

Why Suffering and Evil Seem so Wrong?

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[0 : 00] Friends, have you ever wondered why suffering and evil seem so wrong? That's where we're going tonight with the first one of this evening series.! Well, to get us going, let me quote to you.

Kemi Badenoch, the leader of the Conservative Party, who was speaking about this truth recently. She was giving an interview on her upbringing. She was talking about the fact that she grew up in and around the church, but she lost her faith in 2008 because she read about the case of Joseph Fritzl and his daughter Elizabeth.

Now, I will spare you telling you the details of that whole story because except to say with children, with daughters, you'll understand that I can't. You Google it afterwards, you'll see it. Absolutely horrific.

It epitomizes evil. And she said this as she was reading the news every day about what was going on. She said this, I couldn't stop reading this story.

I read her account how she, she's talking about the daughter, prayed every day to be rescued. And I thought I was praying for all sorts of stupid things and I was getting my prayers answered.

[1 : 09] It's like, why were those prayers answered and not this woman's prayers? And then notice what she ends with, talking about her faith. And it just, it was like someone blew out a candle.

Now, here's one thing you can say about her sentiments. They are so deeply human. For when it comes to the plausibility of faith and particularly the Christian faith, this is the question.

Statistics will tell us that the question of suffering and evil and all its spring-off cousins continue to pop up the charts when it comes to barriers to faith in God.

Why do people suffer? Why do good things happen to bad people? Why do bad things happen to good people? How do we make sense of evil and suffering?

Because surely if there is a God, and let's assume that God is good, none of this would happen. And is there any hope through it all?

[2 : 27] Now, listen, I don't know what's brought you here tonight. Maybe that's a question that you are slap bang in the middle of. Maybe it's one that your friends have.

Maybe it's one that you have about your friends or your family. You are thinking, why does this happen? Let me just say we have all, whoever we are here tonight, we've all got skin in this game.

Can I just tell you, Ma'in, it's always good to be self-aware of what's going on in your life as you come to topics. I'm coming at this from two perspectives. I'm coming at this from a pastor, which is what I do here. In my role, I have seen people go through some serious stuff.

Trying to get their heads around a cancer diagnosis that they just didn't see coming. Dementia. Strokes. And we heard another one today of someone in our church family.

Strokes. Blindness. Things that happen in life that just flip life as we know it completely upside down and tear you inside out. So coming at it as a pastor, I've seen stuff.

[3 : 35] Also coming at it just as a person. We've got four daughters. I remember our second oldest, Grace, when she was born, the doctors found a hole in her heart. And I'm holding my then pale eight-month-year-old daughter and contemplating that question.

What if? What if she doesn't come through the other side of that surgery? Remember a few Christmases ago, my uncle died really suddenly from a heart attack.

He dropped, I think it was the 21st of December, just dropped at home. He got two days. And he never regained consciousness. So strange because we were even opening presents from him on Christmas Day.

My 94-year-old gran has vascular dementia. She doesn't even know where she is. We've all got skin in the game in this. All get skin in the game when it comes to this question.

And what I and millions of others down the years have found is that the Christian faith, it doesn't sidestep the issue. It confronts it head on.

[4 : 37] And wrestling with that question, with this question of why, not only is it one that the Bible, come to the pages of the Bible and you see we are invited to take to God. But actually wrestling with it takes us right to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

So what I'm going to do tonight, just to shape this a little bit, I'm going to assume that somebody has come to me and asked me that question, why? Because this is all about loving people at the end of the day.

Yeah? These are real people with real questions. This is all about loving people. So we should take the time to think about the person who's asking the question, what's going on in their lives?

Now, in my experience, what's crucial before you make the next move when it comes to that question of why evil and suffering, have you ever wondered, is to understand where the person asking the question is coming from.

Now, in my experience, there's two types of people who generally ask this question, and we'll kind of run with this all the way through tonight. Here's the first type of person. It's the debater.

[5 : 43] This person is interested in exploring the question genuinely. They're coming at it from a philosophical point of view. The other type of person, though, is the sufferer.

This question is not an academic one. It's a really raw and painful one that is filled with tears. And diagnosing who's in front of you and how they're coming at this question will totally change how you approach it.

So the question always to ask is, is this person who's coming to me, are they in the, if you like, the armchair or are they in the wheelchair? And determining who is asking the question will totally affect how we seek to answer it.

And we're going to see that as we go tonight. But that whole question of evil and suffering, my answer really is framed around two responses. And I hope this is just helpful getting us just to think.

Two responses that I think as a Christian you can say are true from the Bible about this topic. Here's number one. It's that the Bible invites us to have a, the Bible invites us to have a big problem with evil and suffering.

[6 : 57] Yeah? The Bible invites us to have a big problem with evil and suffering. Now let me explain. The Bible tells us and offers us an explanation of why the world is the way it is.

Now we meet in Genesis, the opening book of the Bible, at creation, a God who is good.

And that underpins the whole of the Christian worldview, a God who is good. He creates the world, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. He creates a good world.

He creates people to inhabit it as the climax of his creation. And that's so important that we understand what a human being is from Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.

Because it means if God has made every human life in his image, it means that every human life has value and worth because we are all made in the image of God.

[8 : 00] And I think in our current cultural moment, that is one of the sharpest arrows we have, if I could put it like this, in our apologetic armory. The image of God, what it is to be a human being.

That is something that value, something that is not earned or discovered. It is pronounced over us from the outside because God made life in his image.

God makes Adam and Eve. He gives them the job of stewarding his good planet, all in loving relationship with him, the God who made them. And at this point in the Bible story, all is rosy.

But at this point, I think of my daughters and their love of spot the different puzzles. You know, the two pictures next to each other. And you think they kind of look the same, but there's a few things that are different.

If you do that with Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 and the world in which we live today, you will see that they're similar but very different. This is not the world of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 that we're living in.

[9 : 02] And you'd be right. The Bible then goes on in Genesis 3 to tell us the story of human sin coming in, cosmic rebellion, human beings against our creator.

Sin, if you want to understand it like this, shove off God, I'm in charge, no to your rules. Sin, shove off God, I'm in charge, no to your rules. And the ripple effects of sin are catastrophic.

The fracturing of relationships in four directions, people with God, people with people, people internally, and people with creation. The Bible paints this picture of a world that is beautiful and yet broken.

You know, I remember coming to the Bible for the first time as a teenager trying to think about these things. Why is the world the way it is? What's going on here? And I found in the Bible a deeply relatable and realistic book.

The Bible has a framework for understanding the mess that we're in today. And maybe here's the big thing that you can take from this. And I know I've rushed it, but we can bat it out afterwards if you want.

[10 : 12] Here's the big thing to take. This is not how God created it to be. That's the framework. And with that framework, you can begin to engage the debater.

When someone asks me why and it's clear that it's the theory of everything that's driving them to ask it. Listen, I just take a leaf out of the Jesus playbook of evangelism and just ask a question back.

Always a great tactic. Jesus is the question asker par excellence when you meet him in the Gospels. Did you know some facts for you tonight? That Jesus asks 307 questions in the Gospels.

He's asked 186. He answers directly 8. Isn't that not fascinating for one who called himself the way, the truth and the life?

Because questions get people thinking, don't they? They draw us out. They invite us in. It's what Jesus does here. So why evil and suffering?

[11 : 24] Take atheist professor Richard Dawkins, who famously said this. Again, thinking about the debater. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect.

If there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference. Love to be at a Christmas party with that guy.

Nothing but pitiless indifference. And it's a really popular thing to, if not articulate, then certainly to think that there is no God.

And yet, if you pushed people, you would find that so often the same people who hold that opinion care deeply about things like human rights and discrimination and protecting the vulnerable and marginalized in our society.

And so the question to offer back respectfully and with love is when we feel that sense of responsibility, it's worth asking where that sense of ought and what's right comes from.

[12 : 31] If there is no God, and yet we feel morally like we should care about certain things, it's worth asking where that sense of ought and right comes from.

That was C.S. Lewis, a famous Christian apologist and author, famously talked about that very thing. Wrestling with that exact question was the thing that moved him from atheism to theism.

Now, he was a few notches away from Christianity, but it moved him from atheism to theism. He said this, My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how?

How had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing the universe with when I called it unjust?

Do you see what he's saying? If we feel like this world isn't the way it should be, if it's like our car dashboard, if it feels like there's a light going off saying there's a problem, then it shows in our minds that we have some sense of what is right.

[13 : 41] And with this framework as well, we can begin to engage and love the sufferer. Now, the Bible might tell us why the world is as it is, if you like, on a big picture level.

We're all living in this sin-stained, broken world. But when it comes to individual suffering, friends, can I just suggest pastorally, we cannot draw straight lines. Individually, it's so often not our place to guess why people are going through the things that they're going through.

And to pretend that we have trite answers and can explain it away is really just cruel and unloving. What can we do with this framework? Because we know that we live in this world.

Is that we can cry with people. Because this is not the way it was supposed to be. You know, there's a book in the Bible, if you want to look at it later.

I mean, it is a big one, but it is the book in the Bible that's really all about human suffering. And it's a book in the Bible called Job. And in Job, all the big questions are raised.

[14 : 49] And all the easy straight line answers are ruled out. Under God's permission, Satan takes everything away from Job. His three close friends come and they see the devastation which has happened in this man's life.

And how do they respond initially? They cry with him for three days. In fact, I think you could argue that it's the only thing in the book that they get right. They cry with him for three days.

This is not the way it's meant to be. Did you see as we picked up the reading there in John chapter 11, we'll come back to it, that Jesus was deeply moved.

To be a Christian is to have a bigger issue with evil and suffering. But here's the second thing. The Bible invites us to embrace a great hope through evil and suffering.

Because have you thought about the fact that the Bible really should be a three chapter book? What's God going to do in the wake of Adam and Eve's Rebellion Gate scandal?

[15 : 56] Burn it all up and start again? Could have done that. God promises to send someone. And turn to the Gospels and we learn that someone has a name.

In the coming of Jesus, he who was timeless stepped into our time and space. He who was sinless stepped into our mess and brokenness and sin.

Jesus steps down, takes on our human flesh and steps into our story of suffering. And he was a man of suffering, climaxing in his death on a Roman cross.

He dies there for the sins of his people. And on the third day, he rises again. Forty days later, he ascends to heaven where he is right now.

One day he will come back to make all things new. And that is radical as far as religion is concerned. That God would come down and suffer. That he would step into our mess, our brokenness, our pain.

[17 : 05] That is unique. You see, Christian hope is not a wishful grasping at an uncertain tomorrow. It's a confident expectation rooted in the reality of what transpired some 2,000 years ago.

Centering on an empty tomb in Jerusalem. And that's the Christian hope. Doesn't bypass suffering. It's one that takes us straight through.

You know, the Bible, when it talks about experiencing grief and hardship in this world and longing for that day when these things won't be, it uses that word, and you can look at it later if you want, in Romans chapter 8.

That word of groaning. Groaning. And Fiona's song choice at the start was brilliant. That idea of come, Lord Jesus, and make this right.

Come and bring an end to the suffering. In fact, the best metaphor that a man called Paul, an eyewitness of the risen Jesus, uses as he writes, is the one of childbirth.

[18 : 10] That sense of agonizing pain. Now, I've watched my wife go through four of these, and I would not swap places. Sickness, tiredness, even on the day, going the best part of 20 hours without food to do it right, to deliver our fourth daughter.

What on earth gets you through something like that? It's the joy of seeing the newborn baby on the other side. And that's the Christian hope. And so to the debater, I'm always wanting to ask, what is your hope?

One of the topics we'll come up with in a few weeks' time is, where is history going? Is history going anywhere? What is your hope? Where are things heading?

And to the sufferer, you're able to draw alongside with tears in your eyes and say, there is a hope. You know, so often when I'm trying to process grief myself, or I've been trying to pastor people in it, the language of hope, and Kate I picked up on it this morning, is absolutely priceless and unique.

Places like 2 Corinthians chapter 4. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever.

[19 : 40] And on that note, we're going to end tonight by seeing that God's answer to our why is ultimately a who.

A bigger issue and a greater hope. I want to take you to what for years has been my favorite chapter in the Bible, John chapter 11, and show you how these two things connect in the person of Jesus.

John chapter 11, where we see Jesus of all places at a funeral. There was this family that Jesus loved consisting of three siblings.

You've got Mary, you've got Martha, you've got Lazarus. Lazarus died. And on hearing this, Jesus says to his disciples, not let's go. He says, let's stay.

And he says to them that it's because you're about to learn something about me and my glory and my person that you wouldn't learn any other way.

[20 : 43] So after four days, Jesus and his disciples get to this funeral. And one after another, Mary and Martha, make their way to Jesus with their question.

And they run up to Jesus and they both, if you notice it in the text, they make the same point to Jesus. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

It's not a question. It's a vent. Essentially, Lord, I thought you loved us. Essentially, Lord, how could you let this happen?

And they make the same point to Jesus individually. And yet Jesus answers them both in profoundly different ways. Want you to see this, Jesus, because this is the only way we can answer this question and have hope.

To Martha, who I think is struggling to understand this intellectually. Jesus says to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

[21 : 45] And to Mary, who I think is struggling to understand this emotionally. Jesus doesn't say anything other than show me his tomb.

And when he gets there, you get the shortest verse in all of the Bible. And yet, make no mistake, it's the most profound. Jesus wept.

Jesus knows his people perfectly. He knew that Martha needed to know that he was in control. He knew that Mary needed to know that he cared.

What does this tell us? Two quick things about Jesus. It tells us, firstly, that his tears are real. We're told that he wept for Lazarus when he learned that Lazarus has died.

And when he encountered the sorrow and the heartache that death because of sin had brought to this world. He cries, not as someone who is lacking control.

[22 : 46] He cries. And the way that it's put there is that he is, he's raging. He's angry. He's determined to do something about this. So much so that people around him saw him cry and they comment, you see it in the text.

See how much he loved him. You see, in Jesus Christ, Christians have a Savior sent from God who entered our broken humanity and became one of us.

And far from being immune from the pain, he knows and he feels and he shares and he weeps and he knows life in this broken world.

And that is wonderfully unique about the Christian faith. In Jesus, we have one who's able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. A Savior and brother to all those who will believe in him.

His tears are real. They're not crocodile tears. His tears are real. And he knows what it is to suffer himself.

[23 : 48] The second thing about Jesus is that his words are powerful. Because he's not just a shoulder to cry on. He's a Savior to be trusted.

We read that after Jesus had wept for his friend, he asked for people to roll away the stone. And he spoke into the darkness and the void.

And he said, and he didn't just say, he shouted, Lazarus, come out. Now talk about things that you don't say at a funeral.

Let's get that coffin back up and let's unnailed it and we'll see what we can do. If that is true, then it's horrendously cruel and insensitive for Jesus to say that.

Unless, of course, he does have the power. Jesus spoke and he summoned his friend back from the dead.

[24 : 50] I love just how casual John writes that there. Of course, what this says is a wonderful foretaste of what Jesus himself would later do. He dies on the cross for the sins of the world and three days later comes back to life, defeating death.

In Jesus Christ, Christians, that is all those who've put their trust in Jesus as their Lord, King and Savior, can know that our lives are secure and our times are held in his mighty hands because he is the king who has triumphed over death.

I love if you want to look at it there, verse 10 of chapter 12. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well.

So the chief priests are after killing Jesus. Now they add Lazarus to that list. Can you imagine Lazarus' response when he learns about that? These guys are trying to do what to me?

To kill me? What is the worst that can happen if my lives are held in his hands? Friends, it's because of Jesus that you can say at every funeral that you go to, and I can say at every funeral I do, that for that person who has died, if their faith is in Jesus, it is now far better because they are now in the presence of their Savior who called them home into his very presence.

[26 : 14] And it's because of Jesus that what's happened to Lazarus will happen to each one of us. Jesus will banish evil and death.

But here's what I want you to take from this tonight as well, this whole idea of evil and suffering. Friends, nothing has gone unseen in the eyes of an all-seeing God.

That evil that we started with, we've got to call evil evil. Nothing has gone unseen in the eyes of this all-seeing God, and nothing will go unpunished in the eyes of this holy God.

Hell is a place where God reigns and will eternally and justly deal with those who have rejected him. There is coming a day when evil will be completely dealt with.

But to those who have hoped in him, Jesus will raise our bodies from the grave and usher us into the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness dwells.

[27 : 14] A place where, in the words of Sam, speaking to Gandalf and the Lord of the Rings, that place where everything sad will come untrue. You see, here's what I want you to take from tonight.

If you remember one thing, remember this, okay? That our world is full of people at the minute who have lots of power, but they have no love for people.

Our world is also full of people who have lots of love and good intentions to do great things, but they've got no power to do anything about it. Do you see in John chapter 11 how in Jesus we have one who is all power and all compassion?

And that's why he's worth your total trust tonight. You know, let me just close thinking of this whole idea of hope with this quote from Jeremy Marshall, who was a much-loved businessman and evangelist in the UK who died a few years back after a long battle with cancer.

And he wrote a book in the year before he died called Life Beyond the Big Sea. And here's what he wrote towards the end, and we'll finish with this. He wrote, God's ultimate treatment is not a philosophy or theology or morality, but a person when nothing else makes sense.

[28 : 42] And when nothing else is left, Jesus is there, and he will hold us fast if only we will trust in him.

So let me pray. Lord, we pray that you would just be with us. Lord, I'm so conscious of this topic tonight.

Lord, personally, I'm also conscious of so many things that I might know that people are going through tonight. And so, Lord, I pray that your spirit would come and help us tonight as we think about this topic.

So, Lord, thank you for your kindness and your presence with us. We pray that you would just be with us now as we talk about these things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.