



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

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Sermon: Questions for God – Why all this Suffering?

Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

- *Why do bad things happen to good people?*
- *Dear God, I want to know why you let violence happen, why do you let people get mental illness, substance abuse, etc?*
- *Why has God opened so many doors for me? My being placed into a loving couple of parents, wonderful grandparents, doors that opened for me for colleges, my wonderful wife, our two gorgeous intelligent daughters, my employment – None I deserved.*
- *I had cancer 30 years ago and am now cancer-free. Why was I spared? How do I know what God wants of me with the gift of life?*
- *How do we discern when something ‘bad’ that happens is because of the free will of others OR an event caused by God that has a good purpose in the end?*
- *Why all this suffering?*

Good questions! Now, often when I am faced with a theological conundrum, I like to go back to the classics. Let’s see what we have up here. Yes, John Calvin, the Father of the Reformed tradition, the theological tradition of Presbyterians. Calvin had quite a lot to say about God’s sovereignty over the events of this world way back during the Reformation. Here we are, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin, section 1, chapter 16:

And truly, God claims, and would have us grant [God], omnipotence...Governing heaven and earth by his providence, [God] so regulates all things that nothing takes

place without [God's] deliberation¹...If we accept these things, it is certain that not one drop of rain falls without God's sure command²...I infer that no wind ever arises or increases except by God's express command.³

There we have it: God directs every drop of rain, every increase in the wind. (wipe hands) So, we good? (walk away).

Oh, right. Freewill. There was a question about freewill, that idea that God directs our lives but gives us choices about whether or not we follow God's will. I believe Calvin had something to say about freewill as well. Yes, here we are:

Let them now say that man is moved by God...but that [man] himself turns that motion whither he pleases. Nay, if that were truly said, the free choice of his ways would be in man's control...It is an absurd folly that miserable men take it upon themselves to act without God, when they cannot even speak except as [God] wills!⁴

Maybe some translation is needed here. This was basically what trash talk sounded like in the 1500s when Calvin wrote these words. He's writing against the belief that God directs our lives in general, but we are free to act in accord with or against God's will at any given moment. Oh no! says Calvin. Just as no drop of rain falls without God's decree, so also there is no human action without God's command. Absurd! You say? But what about this, what about that? Calvin did all he could to emphasize God's sovereignty in this world. He went on to say when a branch falls from tree and kills someone passing by, that is directed by God. So are thieves and

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill (ed.), Ford Lewis Battles (trans.) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.16.3.

² *Ibid.*, 1.16.3.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.16.7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.16.6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.16.6. This is a paraphrase of commentary on Calvin's doctrine of providence found in Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking*

murderers. Though, don't worry, even though God decrees it, the thieves and murders are still to blame, says Calvin. God directs their thieving and murdering, you see, but the humans who the deed are the ones who actually sin. So again, are we good?

No, of course not. But let's back up for a minute: if we are going to be fair to Calvin, I should say that he actually meant for his theology of God's decree to be good news. The good news is that God is more powerful than evil. In fact, evil is directly under God's control, so that, no matter the pain you experience today, God's goodness and love will win out in the end.⁵ What is known by theologians as the doctrine of providence, God's intimate and direct intervention and governance of everything that happens in this world, was meant to be good news. And you can see how Calvin's teaching through the ages comes to us still, watered down a bit, but still employed as comfort. A month ago, my father tore a ligament on his right quadriceps so bad that it required surgery. He's spending his summer in an armchair now recovering, and another family member casually gave me that line we've all heard: "Well, everything happens for a reason." There's Calvin, right there, spoken casually, and this is pretty funny, spoken by a family member who happens to be a Free Will Baptist. These beliefs show up again and again: you go through a particularly hard time in your life, and you hear that God is testing you;

⁵ This is a paraphrase of commentary on Calvin's doctrine of providence found in Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 123.

or that God never gives you more than you can handle; or you reap what you sow.

This is all trickle-down Calvinism.

These become caricatures, of course. They're real, yes. People say these things, but it does not take much life experience or reflection to find that they don't hold up: that, in fact, you are often given more than you can handle, more than you can bear; that sometimes, things don't all turn out well in the end; that tragedies happen all the time for no reason at all.

But, right out of seminary, if you had asked me these questions: Why all this suffering? How do we know when an event is caused by God? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does God let violence happen? Why did God give me such a good life? Why did God spare me from cancer? If you had asked me about my own life as well, from my privileged corner of life, I would have affirmed God is in control, that God, in God's infinite mystery, made things happen to me, decreed that in the proper time and place, God aided me, or challenged me, poked and prodded me this way and that, because, I would have said, in the long run, an omnipotent and benevolent creator was leading me through my days, because God had a plan for my life. And you know, I still sometimes want to believe that. Do you?

But, after seminary something changed; after seminary, I had to relearn how God's power manifests in our lives, because of a room in the corner of the Hospital

of the University of Pennsylvania's Emergency Department where every trauma patient is examined and treated. It is big room, about a quarter the size of this sanctuary; it's walls about 3/4ths as high, painted this sterilized, hospital white, covered always in bright, rather unflattering, florescent light. The room holds three beds, so if needed, three trauma calls can be going on at the same time, and there were sometimes that we needed more than three trauma beds. And in the back, there is a long desk with some computers. And behind that desk, during a trauma call, when a patient is brought in after a car accident, or a gunshot wound, or an overdose, or any number of serious, life-threatening emergencies, behind that desk at UPenn Hospital stands the hospital chaplain, who collects information from the patient about family they want called. So from 2010-2011, fresh out of seminary, I sat behind that desk as a chaplain during countless trauma calls, in the biggest hospital in Philadelphia, that stands just a mile away from the economically devastated West Philadelphia neighborhoods.

What I saw in that room defied any theological system: I saw a teenager turned into a quadriplegic after being trown from a horse; the broken neck of an undergrad who fell from his second floor dormitory; the flesh of a grandmother who burned to death when her electric blanket caught fire; the body of a thirty-five year old who dropped dead, for no apparent reason, in the middle of his overnight shift at the airport; and over and over again, bodies ridden with bullet holes, gun-

shot wounds, often wounds in by-standers, over and over again, and over and over again, gun-shot wounds almost every night in that city.

We know these things in the abstract, right? That an unquantifiable level of suffering happens within our towns and our cities. That on any given night, when you look up at the major hospital of a major city, you know some awful experience of suffering is likely to cross its threshold soon. I knew it too before I ever worked as a chaplain, but I could keep it over there, as we all have to, out in the corner of my mind, where I keep, say, the Pythagorean formula, or the reality of a country I know exists even though I've never seen it, and I could keep my beliefs about God's good governance over your life and mine over here, a mixture of explanations involving free will, and eternity, and mystery.

But then I stood for a year in a trauma room, oftentimes in the middle of the night. Sometimes, I would look through the tattered and blood-stained cloths of a deceased person, trying to find some identification, trying to find some family member to contact. And I'd be the person to tell the family that, for instance, that their teenage daughter who had just stepped out the door to pick up a toothbrush before going on a big trip was actually in our trauma room, and they better get here quickly. And those two things that I held separately, providence and suffering, God's goodness and the reality of pain, they crashed into one another, over and over again, over and over again. And I got lost.

And maybe you've been lost too. Each of these questions feels like it has a story of being lost behind it. We struggle to hold two dissonant beliefs together, the God who governs life and all the needless, meaningless, unnecessary suffering of this world. We string together our theories and our theologies, but they never quite fit together, do they? (pause)

My guess is that Jesus felt the same way, seeing the crowds, "like sheep without a shepherd," says Mark. Jesus, in the first half of Mark, seems overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the suffering he sees. At the beginning of our passage, he's exhausted, just trying to get some space from it. 'Let's get away to a deserted place and rest a while.' He and his disciples haven't even had a chance to eat. But they can't get away; the need is too great. They try to find some breathing space, and look, the crowds see where he is going and show up ahead of him! "When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about the whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed."

If we look to the Jesus of the Gospels, we do not find a puppet-master God, decreeing where branches fall, but rather a savior struggling against the enormity of suffering that plagues this world. And yes, he proclaims, and he believes, and he

hopes, that God's love will overcome, one day, in the end. Calvin was right in that. But in the day to day, it's crowds pressing in, and a savior who struggles in the midst of so much pain; God, in Jesus, struggles.

Very early in my time as a chaplain, during an overnight shift, I saw a young child, about my son Joseph's age, come in to our trauma center. This was in New Jersey rather than Philly, when I was doing just a summer internship at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in New Brunswick, right across from the main campus of Rutgers. I am sorry to tell you this story on a Sunday morning. But if we are going to talk about God and suffering on Sunday morning, we have to do it in honesty, with the sheer horror of human tragedy in front of us: This child had been hit by his uncle's car as he backed out of the driveway. At first it seemed like the kid was fine. He cried all the way into the hospital, and that's a good sign. But, there was internal bleeding; he grew quiet in the trauma room. And, you know. He didn't make it. And I tried to be a comfort to his young parents, not much more than my own age now, as they fell on the floor, and cried, and screamed. I cried too, when I made my report to the chaplain's office the next morning. I cried and I cried and I cried. You know, I have spoken, and I have written about my experience with that death many times. Right now, I still feel the familiar soreness in my throat, every time I tell it. Every single time.

I do not believe that God would decree for that child die, would govern the creation towards his death. I will not. But I will proclaim a God who stood alongside that child in his final moments, who stood alongside those parents in their grief, who stands alongside them now, years later, in their grief, holding them, and empowering them to love again, when their hearts were once torn open by unimaginable loss.

These questions for today are more a challenge than an interesting conundrum. They're more a spiritual practice than an intellectual debate. If we believe in a God who stands with us rather than over us, who asks us to love as God loves, and who holds us in grief, in the fragility of life, then this God is calling us to something deeper than simple submission to a kingly decree.

Contemporary theologian Wendy Farley says that motherhood taught her an echo of the patience and the grief of God, because that experience of being a mother is one, she says, of wearing your heart outside your chest. Her experience of mothering is loving a child with a burning intensity, knowing that child has and will suffer: "With this raw and tender heart, [mothers] are then forced to be present when the severe and obscene power of suffering is unmasked, when it is written on the bodies of their own children and on the bodies of other mothers' children." Theodicy is the term theologians use for this questioning of God. Theodicy is our way of calling into question God's omnipotence and benevolence. But, theodicy,

says Farley, in grief, in the reality of tragedy, is a spiritual practice, one that brings one closer to the divine, closer to God who does not decree suffering but who suffers with God's beloved and fragile and suffering creation: "Theodicy is not a puzzle but a vital necessity. It is not a theoretical solution but the practice of love after one's heart has been broken... The practice of theodicy is the raw courage that mothers show when they accompany their children into suffering and refuse to be destroyed."⁶ In this way, those who've shown us a mothering kind of love, when they refuse to turn us away, they are like Jesus. And Mark says, "Whenever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged [Jesus] that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak."

These questions, they call to us Grace Covenant, people of the God who suffers with us: We are called to love as we are loved, to keep our heart open when suffering seeks to close it; or, when we cannot keep it open, we're called to trust that God's heart nonetheless remains open for us, as God walks with us, in the joys and agonies, the beauty and the tragedy, of God's gift of life.

⁶ Wendy Farley, "'Courage Unparalleled Opened Her Utterly': A Practical Theodicy" in Claire Bischoff, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, and Annie Hardison-Moody (eds.). *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology: Mothering Matters* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 292