

Suffering: If God Is Good, Why Is There So Much Evil in the World?

by Tim Keller

The sermon explores the problem of evil and suffering in the world, and how Christianity offers a unique perspective on this issue, pointing to the cross of Jesus Christ as a solution.

Duration: 31:03

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3

Topics: "Suffering"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher shares his experience of speaking to the families of 9/11 victims at Ground Zero. He was given only seven minutes to address the problem of evil and suffering, but he took eight and a half minutes. He refers to the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the book of Daniel, where they refused to bow down to a false idol and were thrown into a fiery furnace. Despite the intense heat, they were unharmed, and Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth person in the furnace who looked like a son of God. The preacher emphasizes the importance of having a living hope in Jesus Christ and looking into the gospel, as even the angels passionately long to understand its message.

Transcript

1st Peter, chapter 1, verses 3 through 12. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

Kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Concerning this salvation, the prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that

would follow.

It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. This is the word of the Lord.

Every single week we're going to take one, just one of the big questions, big problems that people in our culture and especially in New York City have with Christianity. What are those big problems? Every single week we're going to look at one. And this week we're looking at the one that you could call the problem of evil and suffering.

And it's a very, very formidable problem for Christians, Christian belief. And if I could put the argument, you might say, against Christianity on the basis of evil and suffering in a nutshell it would be like this. If God allows evil and suffering to continue because he can't stop it then he might be good but he's not all-powerful.

On the other hand, if God allows evil and suffering to continue because he could stop it and yet he won't stop it then he might be all-powerful but he's not good. Either way, the good, all-powerful God of the Bible couldn't exist. It's a pretty formidable argument.

What do we say to it? How do we address it? Some of you know that on Sunday night, September 10th, just like three weeks ago or four weeks ago, Sunday night, September 10th, I was asked to speak at a memorial service at Ground Zero mainly for families of people who are members of the police department, fire department, the port authority who were killed in 9-11. It was mainly for the 9-11 victims' families at Ground Zero. Some of you certainly know because I wasn't here and some of you weren't excited about that but it was quite an experience.

So I was supposed to go down and speak to all these people who had lost loved ones at 9-11 about the problem of evil and suffering and they said, you've got seven minutes. Seven minutes to discuss the problem of evil and suffering to people who have been struggling enormously with it, personally with it for five years. So like a typical preacher, I took eight and a half minutes and I want to share some of the thoughts that I shared that night with you tonight at a little greater length.

This text tells us, first of all, one thing you should not do, one way not to face evil and suffering in the world and then three ways to face evil and suffering in the world. One way not to, three ways to. This is 1 Peter 1. Now Peter in this book, this letter, this whole epistle is addressing people who have suffered a great deal and are about to suffer more.

And when we experience horrendous suffering and catastrophe, one of the things, one of the ways we respond to it sometimes is that we back off of or even abandon our belief in God. It's perfectly natural and a lot of people do it. When these horrible things happen to us, we back off of or even abandon our belief in God.

But Peter, notice Peter in verse 6 and 7 what he says. If you especially, if you pick out the, let me just pick out a few words. He says, you had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials so that your faith may result in praise, glory, and honor.

He says the pain you're going through now and the suffering you're going through now doesn't have to weaken faith at all or destroy faith. It can strengthen faith. It ought to strengthen faith.

Now how does that happen? Well, we'll get to that in a minute. But here, just for a moment, I want to consider what Peter's saying. Peter is saying that in the face of evil and suffering, abandoning your belief in God doesn't help anything.

It doesn't help you understand suffering. It doesn't help you handle suffering. Abandoning your belief in God doesn't help at all.

Why not? Martin Luther King Jr., in his letter to Birmingham, letter from Birmingham jail, very famous little document, says the only way he can know whether a human law is unjust is if there's a divine law, a higher law from God. Get that? He says there was no God. If there was no divine higher law, there'd be no way to know whether a particular human law was unjust or not.

So if there's no God, somebody could say, oh, that law is unjust. But that would be according to their standards. And why should their standards be privileged over somebody else's? Okay? But just take that a step further.

If there is no God, let's abandon belief in God, huh? If there's no God, there's no higher divine law. Then how can we say that any historical event is unjust? I mean, what is more natural? If there's nothing but nature, if nature is all there is, there's nothing more natural than violence. It's how you and I got here.

Natural selection, right? The strong eating the weak. So there is no God. All we have is nature.

What's wrong with violence? It's perfectly natural. And somebody who really understood that was Jean-Paul Sartre in his signature essay on existentialism. He writes this, if God does not exist, there is no longer any possibility of an a priori good existing.

It is nowhere written that one must be honest or must not lie since we are now on the plane where there are only human beings. Dostoevsky once wrote, if God did not exist, everything is permitted. That is right.

If God does not exist, we have neither behind us nor before us a luminous realm of values nor any means of justification of any behavior whatsoever. Hear what he's saying? He says, if there is no God, then you might have feelings that this is wrong, this is unjust. That's all it is.

It's a personal feeling. It's just a personal feeling. On what possible basis, if there is no God, on what possible basis could you object that the natural order of violence is unnatural? So you see, if you don't believe in God, suffering and evil is as big a problem, if not a bigger problem, than if you do.

I mean, I'm going to stop the philosophy right now. I'll tell you why. Because if you really are struggling really profoundly with how a good God could allow evil and suffering, that this is not a philosophical issue for you, is it? But my point has only been this.

Evil and suffering is a problem for those who believe in God. But evil and suffering is a problem for disbelief in God. It's a bigger problem, because if there is no God, who's to say that this is wrong? Why do we even need to have a, you know, on what basis do we even ask for a better world? In other words, getting rid of your belief in God to handle evil and suffering will not help.

Getting rid of your belief in God in order to understand evil and suffering won't help. What will? Okay, the next. Here are three ways, according to Peter, that we can face suffering and evil in our lives.

And I guess we could characterize those three things this way. You have to look back to something, Peter says. You have to look ahead to something.

And you have to look into something. To look back to something, ahead to something, and into something to handle evil and suffering in this world. Okay, first, you have to look back to something.

Now, notice in this passage, and he also says it in chapter four, Peter likens suffering and pain and trouble to a fire. He likens it to a furnace that you put gold or metals through. Now, that's a very powerful image, that troubles and suffering are like a fire, a fiery furnace that you put metals through.

And it's a wonderful metaphor, and you can get a lot out of it if you think about it. But one time in the Bible, it literally happened. And probably Peter may have this in mind, this incident in mind.

One time it really literally happened that some believers were thrown into a fiery furnace. You remember when that happened? In Daniel chapter three, Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar sets up a great image and demands that everyone bow down to it and worship it. But three young men, Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego won't do it.

In a rage, Nebuchadnezzar says, you're going to be thrown into a fiery furnace. And he heats the furnace so hot that the men who are throwing them into the fiery furnace are killed by the heat as they do so. And after they're thrown in, Nebuchadnezzar obviously from a safe distance looks into the furnace and is amazed what he sees.

And we're told in Daniel three, then king Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and cried, weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire? But I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed. And the fourth looks like a son of God. Now, what happened in there? Because of course, as we know, they came out unharmed, but only three came out.

Who was that in there with them? Now, one of the things we know right off the bat is that in the Hebrew scriptures, in the book of Isaiah, Isaiah the prophet, God gives us a promise. And here it is. God says, fear not, I have redeemed you.

When you pass through the waters, I will be there. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned. Neither shall the flame kindle upon you.

That's Isaiah 43. You know, we sing a hymn at this church that is based directly on that passage. And two of the verses go like this.

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace all sufficient shall be thy supply. The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine. Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed, for I am thy God and will still give thee aid.

I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand. Wow, what a promise. But notice, everybody, is that inspiring? Does that sound inspiring? Did you see what the promise is to believers? The promise is not, it is not that if you belong to me, God says you won't go through deep waters, you won't go through fiery trials.

He doesn't say that, does he? In fact, the promise isn't even if you go through fiery trials. The promise is when you go through fiery trials, when you are plunged into the fiery furnace, God says, I will so care

about you, and I will so love you, and you will so be able to sense my love and presence with you, it'll be as if I'm walking with you. And if you sense me walking with you, you won't be consumed.

And by that it means the trouble in the trial won't turn you hard, it won't turn you bitter, it won't break you, but instead it'll refine you. It'll give you splendor. It'll give you a character and a soul and a faith.

Well, you say, that's really very inspiring, but how do I know it's true? And this is the answer of the New Testament. When in the Old Testament God says, I will be with you in the furnace of affliction, not till you get to the cross of Jesus Christ will you know how far God was willing to go to make good that promise. When he says, I'm gonna be with you in your afflictions, not till you get to the cross do you realize how far he went to be with us in our affliction.

See, down here at verse 10 and 11, it talks about the prophets like Isaiah. The prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glory that would be revealed. Only Christianity of all the religions of the world says that in Jesus Christ, God became vulnerable and subject to suffering and pain and even death.

On the cross, to our astonishment, we see, if you're a political prisoner, God, the subject of unjust suffering, weakness and death, what do you see on the cross? He's being lynched, essentially. Or if you've lost a loved one, to our astonishment, we look up on the cross and we see the father losing his only son. Or are you just screaming out, you know, in your pain, why God, why God? You look at the cross and there's Jesus screaming out in pain, why, why? See, amazing.

He suffered everything we have ever suffered. He suffered everything we've ever suffered. Oh, and more and more.

Because when you actually look at the accounts of the end of Jesus' life, one of the things that strikes you, especially if you're a history buff in any way, is that a lot of people died better than Jesus. Do you know that? Do you know what I mean? In the last couple years, I've read the death of the Maccabean martyrs. It happened in history between the Old and New Testament when Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian tyrant, took over Israel and was doing everything he could to oppress the Israelites.

And some people stood up to him and they were put to death in public, the Maccabean martyrs. And in every case, these Maccabean martyrs when they were being killed, they'd talk to the onlookers and the onlookers would say, trust God. They were smiling.

They had confidence. Their heads were held up. Here in the Garden of Gethsemane, you see Jesus Christ, clearly a man in shock, blood coming out of his pores, asking God, is there some way I could get out of this? Is there some kind of, can this cup pass from me? And on the cross saying, why, why have you forsaken me? Why the difference? And here's the reason.

Jesus Christ did not just suffer what we suffer. On the cross, his sufferings went way beyond the physical. He was experiencing cosmically what we deserve.

What is the natural consequence of wanting to be away from somebody? If you say to somebody, I don't want to be around you. I don't want you controlling my life. I want to be away from you.

What's the natural consequence of that? The natural consequence is to say, okay, be away from me. But because the human race wants to be, we want to be our own masters. We don't want God to control us.

We want to be in charge. The natural consequence is to be cast out of the presence of God. But when we cast out of the presence of God, you're being, you're losing the source of all life and all light.

And on the cross, Jesus Christ did not just experience physical torment, but he was being cast out of the presence of God. And he was experiencing cosmic, absolute, utter, infinite suffering. And Jonathan Edwards explains that in terms of a fiery furnace.

In his famous sermon about Jesus struggling in Gethsemane, he says this about Jesus. He says, the sorrow and distress which Jesus' soul then suffered arose from that full and immediate view which he had of the cup of wrath, which was vastly more terrible than Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. He had a near view of that furnace of wrath into which he was to be cast.

He was brought to the mouth of the furnace that he might look into it and stand and view its raging flames and see the glowings of its heat, that he might know where he was going and what he was about to suffer for us. For us. Okay, now, do you see? Let's go to the cross and take this big question to the cross.

Let's take this question to the cross. Go to the cross and say, God, why are you allowing evil and suffering to continue? And even though the cross cannot tell you what the answer to that question is, the cross can tell you what the answer to that question isn't, what it can't be. It can't be that he doesn't love us.

It can't be that he doesn't care. We don't know what the reason is that he allows evil and suffering, but the one thing it can't be is he doesn't care or he's remote or he's indifferent because he came and he plunged himself not just into the fiery furnace of our sufferings, but to infinite degrees beyond anything that we will ever suffer. Because he loves us that much and he hates suffering that much that he was willing to come and be plunged into our sufferings and experience it so that someday he could end all evil without ending us.

The implications of this are vast. The cross does not tell us what the answer to the question is. Why does God allow evil and suffering? But it tells us what the answer can't be.

And that is that he doesn't care. Even, believe it or not, Albert Camus understood that. And in this amazing piece of writing, Camus says this, Christ, the God-man, suffers too.

Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important because the divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege and lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death. And because Jesus Christ went into the ultimate furnace for you, the only furnace that could really consume you, because Jesus Christ went into the ultimate furnace for you, there's your assurance that he's walking into your personal furnaces with you, whether you feel them or not.

No matter how hot it is right now for you, he's walking next to you. So if you want to deal with evil and suffering, the first thing you've got to do is you've got to look back to something, what he did on the cross. But the second thing you've got to have is you've got to look forward to something.

You have to look ahead to something. What is that? Well, at the very top of the passage, remember, Peter is talking to people who are suffering and are going to suffer more. And he says, you have been born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Now, there's a mouthful, but look what he's saying. First of all, you can't go through the furnace without a living hope. And a hope is, you know, obviously hope for something in the future, but a living hope is a power.

It's a dynamism. It's something that really gets you through that furnace. And what is this living hope? It's an inheritance, which, of course, means a kind of wealth.

And it's kept in heaven, but it's not strictly spiritual because the foretaste of it, the sign of certainty that we're going to get it is the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And it's the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead that is the foretaste, the first fruits of the final salvation to be revealed at the end of time. And what is that? New heavens and new earth.

At the end of Revelation chapter 21 and 22, down comes heaven into this world to purify it and give us a new heavens and new earth. And Paul talks about it in terms of the resurrection. We experience resurrection.

And he says in 1 Corinthians 15, Behold, the trumpet shall sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written shall come true. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory in Jesus Christ. Now, do you see what he's saying? God is not preparing an ethereal, spiritual heaven that would be compensation for the life in this world that we lost. No, no.

Resurrection isn't compensation for the life we lost. Resurrection is the restoration of that life. The new heavens and new earth means this world.

Your body, your loved ones, your homes restored to you, purified, beautified. This world, this body, it comes back. It all comes back.

Pure, unfading, imperishable, unspoiled. And Paul goes so far as to say, suffering and death will be swallowed up by victory. And you know, I have been thinking about this for years now.

Do you know what that means to be swallowed up by victory? It doesn't mean that death and suffering just stop. It's swallowed up and taken into the victory. Look, when I swallow and digest things, it makes me bigger, as you can see.

Okay, when you swallow and digest things, you take them into yourself and they become part of you and they make you bigger, unfortunately. All right, what does Paul mean when he says the resurrection is going to swallow up the suffering and evil you're going through right now? The best illustration I've got of it, and it's a very imperfect one, is some years ago, I had a horrible nightmare one night. And I have no idea if it was something I ate, something I, you know, a movie I'd watched.

I have no idea why. I've actually, if you've ever heard me use the illustration before, I usually don't go into detail because it was really the most awful dream. Basically, I dreamt my entire family had been slaughtered.

And then I woke up. And there they were. And I want you to know that when I went to sleep that night, before the nightmare, oh, I love my family.

You know, I was comforted to see them all around me. But when I woke up, having lost them, and having gotten them back, as it were, I couldn't even look at them without crying. For joy.

What had happened? See, having gotten them back, as it were, the experience of losing them made the experience of having them infinitely greater. It's almost like the experience of losing them had been swallowed up by experience of having them so that it was infinitely more precious. Now, if, I mean, I know that's just a dim hint of it, but if Jesus Christ's resurrection happened, and it did, and that means our resurrection is going to happen, and it will, then it means everything sad, everything horrible is going to be brought up into our future glory and resurrection, make it infinitely better than it would have been if we'd never had any of those experiences.

And that's the final and ultimate defeat of suffering and death. And that's the reason why Dostoevsky writes these astounding words. He says, I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed, that it will make it not only possible to forgive, but to justify what has happened.

That's unbelievable. But if the resurrection is true, that's absolutely right. Everything sad will come untrue.

And yet, the resurrection will be infinitely greater for it having once been true, all that suffering and all that evil. So you have to look back at what he's done, and you have to look ahead and have a living hope at what's to come. But there's one more thing this passage tells us.

It's at the very, very end. There's something we have to not just look back to, something we have to look ahead to, but look into. Verse 12 is astounding to me, because verse 12 says, they spoke of the things that were now told to you by those who preached the gospel to you, the gospel, into which things even angels long to look.

And that word long, my friends, that word long is an amazing word. It's the word *epithumia*, which really means lust. The angels obsessively, passionately look into the gospel.

They look at the story of God saving us through Jesus Christ, and they never get tired of looking into it. They're constantly looking into it, all the time. You say, gospel? Isn't the gospel just that kind of elementary ABC stuff, the basic kind of minimum belief requirements to get into Christian life, and then we go on to more advanced stuff after that, don't we? Don't tell the angels that.

The angels are a lot smarter than you and me. You know, they've been around forever, and yet they never, ever, ever, ever get tired of looking into the gospel. The gospel's the thing that they're looking into all the time.

Why? Let me show you how. This is what we have to do as well. Just for a second, let's think about all this in terms of the gospel.

How did Jesus get through his furnace? How did he get through? Jesus came through an incredible furnace of affliction. How did he get through his furnace? Hebrews 12 says, for the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross. So he had a living hope, of course.

The only way you get through the furnace is through a living hope. What was his living hope? Well, that's a good question. What could it be? You say, well, maybe what he was hoping for was bliss in heaven with his father.

But don't forget, this living hope is something that got him out of that. What was it that drew him away from heaven and put him through the fiery furnace? What was his hope? What could he possibly have been looking for that he didn't already have up there? Isaiah 53 says, the results of his suffering he will see and be satisfied. And that's an amazing statement.

What could make infinite suffering worth it? And the answer is, my righteous servant, this Isaiah 53, shall justify many. You are his living hope. That's the only thing he did not have in heaven and that he had to come to earth and go to the cross and plunge himself into the fiery furnace for.

You, a beautified, unspoiled, unfading, perfect, restored, resurrected, glorified you in his arms. That is his living hope. That's what filled him with such joy.

That's what filled him with such inexorable and infallible resolve that he went into the furnace and he came out like gold. And knowing that he, the thought that you are his living hope, the thought that you are his living hope will make him your living hope. The thought that you were his living hope and that's what drove him through the furnace will make him your living hope.

And you'll be able to walk through the furnace with him. And if you do, you see that wonderful verse eight? If you learn to look into the gospel the way the angels do and always see in new ways what he has done for you, the way we just tried to give you an example of, at sometimes you will actually, you don't see him, but you will love him. And you'll rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

And if you do, your grease will be taken up into his story and turned to gold. Let's pray. Thank you, Father, for giving us a complete portfolio of what we need in order to face the horrible mystery of evil and suffering.

It's a horrible mystery. We don't know why. It's not over.

We don't understand the reason for individual tragedies and catastrophes. We don't. But when we look behind us, when we look ahead of us, when we look into the gospel of what your son has done, we have everything we need so that the evil and suffering, instead of consuming us, will turn us to gold.

We pray, Lord, that you would help us right now as we go to the table and receive the Lord's Supper to look with the angels and all the hosts of heaven deeply into your gospel and come out with a strength and a joy that only that can give us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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