



VILLAGE
CHURCH

Presbyterian (USA)

Innocent Suffering; We Have No Answers, but We Do Have Responses

SCRIPTURE:
Philippians 1:12-14

May 22, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

As you know, I spent some focused time in Philippians over the past several years. I needed the wisdom I found in this old apostle. It was this relentless disease that has now taken more than a million American lives. And the increased disparity of wealth. But not only that. There is a baby formula shortage. There are daily shootings. The hospitals are full. I could go on, but it was no surprise to me that so many of you asked, “Tom, where is God in all of this?”

The Philippian church was asking the same question. Paul writes to address their concern. What are they concerned about? Well, they are concerned for Paul. He had been their pastor and they loved him. But he is in jail. You know the concern you feel when you learn that your pastor is in jail. They are concerned for Paul. Is he being mistreated? Is he hungry? Is he lonely? Yet, if I understand the text, there is a deeper concern and that is a concern for themselves.

Paul is the Lord’s apostle. Paul is appointed by God to bring the gospel to the world and Paul is in jail. If this is how the world treats the Lord’s apostle, the Philippians wonder: What is going to happen to us?

It’s an old question. Why does tragedy fall on the innocent? The theologians call this the problem of theodicy. We express the problem this way: If God is all powerful, and God is loving, then why do bad things happen to innocent people? Why do people suffer so often for no reason of their own? It’s an intellectual jail cell; there is no way out.

For the longest time, suffering was assumed to be the result of sinfulness. That was the explanation of Job’s friends. They told him: You are suffer-

ing because you have sinned. But Tom Long, in his book, “What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering and the Crisis of Faith,” says that explanation came crashing down in the mid-eighteenth century.

In 1755, a traveling merchant wrote in his diary, “Never had there been a finer morning than the 1st of November; the sun shone out in its full luster; the whole face of the sky was perfectly serene and clear; and not the least signal of warning of that approaching event, which has made this once flourishing, opulent and populous city, a scene of utmost horror and desolation.”¹

He was not describing New York on 9/11 or Port-au-Prince after the earthquake or Mariupol. He was speaking about Lisbon. In the mid-eighteenth century, Lisbon was known as a city of faith. It is estimated that in 1755, fully 10% of the population were monks, priests or nuns.²

And Nov. 1 is All Saints Day—a day when all the faithful were in worship. But at 9:30 in the morning an earthquake under the ocean floor reached the city. The shaking lasted ten minutes. The cathedrals, packed with worshipers, began to crumble, killing many as they prayed. Fires—including those resulting from falling candles in worship, whipped up by howling winds—raged like an apocalyptic force through the city. To escape the fires, citizens rushed to the only safe place left: the harbor. But there, a tsunami arose, and as Tom Long describes it, “Like the ‘beast rising out of the sea’ in the book of Revelation, this evil thing was not done with the people of Lisbon, and it seemed to pursue them with a malevolent intelligence.” As thousands gathered at the wharfs, they watched in horror as the water in the harbor was sucked out to sea and then a mountainous wall of ocean

1 Thomas Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering and the Crisis of Faith* (2011) p. 1.

2 Long, p. 2.

crashed down and washed thousands to their watery deaths.³

This event shook not only the foundations of Lisbon, but the foundations of a theological world-view that had stood from the time of the Jewish exile to Babylon. The assumptions of how God was at work in the world no longer made sense. Susan Neiman, a student of philosophy, said, “The eighteenth century used the word Lisbon much as we use the word Auschwitz today... It takes no more than the name of a place to mean the collapse of the most basic trust in the world, the grounds that make civilization possible.”⁴

Sin as the justification for every disaster no longer made sense after Lisbon. It is the same today; we now have cable news and there are tragedies like this every day. For many people, these realities have made it difficult to believe in God.

If God is all powerful, and God is loving, then why is there suffering? Through the years theologians and pastors have sought answers.

One you might have heard of is Rabbi Harold Kushner. In the 1980s, he wrote “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Kushner’s son Aaron was diagnosed with a rare and dreadful disease called progeria, or rapid aging. It meant that at 13 years old, Aaron would die of old age.

Kushner said, “I had been a good person... I believed that I was following God’s ways and doing His work... If God existed, if He was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?” He continues, “Even if I could persuade myself that I deserved this punishment for some sin... on what grounds did Aaron have to suffer? He was an innocent child, a happy, outgoing three-year-old. Why should he have to suffer physical and psychological pain every day of his life?”⁵

In his search for answers, Kushner, like many, went to the book of Job. He found help near the end of the book, when God speaks:

Have you an arm like God?

Can you thunder with a voice like His?

*You tread down the wicked where they stand,
Bury them in the dust together...*

*Then will I acknowledge that your own right hand
Can give you victory.*

Most interpreters read this as an affirmation of God’s strength, but Kushner read it in the inverse. Kushner says, “I take these lines to mean ‘if you think that it is so easy to keep the world straight and true, to keep unfair things from happening to people, you try it.’ God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can’t bring that about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims...”⁶

Kushner faces the intellectual jail cell: God is all powerful, God is all loving, there is innocent suffering and he unlocks it by saying God is not all powerful. God is doing the best God can.

Bart Ehrman provides a different answer. Ehrman teaches religion at the University of North Carolina. Ehrman grew up a Christian, but he no longer believes. Of his own journey, he writes, “I felt compelled to leave Christianity altogether. I did not go easily. On the contrary, I left kicking and screaming, wanting desperately to hold on to the faith I had known since childhood... I realized that I could no longer reconcile the claims of faith with the facts of life... For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering... The problem of suffering became for me, the problem of faith.”⁷

For Ehrman, the pervasiveness and the randomness of suffering makes God, as God has been understood, unintelligible. Ehrman unlocks the intellectual jail cell by saying God is not loving and therefore not worthy of our worship.

Theologian John Hick cannot accept that God is less than powerful or less than loving, but Hick answers the problem by giving suffering a reason: Suffering has purpose. Hick asks: What if the purpose of creation was not paradise, but rather an environment that causes us to grow toward God?

3 Long, p. 4.

4 Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002) p. 3.

5 Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981) p. 4.

6 Kushner, p. 49.

7 Bart Ehrman, *God’s Problem* (2009) p. 3.

And growth, notes Hick, results from tension, challenge, even suffering. Perhaps we have created this problem because we have failed to understand what constitutes a good creation. Maybe a good creation is not one that avoids suffering, like life lived on Novocain. Maybe a good world is one that has challenge stitched into it. This is what Hick calls a soul-making or ‘person-making’ world.”⁸

Hick says: I have the key to the intellectual jail cell. God is all powerful and God is loving, but suffering is not really suffering... it happens for a reason and serves a greater purpose. Suffering is, at the end of the day, good.

I appreciate the honesty and courage of those who have thought about this, but I must admit: I find their answers lacking. And over time, I myself—and you may see this differently—but I myself have come to think that ‘answer’ is the wrong category. I’m not sure Christian faith provides an answer to this problem, but it does provide a response.

Paul writes: I want you to know that what has happened to me has actually helped spread the gospel, so that it has become known to the whole imperial guard that my imprisonment is for Christ. If I understand the text, this is Paul’s response; it’s not really an answer. In other words, he does not tell them *why* this has happened, he just tells them who he is in the face of suffering. He draws their focus away from the suffering and onto the sufferer... and in so doing, he does not provide an answer or explanation. But he gives them a response. I think what Christian faith tells us is that suffering is not something we explain; it is something we battle.

When I was in South Carolina, Sara was an elder

in a church there. It was not the church I served, but actually the same church that our friend Rev. Jenny McDevitt serves now. Sara had a routine medical procedure and received blood in the hospital. It was the mid-1980s and the protocol to protect the nation’s blood supply from HIV was lacking. Sara contracted HIV. It quickly became AIDS. In those days, the only thing worse than the disease was the fear that surrounded AIDS. Just reflect on your own journey with COVID and you will understand. It was a hard time for that congregation; many of them were afraid.

One Sunday, Sara walked to the front of the sanctuary. She said, “I have AIDS and it will kill me. I do not have long now. I thank those of you who are praying for me. I hate what has happened to me but I want you to know that I trust in Jesus Christ and I am at peace. Jesus also suffered greatly and has shown us that suffering will not have the last word. My faith is not shaken and I am not afraid. When it comes to you, and suffering will come to you,” she said, “remember that I was here and do not be afraid.”⁹

I will say more about this next Sunday, but today my only wisdom is that I cannot count the number of people I have known like Sara. She is like many of you in this church family. For many, life has dealt them cards that no explanation can justify and even to suggest that there is a reason for their suffering is an insult. But when I shift my gaze from the suffering to the sufferers, I have known many who have faced such realities with grace and strength and good cheer. And when some ask, “Where is God in all of this?” I say: Look at them. Look at them. How do you explain them, unless there is a powerful and loving God?

⁸ John Hick, “Soul Making Theodicy,” in *Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Peterson, Hasker, Reichenback and Basinger (1996) p. 282.

⁹ Sara Touchton was an elder and educator in the Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC. Her husband, Bruce, was my financial secretary in the Seven Oaks Presbyterian Church, Columbia.