

Suffering. It comes in many different packages today. How has it been delivered to you? The package may be a bad marriage, where you realize you are in this for better or worse, richer or poorer, and you just feel you can't take the emotional and mental abuse any longer. The package may be a wayward child. A child you thought would oneday straighten up their act, but still to this day, their life is a mess. The package may be the tragic death of one of your children or a spouse that you thought would live at least into their 70's or 80's with you. The package may be a health issue, that can't be cured and you will have to live with it for as long as you do live.

Like sunshine and rain fall from the heavens, and strike both believer and unbelievers, so suffering burns and wets everyone's skin sooner or later. No one is immune. And I as a Christian pastor, have the difficult assignment over the years to walk into your home or hospital emergency room, and face you as you say to me, Why? If God is such a good God how come there is so much bad in the world, and why strike our family? You want answers to tough questions. Maybe for a little while, we will just sit and cry together. That's all you can handle for the moment. But as time goes on, you want answers to Why does a good God allow suffering? Let's answer that tough question today.

The first point of light to remember is this: *God is not the creator of evil and suffering*. This answers the question you hear so often: "Why didn't God merely create a world where suffering and evil didn't exist?" The answer is: *He did*. Genesis says that when God created the world, it was "good." But if God is not the author of pain or evil or death, where did they come from? Well, God decided to give human beings free will, which is necessary if we are to be able to express love to God and to each other. If you pull the string on a Barbie doll and it says, "I love you," that doesn't mean anything because it's been programmed to say it. *Real love must involve a choice*. Unfortunately, we humans have abused our free will by rejecting God and walking away from Him. And that has resulted in the introduction of two kinds of evil into the world: "moral evil" and "natural evil."

Moral evil is the immorality and pain and suffering that comes because we choose to be selfish, arrogant, uncaring, hateful, and abusive. Some have estimated that 95 percent of the world's suffering results from the sin of ourselves or others. The second kind of evil is called "natural evil" — these are things like earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes that cause suffering. But these, too, are the result of sin being allowed into the world. As one author says: "When we humans told God to shove off, He partially honored our request. Nature began to revolt. The earth was cursed. Genetic breakdown and disease began. Pain and death became part of the human experience." Genesis 3:18 says it's because of sin that nature was corrupted and "thorns and thistles" entered the world. Romans 8 says nature has been subject to frustration because of sin and that it is "groaning as in the pains of childbirth," longing for redemption to come and for things to be set right again. That's the source of disorder and chaos. Let's make this crystal clear: *God did not create evil and suffering and death*. Now, it's true that He *did* create the *potential* for evil to enter the world, because that was the only way to create the potential for genuine goodness and love. But it was human beings, in our free will, who brought that potential evil into reality.

Someone might ask, "Well, wasn't God smart enough to foresee what might happen if he created a world where there was free will? Couldn't he have anticipated all

the pain and suffering that would result? Why did He bother to create the world? Those of you who are parents faced that same possibility when you decided to have children. You knew that they might be born with birth defects. You knew they would have disappointments during their lives. You knew they would probably disappoint you at times, and that there was a strong possibility they would actually hurt someone else either verbally or physically. And yet you still chose to have children. Why? Because of love. Because you wanted to love a child. You wanted to have a relationship with something in your own image. Because you weighed out the downside potential against all the joy and hope and love you also anticipated and you said, "All of this pain will be worth all of the joy and love." And you went ahead. And so did God.

But you know, even though God went ahead with his plans, He still had to justly deal with the results. Evil must be paid for in order for there to be justice in the world. All of us have this knowledge within that evil cannot go unpunished. If OJ Simpson, was indeed confronting someone in a hotel room with a friend holding a gun, we all feel, he should be punished in some way. God is like us in this respect. He requires that sin and evil be paid for. So God created a place called hell. It's a place of eternal condemnation and destruction. It's a place where sin is paid for. I don't believe that God wanted to create hell. His justice demanded it. He could not remain who He is, a just being, without making provision for the payment of sin. Having created hell, God did everything He could to prevent any of his children from going there. He spared no expense, in fact He sent His Son Jesus into the world to give up his life to pay for the sins of the world. And all who believe in this Jesus can be assured that oneday they will be in heaven, and that all suffering they go through in this life will be used by God now for good in some way. Get this Christian. Your suffering is not a punishment. The punishment has been paid for by Christ. However, your suffering is something God will use for good. What good you say? First, God uses suffering and death to draw people toward Christ. Philosopher Peter Creef put it this way: The meaning and purpose of suffering in history is that it leads to repentance. Only after suffering, only after disaster does Israel, do nations, do individuals turn back to God. Suffering brings repentance. We learn the hard way. As the psalmist David says, It is good that I have been afflicted, oh Lord, that I might learn your statutes. C.S. Lewis says: 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'" You know that's true. When we're happy and trouble-free, how often do we forget God? Often it's when we suffer, when we experience heartache or loss or disappointment that we're more likely to turn to God.

Second, God uses trials and suffering to direct me. Though donkeys have long been used as a useful animal for carrying and traveling, they are extremely stubborn at times. When they set their mind to keeping still, they will keep still until excessive force is used. God knows that humans have something in common with the donkey: sometimes, to get us moving, we first need to be hit over the head with a two-by-four. So the book of Proverbs says, "Sometimes it takes a painful situation to make us change our ways. Problems often point us in a new direction and motivate us to change.

Third, God can use trials to sharpen the character of His children and help them become more like Christ. Romans 5:3 says: "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Hebrews 5:8 tells us that Jesus Himself learned obedience through suffering —

and if that's true for Him, why wouldn't that be true for us? It's like the old saying — "No pain, no gain." Most improvements in our character and in our virtue and in our wisdom usually come through a process that involves sacrifice, difficulties, trials, and pain.

The fourth way God accomplishes something positive out of the negatives of life is by fulfilling His promise in Romans 8:28, which says God will take the bad circumstances that befall us and cause good to emerge, if we're committed to following Him. As a boy at Trinity named Jimmy once told me, "Pastor, its like making a milk shake. You put in all the stuff, and mix it up and drink it, and its good." Remember God *has the big picture and we don't*. He can see the good that will result from a tragedy, but most of the time we can't see it. I love the way Joni Tada who got hurt a number of years ago in a diving accident put it: "Every sorrow we taste will one day prove to be the best possible thing that could have happened. We will thank God endlessly in heaven for the trials He sent us here. This is not Disneyland — this is truth." And that from a woman who has suffered more than most of us ever will.

Oneday soon, all things will be made right, when Judgment Day comes. *The day is coming when suffering will cease and evil will be judged.* A lot of times you'll hear people say: "If God has the power to eradicate evil and suffering, why doesn't He do it?" And the answer is that because He hasn't done it yet doesn't mean He won't do it. In fact, the Bible says that the day will come when sickness and pain *will* be eradicated and people *will* be held accountable for the evil they've committed. *So what's holding Him up? One answer is that some of you are.* He's actually delaying the consummation of history in anticipation that some of you will still put your trust in Him and spend eternity in heaven. *He's delaying everything out of His love for you.* Second Peter 3:9 says: "The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." :

Remember too, any suffering we experience in this life pales in comparison to the good God has in store for his followers." The Apostle Paul says in Romans 8: , "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." The Greek word here for consider is an accounting word. It basically means that you put a list down of all your debits and credits, and compute the bottom line. Paul says that he has done the math and added it all up. He has added up all the sufferings of this life on one side of life's ledger and he has added up all the glories of the future life on the other side of the ledger and the glory far exceeds the pain. The suffering in this world is nothing compared to the glory of the next! The best is coming. Its worth the wait. Think about it this way. Say on the first day of 2018, you went to the dentist and had a root canal. ON your way home you were in a car accident and totaled your car. Later that day you found out that the IRS was going to audit you and a friend had betrayed you. The whole day goes like that. It's a terrible, no good, very bad day.

But then for the rest of 2018, every day is just fantastic. Your Aunt Betty leaves you a 2 million dollar estate. You get promoted to the dream job you've always wanted. The Village Sun paper puts your picture on the front page as Village of the Year. You have your first child, and your wife insists that he be named after you. You have a chance to play Patrick Reed at the Palmer course from the black tees in golf and you beat him. Your marriage is fantastic, and you take that dream Greek Island vacation for 4

weeks. Now on New Year's Eve, somebody asks you, "So how was your year?" What's your response going to be? "It was great. Well what about the first day? Oh yea, I guess it was a bit rough. But the rest of the year was so wonderful, I had forgotten about it. That's what heaven will be like. That's not to deny the reality of pain and suffering in this world. But after 15 million years in the absolute bliss of heaven, all the troubles of this life are going to seem insignificant. God will have wiped all the tears from our eyes and they'll all seem like a wisp. Our God doesn't owe us an explanation as to why suffering has occurred in our family. Besides 99% of His explanation would be over our heads anyway. I like the way author Philip Yancy puts it. "Maybe sometimes God keeps us in the dark about why not so much because He wants to keep us in the dark, as because He knows we are incapable of absorbing so much light." One day soon though, we will no longer see through a glass darkly, but all will be made clear to us. Until then, let's Trust in the Lord with all our hearts, and not lean on our own understanding." Amen.