

Why We Suffer

Amos 3:2; 4:6-12; Genesis 50:20-21; 1 Chronicles 21:1

Luke; 13:16; Ephesians 6:10-12

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Last summer, someone asked if I would preach on suffering. I said yes—but with great hesitation. It’s a difficult and complex topic, and I confess I don’t have deep personal experience with it. I’ve not suffered as some of you may have. So I come to this sermon, as the apostle Paul once said, “in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3).

My goal today isn’t to offer easy answers—because there are none. No pat answers. Instead, I hope to wrestle with you over this timeless question—one that touches all of us.

Over the next two or three Sundays, we’ll explore what the Bible says about suffering—while also drawing from wisdom in theology and philosophy. At the end of the sermon, you will have time for comments or questions.

So let’s begin with the central question: *If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?*

The technical word for this question is *theodicy*. It comes from two Greek words: *theos*, meaning “God,” and *dike*, meaning “justice.” So, God’s *justice*. *Theodicy* asks how God can be “just” or “good” when there is so much suffering in the world.

But it’s not a biblical term. It was first used by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), who wrote a treatise trying to explain how the existence of evil could still fit with a God who is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing.¹

There are three assertions:

- God is all powerful.
- God is all loving.

¹ G. W. Leibnitz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God and the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* (Chicago: Open Court, 1985).

- There is suffering.

That's a problem. How can all three be true at the same time? If God is all-powerful, then God can stop or prevent suffering. If God is all-loving, God certainly does not want people to suffer. And yet people are suffering.

Throughout history, people have taken two main approaches to the problem of suffering.

The first is to **deny that God is all-powerful**. This view was made popular by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The book grew out of Kushner's grief after his son died from *progeria*, a rare and fatal condition that causes rapid aging. This tragedy made him struggle with a painful question: *if God is loving and all-powerful, why do bad things happen to good people, especially those who don't deserve it?* Kushner says God truly wants to stop suffering, but can't. God's hands are tied. What God can do is help us endure it, comfort us in our pain, and give us hope that things will get better in the end.

But if God isn't all-powerful, we might ask, is God still God? If God cannot act, can't do anything to stop evil and suffering, *in what sense is God really God?*

The second approach is to **deny that God is all-loving**. This view is seen in the writings of Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor. In his book *Night*, Wiesel accuses God of being silent and absent while his fellow Jews were murdered, especially innocent children at Auschwitz during the Holocaust. His other book, *God on Trial*, is a play based on the actual genocides of the Jews in Ukraine and Poland between 1648 and 1657. In the play, three rabbis put God on trial and declare God guilty of crimes against humanity. In both books, Wiesel concludes that God cannot be loving in the way we've always believed.

Before we look at what the Bible says, let's consider a popular explanation for suffering: *free will*. This is what most people would answer when asked why there is suffering.

So, this is how the *free will* response goes: God created human beings with freedom—the ability to choose. We're not robots programmed to obey. Because we're free to love, we're also free to hate, to hurt, even to kill. This

is what we might call *moral evil* as opposed to natural evil, which is caused by the forces of nature, such as earthquakes, storms, and tsunamis.

And it's true—some people do terrible things. Think of Stalin, Hitler, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, and other brutal dictators who caused the deaths of millions.

But this particular response has limitations. Free will doesn't explain everything. It doesn't explain earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, or droughts—suffering that comes from nature, not from human choice.

And here's another question in addition to the argument from nature. I owe this insight to Bart Ehrman, distinguished professor of *Early Christianity* at UNC Chapel Hill, who wrote a book about suffering.² In fact, I base the Biblical answers on why we suffer from his book.

But on the specific question of free will, Ehrman asked: "Is there free will in heaven? Most people would say yes. Then will there be suffering in heaven? To which they would say, of course not. So then, God could create human beings with free will without suffering.

In fact, Ehrman continues, if God gave us free will as a great gift, why didn't God also give us the wisdom to use it well, so we could all live happily and in peace? You can't say God wasn't able to, if you believe God is all-powerful. And if God sometimes intervenes to override free-will decisions, such as when God drowned Pharaoh's army at the Exodus or when Jesus fed the hungry crowd who chose not to bring lunch—then why doesn't God intervene more often? Or even all the time?³

By the way, about earthquakes and other natural disasters—there's an interesting scientific theory about *plate tectonics*. Scientists believe that the same forces that cause earthquakes, volcanoes, and mountain building also made Earth habitable.

The shifting of these plates has shaped continents, mountains, and seas, creating a variety of climates where life could emerge and thrive. Volcanic activity and mountain building recycle gases and nutrients, keeping the

² Ehrman, Bart D. *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008.

³ Bart D. Ehrman, "Do We Suffer Because We Have Free Will?" *The Bart Ehrman Blog: History & Literature of Early Christianity*, February 26, 2025, <https://ehrmanblog.org/do-we-suffer-because-we-have-free-will/>

climate stable and fertile. These slow processes made Earth habitable and allowed complex life to evolve. Without these geological processes, the Earth might have become too cold, like Mars, or too hot, like Venus, and complex life never would have evolved.

But, as interesting as the theory of plate tectonics is, the question remains: *Could God have created life without tectonic plates that produce earthquakes if God were all-powerful?*

I'll pause here in case anyone has questions or comments. Next Sunday, we'll look at what the Bible says about why there's suffering in the world.