

Other notable Biblical passages about the apocalyptic view of suffering are the Book of Daniel, 1 Maccabees, and Revelation in the New Testament.

What’s important to note is that Jewish apocalypticism did not see this struggle lasting forever. God would soon intervene, overthrow the forces of evil, and establish God’s own kingdom.

Many scholars believe Jesus shared this view, which was common in his time.³ In Mark 13, Jesus speaks of it in what’s called the “Little Apocalypse.” He says:

In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the ends of the earth.” (Mark 13:24–27)

The message is this: those who suffer now will be rewarded in the world to come. Eventually, the forces of evil—the devil and his demons—will be destroyed.

But this view also has a drawback. It can make us passive. If God will one day make everything right, we might stop trying to make things right

²Ibid, 204.

³ Ibid, 219.

ourselves. Why fight injustice or work for peace, if we're just waiting for Jesus to return?

- *Suffering Is Ultimately Redemptive*

There is another biblical view of suffering—one that offers hope. Suffering, in this view, is ultimately redemptive. Something good can come out of it.

This view helps us find meaning in suffering. It moves our focus away from punishment and judgment and turns us toward hope—toward what God might be doing for good, even in what seems bad.

A powerful example is the story of Joseph in Genesis. Joseph, Jacob's beloved son, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. But in Egypt Joseph rose to power after interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, predicting years of abundance and famine. As governor, he saved countless lives—including that of his own family.

When his brothers came to him, Joseph forgave them and said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good—to preserve many lives." (Genesis 50:20)

And that's how Genesis ends—with redemption through suffering. Through Joseph's misfortune, God saved God's people.

Many people today relate to the idea that suffering can bring something good. We've all had painful experiences that later led to growth or new insight.

But most suffering isn't like that. It doesn't make us stronger. The saying, "Whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger," isn't always true. Sometimes what doesn't kill you breaks you. It leaves wounds that never fully heal—on the body, the mind, or the heart.

We should never speak lightly of suffering—our own or anyone else's. To say that others suffer so we can be grateful is not wisdom. It's cruelty.

And much suffering has no silver lining at all. My younger brother died of hydrocephalus before his first birthday. That wasn't redemptive. I was too young to remember, but my mother never got over it. It broke her heart.

Okay, I'll pause here for any comments or questions. Next Sunday, we'll dive into the Book of Job. Suffering as a test of faith and a mystery. It will be the final sermon in our series on the problem of suffering.