

youthESource Bible Study

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: The Problem of Suffering

by Jonathan Ruehs

Introductory Note

While the problem of suffering or pain is wrestled through on both a philosophical and theological level it is a daily reality that we all deal with. C.S. Lewis introduces his famous work on the subject, *The Problem of Pain*, stating in regards to pain, that "If any man is safe from the danger of under-estimating this adversity, I am that man." (p. 10). It is a bit ironic and maybe, if I dare say, a bit prophetic that later on Lewis dealt with that adversary head-on as he watched his beloved wife Joy succumb to the ravages of cancer. His book, first written anonymously, *A Grief Observed*, dealt with a man for whom the "rubber met the road" in regards to how his faith was tested under the real experience of suffering. When a person is going through the actual experience of suffering the last thing they want to do is have someone answer their cry, "Why are you doing this to me God?" or "Why is God allowing this to happen to me?" with a philosophical or theological treatise. Rather it is a person's compassionate presence that speaks volumes to the one in the midst of suffering. Here is where Job's friends were truly of help when they sat with Job, in his suffering, and did not say a word (Job 2:11-13). While this does not mean that we should never address the issue of suffering, it does mean that the issue should be addressed at an appropriate time and always with loving concern. It is important, therefore, that the teacher of this study keep this in consideration when they are teaching this lesson to their youth, for there may be students in their midst for whom the problem is currently an experienced reality.

Introductory Exercise

Ask: Can you think of examples of where pain is good? What might they be?

Examples (provide after your students brainstorm):

- Muscle pain in the context of exercise is a good thing, because it means the muscle is being stretched. Often times people will talk about the pain they experience after a workout as a "good pain".
- The pain that comes as a result of a shot that is given to inoculate against disease. Especially with an infant the surprise and momentary sting of the needle can rend a parent's heart, but they know it is a "necessary pain" in order to protect their child from the greater pain that can come as a result of a life-threatening illness.
- In a similar vein to the one above, post-operative pain can be seen as a "good pain". Pain as a result of surgery is many times the inevitable result that occurs when someone goes under the knife. Yet that pain can be seen as more acceptable, and in some circumstances, more bearable than the pain that they would have experienced in dealing, for instance, with the ravaging effects of cancer.

Ask: In regards to the last two examples of "good pain" why did that pain have to be endured?

(There was either the potential of a greater pain or the existence of a greater pain that needed to be dealt with.)

Say: So in those last two examples the existence of what philosophers call a "natural evil" (i.e. cancer) necessitates the need to enact more pain. So it begs the question why does suffering exist in the first place?

Back to the Beginning

Read: Genesis 1:4, 10, 18, 21, 25, & 31

(Note: You may want to assign the different verses to different youth to read)

- What phrase do you see repeated over and over and over again? Why do you think this phrase is repeated so much?

Read: Genesis 3:16-19

- So according to these verses what changed? Whose fault was it for the change?
(Note: While God is the one who declares the suffering it is a result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In essence it is their fault as to why suffering has come upon the world.)
- So is all suffering in the world due to sin? Explain.
(Note: As mentioned in the above example "muscle pain" is a natural result of exercise which is not viewed as being evil, which brings us to the conclusion that not all pain can be viewed as being evil.)
- How might we distinguish between suffering as result of sin vs. suffering that is not?

Covenantal Curses

Say: Some suffering in the Bible is a direct result of God's punishment, as it was in the Garden. In the book of Deuteronomy we read a section that deals with covenantal curses.

Read: Deuteronomy 28 (Note: Have the students read portions of this chapter.)

- What was the point to the covenantal curses?
(Note: You will want to set this reading up by talking about how when Israel made their covenant with God they agreed to the conditions of that covenant, including a section of "blessings" and of "curses". In some respects it reminds us of modern day contractual arrangements. When we buy a house or a car we agree to pay a monthly payment that includes an interest rate. When we fail to make our monthly payment then we agree to suffer the consequences of that failure, which usually includes some type of payment penalty, and if it continues that way it can result in repossession.)
- Look back at the first few verses of this chapter. How do these verses echo the consequences for sin mentioned in Gen. 3:16-19? In what ways are these curses a reaffirmation of what occurred back in the beginning?
- Why do you think God includes a section of cursing?
(Note: As hard as it is for us to have to deal with the negative consequences for our actions God communicates to us through these consequences that He takes sin seriously. Sin is literally a "deadly matter" since God told Adam and Eve that they would surely die by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.)
- What does it mean to say that someone is a "just" person? What does it mean to say that God is a "just" God?

Imagine the following scenario. You are having lunch at school and you sit down with your friends at the lunch tables. You place your lunch in front of you and temporarily get up to retrieve a soda from a nearby machine. You come back and another person is sitting in your spot. You ask that person nicely if they could move because you were there first (you point to your lunch that is sitting at the table). Their response to you is that you shouldn't have gotten up so it is your loss. What might come out of your mouth, or murmured under your breath, is that they are not being "fair".

- Where do we get this concept of "fairness" from?
- How does this idea of being "fair" translate into the idea of justice?
- Why do we get angry, for example, when someone steals something from us? How is this related to the concept of justice?

Say: It is interesting how many people will look at the stories of the Bible and be upset that God's laws come across as being so harsh. Yet on the flipside they cry out for justice when their seat at lunch is wrongly taken, their lunch is stolen or even when they are having to deal with greater issues of injustice. We want the guilty party to be found and punished, and yet as the guilty ones we want God to "go easy" on the sins that we have done. But there is also a danger in how we understand God's punishment in our contemporary setting. Do the

curses of the covenant apply to us Christians today? As we wrestle through this concept we will consider a couple scenarios.

Scenarios

(Below are various scenarios to get the youth thinking about how we understand the nature of consequences for sin in today's world and how texts like Deut. 28 fit in.)

- Post 9/11 there were Christian preachers who claimed that God was punishing America for allowing gay marriage. What do you think about this? Do you think they were right for making such a claim? What problems occur when you try to apply texts like Deut. 28 to this scenario?
(Note: For starters, America is not a covenantal nation like Israel despite the claims of all kinds of Christians who say that America began as a "Christian nation". Secondly, in the Old Testament God raised up prophets to call His people out for their covenantal disobedience. When Israel sinned and prophets called them out on their sin it always went back to the covenant that they made with God. When God, for example, brought the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and the temple during the time of Jeremiah it was in keeping with the covenantal curses. Even if preachers were to claim that they were modern-day prophets and that God told them that He was punishing America for its sins the problem still exists that America is not a covenantal nation. Also we can apply the test for a true prophet in Deuteronomy 18:15-22 to the scenario and easily show that they cannot make such a claim.)
- A Christian friend confesses to you that he has had sex with numerous girls and has contracted an STD. He says to you, "I think God is punishing me for the sin of having pre-marital sex." Do you think he is right in saying this? How would you respond to his claim? Again what problems occur when we try and apply texts like Deut. 28 to this scenario?
(Note: While it may be tempting or easy, in this scenario, to say that his STD is a punishment from God we cannot make that claim. Is the STD a result of his sin? Yes! Is it God's direct punishment for his sin? Again we cannot say "yes" with any type of confidence, because God did not tell us this. For example we can point to counter examples where this does not occur. Another Christian guy could be in the exact same situation with having multiple sex partners, but never contract an STD. We aren't told why in one situation a person suffers for their actions, but in another situation they don't.)

The Curious Case of Job

Read: Job 1

- How is Job described in the first few verses? What do you think it means that he was blameless and upright? Is this the same as being sinless? Explain.

Read Job 7:21. Based upon this verse did Job view himself as being "sinless"? Explain.

- So if Job did not claim to be "sinless" then what does it mean that he was "blameless and upright"?
(Note: Being blameless and upright is to be understood as living a moral life. We see this even in the way that Job makes sacrifices for his kids. His being blameless and upright is a result of his faith in God, and not the other way around.)
- Based off this chapter why does Job suffer?
(Note: Job is a Gentile and he lives in a time that most likely predates the giving of the covenant, because similar actions are described of others in the book of Genesis [ex. Cain, Abel, Abraham, etc.]. This is important for us because it provides an important counter example to the nature of suffering. Not all suffering that people endure is a result of their sin. Israel could not even say, post-Sinai, that all the suffering they endured was a result of their breaking of the covenant. Only when a prophet was raised up by God and given the task of warning Israel that their impending suffering was due to their disobedience could they make this claim.)
- Does Job know of the dialog that occurs in heaven between God and Satan? Why is this an important part of the story?
(Note: Job does not know of the scenario, which means that Job does not know why he suffers. He makes the claim, later, that his suffering is not due to any sin that he has committed.)

- Why do you think it is important for us to see the scene in heaven between God and Satan? (Note: We get a behind the scenes look, because it allows us to realize that not all suffering that we endure is a result of our sinfulness.)

Say: In many respects we are like Job. We don't know why we always suffer. While many believers struggle with the way in which it seems as if God is carelessly playing around with the life of Job we know that God is sympathetic to our plight of suffering.

Read: Isaiah 53

- What language describing the suffering of Jesus, in these verses, stands out for you, and why?
- According to these verses why did Jesus suffer the way that He did?
- Where do we find the ultimate fulfillment of these verses taking place? Why is this important for our discussion regarding the nature of suffering?

Read: Galatians 3:13

- How does this verse relate back to Deut. 28?
- Why can we be confident that the suffering we endure is not due to God cursing us?
- Looking back at our STD scenario, how might this verse play a part in our discussion with our friend?

Read: Mark 15:34

- In Jesus' cry from the cross He quotes Psalm 22:1. In what way is this a cry of all people who suffer?
- How do our questions regarding suffering find fulfillment in this question of Jesus from the cross? (Note: While we may not know reasons for why we suffer, for why a mother of four young children dies of cancer at an early age, for why an innocent bystander in a school is violently gunned down, etc., we do see in this passage a God who is intimate with suffering and grief. As a human Jesus even cries out the questions that we cry out, and so He identifies with us in our grief, pain and sin. Yet being God He also is the answer to that question for us as the God who suffers and dies for us.)
- What comfort can we receive from looking to Christ on the cross in the midst of our pain?
- What comfort might we also receive in understanding that in our baptisms we are identified with Christ's crucifixion and resurrection? (Note: Christ the man who cries the question of suffering from the cross and Christ the God who answers that question in His suffering dwells within us through our baptisms. In this way our contemporary questioning cries, as Christians, echo the cry from the cross, as the God-man who knows and suffers with us. Yet Christ also points to a hope of a world without suffering in His resurrection, a hope that is birthed in us in our baptisms, a reality that we face in part now and in its fullness in the world to come.)

Closing Prayer

At the end of this session have the group share prayer requests specifically for people they know who are going through times of suffering. Share with the group that as we pray Christ intercedes to the Father on our behalf, which is why we can conclude our prayer with the "Amen" knowing in full confidence that He has heard us and answers us.

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