**Explore God – Week 3 – Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?**

**Message Big Idea**: While God does not provide the reason for each experience of pain, through Jesus he does provide a way to face suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair.

**Scripture:** Habakkuk 1:1-4, Genesis 1:31, Revelation 21:1-4

**Introduction: A Really Bad Day**

*(Book)* One of my favorite books growing up as a kid was *Alexander’s Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Did anyone else read this book? *(hand)* If you remember, Alexander wakes up with gum in his hair, gets in trouble for fighting with his brothers, ends up with the very uncool plain white tennis shoes because they’re the only pair in his size, finds out he has a cavity, makes a mess of his dad’s office, gets lima beans for dinner, and he’s stuck wearing railroad pajamas to bed. An over all terrible, horrible, no good very bad day! And his solution, of course, is to move to Australia, until in the end, his mom reminds him that some days are just like that, some days bad things happen…even in Australia.



Some days bad things do happen. For example, *(picture)* some days you try to take a shortcut and end up driving into wet cement. That there is a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day!

*(picture)* Some days, you think you’re having a good day, but then you really regret going on that one last ride. That certainly turned into a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day!!

*(picture)* Or what about the day when you are not only in an accident, but you were transporting large paint cans at the time. Can you imagine the look on his face when he stepped out of the car? That there is a… say it with me… terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day!

We can find humor in these terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days, but what about when the picture is far from humorous.

Make these three personal, someone you know, global.

* When it’s your marriage that is falling apart.
* Or you are navigating a difficult diagnosis.
* When all the red flags you ignored leave you with the mess of a toxic relationship.
* ~~Or your house is erupting in flames.~~

During those times, not only is it hard to find humor, sometimes I think it can be hard to find God.

If you are in a place like that right now, I want to stop for a moment and tell you this: **You are not alone.** There are stories upon stories of pain and suffering in the Bible and throughout the history books. I have my own stories of pain and suffering. I know this room is filled with them. If you are in a “bad day” season, you are not the first, nor will you be the last to wonder, “Where is God in all of this? Why does God allow pain and suffering?

**Series Recap**

*(Series Graphic)* Today we are continuing our seven-week series called **“Explore God.”** Along with hundreds of churches across the Chicagoland area, we’ve been exploring seven big questions about God and faith and purpose. Our intention with this series is not to try to convince you of anything or provide pat answers that resolve all the difficult questions in life, but to invite you to explore these questions together.

Today’s question, **“Why does God allow pain and suffering?”** is one of the hardest because it’s not just an intellectual question, it’s one that impacts us personally through our own pain and the pain of those we love. Or maybe we ask this question because we are concerned about those we see as vulnerable in the world. Expand this a bit. We FEEL this question; it’s raw and tender like an exposed nerve. And so navigating it, wrestling with it isn’t easy.

So here’s what we’re NOT going to do today. We’re not going to solve the issue of pain and suffering. We’re not going to minimize pain and suffering by providing simple platitudes like, “Everything happens for a reason.” We’re not going to tell you that your situation will get better if you just have enough faith, because, well, that’s just not how God works. Instead, what we ARE going to do today is to invite everyone to wrestle with this question…to enter into a conversation that’s honest and open. And I can’t think of a better place to start than Habakkuk.

**Word: Habakkuk**

Now, my guess is most of us would say, “Haba-who?” Habakkuk is not a Bible character we hear a lot about. So let’s take just a minute to meet him. Habakkuk was a 7th century prophet living in the final decades before Israel’s Southern Kingdom was overtaken by Babylon. It was a time of injustice and idolatry in Israel but, unlike other prophets in the Bible, Habakkuk doesn’t accuse or call Israel to repent. He doesn’t speak to Israel at all. Instead, his words are addressed to God. The book of Habakkuk documents his personal struggle to believe God is good when there is so much pain and suffering in the world. His short book in the Old Testament of the Bible starts with these desperate words:

 Change translation.

**“God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, ‘Help! Murder! Police!’ before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day?” Habakkuk 1:1-2 The Message**

Sound familiar? Can you relate? Aren’t these the questions we still ask today:

* God, why aren’t you answering my prayers?
* Why are you allowing suffering to continue?
* Why don’t you care about all this pain?

WHY???

These are hard and difficult questions that, to be honest, are exacerbated by the times we live in. Many of us ask them all the time. We don’t understand how God can allow so much pain and suffering.

**Cultural Lies**

However, let’s step back from the Biblical text for a minute and wrestle with some of the reasons we ask these question. Obviously, we don’t like pain and suffering, but is something else at play? Can we just for a moment consider a few cultural lies we’ve absorbed that make it even harder to deal with the pain and suffering we experience in this world?

**Lie #1 – “The goal of life is to be happy.”**

For example, our culture teaches us that the ultimate goal, the meaning of life is happiness. Everyday we are bombarded with media, commercials, and Facebook ads telling us we deserve to be happy and the next car, iPhone, watch, vacation is all we need to get there. Our own Declaration of Independence states “the pursuit of happiness” as one of our unalienable rights. Think about that…we value happiness so much that striving towards it is a legal right that cannot be taken away from us.

Happiness as the goal of life is ingrained into us in subliminal ways we cannot even count. And why is this dangerous? The problem is, if the meaning of life is happiness, then any experience of suffering destroys our life’s meaning. Pain and suffering stand in stark opposition to happiness and therefore in our culture, suffering can have no meaning…it can only be bad. Author and professor Tim Keller writes:

**“In the secular view, suffering is never seen as a meaningful part of life but only as an interruption.” –Tim Keller**

Is it a surprise we have difficulty dealing with pain and suffering when we see it only as something to endure, to grit through, to survive?

**Lie #2 – “If I do good, I will be rewarded. If I do bad, I will be punished.”**

A second lie we’ve absorbed is the lie of Karma. If we’re honest, I think we secretly (or not so secretly) want to believe in Karma. We want to believe life works in this kind of straightforward, predictable way.

I came across this quote the other day, “Welcome to the Karma café. There are no menus. You will get served what you deserve.” Isn’t that why we like the idea of Karma? It infers that life is fair. Karma says, “If I do good, I will be rewarded. If I do bad, I will be punished.” But biblical theology doesn’t connect pain and suffering to the morality of people. For example, Jesus reminds us that:

**“He** (referring to God) **causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” –Matthew 5:45b**

Good circumstances do not mean God is pleased with you any more than pain and suffering can be construed as punishments for wrongdoing. We can check all the boxes to please God, read our Bible, pray, go to church, tithe, volunteer, but none of that guarantees life won’t be hard. Our dogs may still run away, our marriages may still fall apart, our kids might still get mixed up in the wrong crowd, we still might get sick. The Bible is profoundly realistic because it tells us suffering is inevitable. No one escapes it. Everyone experiences it. The Bible is terribly matter-of-fact about the reality that the world is filled with pain.

So life isn’t fair (sorry Karma), the world is filled with misery and suffering is inevitable. Aren’t you glad you came today? ☺ I know this seems like a downer, but hang in there because then *(John 16:33)* Jesus comes along and while acknowledging our reality, he reminds us of his truth. “In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties,” Jesus says, “But take heart! I have conquered the world!” Karma says you get what you deserve. Jesus says this is going to be hard, but take a deep breath…I got this.

**Lie #3: “I have to be OK now.”**

I want us to look at one more lie…the lie that says, “I have to be OK now.” I am amazed at how Amazon can deliver a new TV just hours after I click buy. We’ve grown to expect now, quick, fast and that’s great for TV’s but not so practical when it comes to broken hearts or extended illnesses. When we approach pain and suffering with a suck it up buttercup attitude, we fail to acknowledge the long slow process of healing and restoration.

*(picture)* Did you know there is a special type of starfish called the Linckia that can regenerate its entire body from a single arm? That’s a new central disc and 4 new arms. It takes more than 10 months, which is a long time when you consider their average lifespan in the wild is 10 years. That’s 1/10th of the starfish’s life. More than that, if you consider it takes 2 years for the starfish to reach maturity to begin with. Healing from pain and suffering doesn’t happen quickly, not with broken bones or broken hearts. Add something here about the world…not an easy fix. It’s ok to not be ok right now, and in the process author David Powlison reminds us:

**“God will surprise you. He will make you stop. You will struggle. He will bring you up short. You will hurt. He will take his time. You will grow in faith and in love. He will deeply delight you. You will find the process harder than you ever imagined – and better.” – David Powlison**

It is OK to not be OK right now. Add something here about how long it is taking for pain and suffering in the world. We can lament the pain and suffering in the world.

**Searching For God in Pain and Suffering**

Pain and suffering are a reality of life. No one escapes them. The lies we’ve absorbed from our culture make the trials and tragedies we face even harder to navigate. Yet even when we come to grasp the inevitability of life’s challenges, we can still we find ourselves echoing Habakkuk’s questions:

* God, why aren’t you answering my prayers?
* Why are you allowing suffering to continue?
* Why don’t you care about all this pain?

Like Habakkuk, I struggle to find answers to those questions, but as we continue on this journey to “explore God” together, I want to suggest that for a moment we set aside the “Why?” question and instead ask the question “Where?” **“Where is God in pain and suffering?”** Can we find God in the darkest moments? Can we discover him in the deepest despair?

The best place to look for God in the middle of our pain is to look to Jesus because in Jesus we find a God who suffered.

Remember, God didn’t come to earth in the person of Jesus to sit on a throne; he came to hang on a cross. Jesus came to rescue us from a world that had become thoroughly corrupted by evil and sin. He refused to abandon us to the forces of darkness that sought to separate us from him. God came after us, and he suffered for it.

Jesus knows what it’s like to endure pain. And the truth is, he was profoundly shaken by it.

* *(Mark 14:33-34)* In the garden on the night of his arrest, he was deeply distressed and troubled. His soul was “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.”
* *(Luke 22:44)* His stress was so overwhelming that he literally shed drops of blood. He showed all the signs of being in physical shock.
* *(Luke 22:42a)* He begged the Father to save him from what was about to happen. He wanted to escape.
* *(Matthew 27:46)* On the cross, he cried out in despair. He felt abandoned. He experienced the pain of separation from his Father, his most treasured relationship.

In Jesus, the suffering Savior, we discover…

* That the goal is not earthly happiness.
* That even the best of the good suffer.
* And, yes, that it’s even OK for God to not be OK.

Jesus knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, grief, torture, and pain. He didn’t numb himself to it. He didn’t smile and say, *“Everything happens for a reason.”* He experienced it. He lived it.

When we search for God in the middle of our pain and suffering, who we find is Jesus. We find a God who understands our pain. We find a God who identifies with us in our suffering.

And while Jesus’ suffering doesn’t answer the question, *“Why does God allow pain and suffering?”* it does tell us what the answer is not.

It can’t be that he doesn’t love us.

It can’t be that he doesn’t care.

Again, author and professor Tim Keller writes:

**“It can’t be that [God] is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself.” –Tim Keller, Reasons**

I don’t have any easy answers for you today when it comes to the question of pain and suffering, but I do know this: Jesus understands your pain. He identifies with your suffering. And I believe he wants you to find comfort in him…to come to him…to bring your sorrow and stress, your pain and despair, and turn to him because he understands.

When Habakkuk surveyed all the pain and suffering around him, he came to the conclusion that the only way to face it was with God. He writes:

**“Look at the proud!**

 **They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked.**

 **But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God.” –Habakkuk 2:4 NLT**

“Stay faithful to God,” Habakkuk urges, “Despite all you are enduring, remaining close to him is the best way forward.”

I have known people who have walked through a depth of pain and suffering most of us can’t even fathom who would say the same. Today I want to share with you a story from one of them. This is Dawn Stayton from our Plainfield location, and here is her story…

**Video Story: Dawn Stayton**

*(Dawn has endured the unthinkable loss of the sudden death of her 16-year-son and then the loss of her husband to cancer. She knew the only way through her unthinkable pain was to cling to God.)*

**Challenge: Pascal’s Wager in Pain and Suffering**

Today we can’t provide you easy answers to the question of pain and suffering. We’re not going to tell you that your situation will get better if you just have enough faith. We won’t offer you platitudes.

Maybe even a stronger push for “together.” “You’re not alone.” What we can do is invite you to wrestle with this question honestly and openly in a community that doesn’t have all the answers. We can invite you to a journey as we look to explore God together.

During the first two weeks of this series, we introduced you to a challenge called **“Pascal’s Wager.”** If you haven’t been with us, Blaise Pascal was a 17th century intellectual who grew up knowing about God, but NOT earnestly following him. Then, in a profound middle-of-the-night experience with God, he had a change of heart. That experience ignited Pascal’s passion to help others find their way back to God.

Pascal began to challenge his fellow intellectuals to a wager on God. He would dare them to step into a belief about God and see if it didn’t change their lives. Pascal explained his wager this way: “Make a bet that there is a God who loves you. If you are right you have everything to gain, and if you are wrong you have nothing to lose. Make a bet that God is real.”

This week we want to challenge you to make Pascal’s wager in relation to the hard stuff you’re going through. In particular, to pray this prayer:

**“God, if you’re real, make yourself real to me in my pain and suffering.”**

Invite God to reveal himself to you in the trials you are facing. Pray this prayer daily over this next week, several times a day if it comes to mind, with openness to God. Let’s continue to explore God together and see how he might reveal himself. In taking on this wager, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

**Conclusion**

Author Frederick Beuchner once penned these words:

**“Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.” ― Frederick Buechner**

Friends, I don’t know what you are going through today. I don’t know what has broken your heart. I don’t know what has torn you down. I don’t know what pain you are carrying. I don’t know what suffering you are enduring. But I do know this…

* Jesus understands your pain.
* He identifies with your suffering.
* He loves us.
* He will never leave us.

*(Revelation 21:3-4)* And he promises that one day he will come again to bring us home. He is preparing a place for us where there is no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying, and no more pain. So let’s keep our eyes on Jesus. We don’t have to be afraid.

**Communion Idea**

The cross is the most powerful symbol in Christianity not just because it symbolizes Jesus’ death, but because it also symbolizes his victory. Evil threw its best punch through the cross. Yes, it inflicted pain on Jesus. Yes, it caused him to suffer. But in the end, Jesus claimed victory. Three days later he rose from the dead declaring that pain and suffering would never have the last word. And it is because of his victory on the cross that the apostle Paul declares:

**“Where, O death, is your victory?**

 **Where, O death, is your sting?”**

**The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” -1 Corinthians 15:55-57**

No matter what you are facing today, no matter what has knocked you down, it will not have the last word. You have victory today because of what Jesus did for you on the cross.

In Communion, we celebrate that victory as we receive the bread that represents his body and the cup that represents his blood. Let’s thank God for the victory we have in Jesus as we receive Communion.