

The Problem of Evil
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We are going to be looking at the problem of evil today, the problem of evil. It's basically the challenge that says if God is good He would stop evil, and if God is powerful He could stop evil. And so if God really is good and all-powerful, why do we see evil? Why do we see suffering? Judging from the surveys that we took a few months ago this is one of the single biggest challenges that our congregation faces personally, one of the single biggest challenges. I'm not totally surprised; in all honesty this is probably—philosophically, reason-like logically, and also even emotionally—this is probably one of the biggest challenges that I have faced in my faith. Things I saw when I was in Afghanistan, and the years following that, different situations, circumstances that happened in my life or in lives of people that I know caused me to question why—why God? If You're really good and You're really powerful, why? Why did You let this happen? Why did it come out this way?

Before we get into it I'm just going to recommend this book. It's called "Unspeakable." It's by Os Guinness. Excellent book—"Unspeakable" by Os Guinness. It is the best single book that I have read on the problem of evil. It is the best single book that I have read on it. Very much from an everyday, normal, non-scholar's perspective, although he is a scholar he puts it in non-scholarly language. How is it that we can still trust in God? He addresses the philosophical all the way to the practical implications, and everything in between, all the emotional impacts and everything else. How can we still have faith in God when we impact evil and suffering in life? So I highly recommend that.

But today what we're going to look at is...as I was preparing the sermon for today I was really struggling with the thing of...I've spent the last several years looking at this issue because just wrestling through it in my own life and my own heart and my own mind. And so I set out looking at this week the sermon, and I was thinking I would love to run you through all the philosophical points and everything else, showing you that honestly, if you wanna get down to it, evil is more of a problem if you want to *not* believe in God than it is if you do believe in God. Logically, philosophically, evil is more of a problem for the atheist than it is for the theist. But as I spent time praying about it and working through scripture, and looking at this and thinking back over those surveys, I realized more and more and I just felt very strongly convicted that this is not really a philosophical question for a large number of people in our congregation. It's not some academic question; it is very much a raw, emotional, visceral question of why? Where is God when I am suffering? Where is God when this one whom I love is suffering? How can I still believe? And I felt more and more convicted that we needed to look at this very much from that perspective—how do we deal with this. And so what we're going to do is we're going to look at one particular aspect of this whole challenge. We could do a whole sermon series on this, ok? We could study it in a whole set of series for months and months. But what we're going to look at is how do we make sense of it when the believer suffers? How do we make sense of this in my life when I suffer, or when people whom I love suffer? How do I make sense of this when the believer suffers?

And we're going to look in John chapter 11, and so I invite you to turn there, and we'll be there through most of the sermon. The reason that we're going to John chapter 11, and I'm going to explain just a little bit of background here—John 11 tells the story of Jesus' confrontation with death, in particular His confrontation with the death of someone whom He loves, Lazarus. Lazarus, Martha, Mary—they were three siblings. Ok? They were followers of Christ; they knew Jesus, they knew Him well, He knew them well. Whenever He would travel through that part of the country He would stay at their home. They had a very close, close relationship. And so what happens is Jesus is out about, He's a couple days' journey away, or a day or so's journey away, He's kind of in the area. But He gets a message that Lazarus is sick, so much so that they're concerned that he's going to die. And so the message is from Martha and Mary, asking Jesus 'Please come, help him. You're his only hope.' And Jesus ends up deciding to stay for two more days where He's at, until finally He goes.

And as He finally goes, what happens is He meets other messengers, and these messengers tell Him there's no point. At this point in the game there's no point—Lazarus has died. But Jesus goes anyway. And when He arrives there, He arrives there, and in verse 21 and verse 32 He runs into Martha and into Mary. And the question that they ask Him—it's actually, it's not a question. It's an accusation. It's not even a statement of fact; it's just a simple...in many ways, an accusation that gets to the core of the question that we have in our heart. And they say, both of them, individually, when they encounter Jesus they say, "*Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.*"

If You had been here. What they're wanting to know is 'Where were You? Why weren't You here? We sent a message. We called on You. We thought that You loved us. We know that You do love us. Why weren't You here? If You had been here my brother would not have died. This would not have happened.' Now notice in here, they aren't throwing their faith out the door; they aren't saying 'We're turning our back on You. We're walking away.' They're still calling Him Lord. They're still acknowledging His authority in life. But they are hurt and they are confused. They're angry, they're suffering, they are grieving and they want to know why? Where were You?

Makes me think of...there's this song that's getting a lot of radio play right now—"You Found Me" by the Fray, where basically Isaac Slade, the member of this band, had a number of tragedies that occurred in his life. And he writes this song imagining having it out with God, wondering 'Where were You? You found me a little bit too late. Why did You wait so long to find me? Where were You?' That's the raw emotion that we so often experience as we encounter suffering in our lives. And so that's what we're going to look at today.

As we do so, ok, as we do so what we're going to see is that there are a few truths that we can learn from this passage. Ok? Some of these are a little bit more difficult to swallow than others. Some of them really...I will tell you that if we wrestle through them I guarantee, for me personally, it speaks to my heart and confirms my faith, and lets me know I can trust Him.

The first thing is simply this—suffering does not indicate a lack of love on Jesus' part. The simple fact that Lazarus is suffering, the simple fact that Mary and Martha are grieving—that does not indicate that Jesus does not love them. In the same way, the simple fact that you are suffering, or someone that you love is suffering—that does not mean that God doesn't love you. In verse 3 and in verse 5, in verse 3 the messengers come and they acknowledge the fact that Lazarus is someone that Jesus loves. In fact, they referred to Lazarus as "*He whom You love...*", and they say 'Listen, he's sick. You need to come.' Not only that, but then John in verse 5, the narrator, he says, "*Now Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus.*" Jesus loved Lazarus! Jesus loved him. And not only that, but when Jesus gets there in verses 33 through 36, something amazing happens. Because Jesus, He gets there and He sees Mary and Martha; He sees the people mourning. And when He sees her weeping He is deeply moved in His Spirit. It's...the imagery here is almost as though His chest is just ripped open and His heart is broken in half. He is broken to the very depth and core of His being, and He begins to weep. And He is weeping so greatly that the people who are standing around and watching, they say, 'Look at how much He loved Lazarus.' Jesus was broken. Lazarus suffered, but Jesus was broken.

See, the first truth that we see here is that suffering in your life, the simple fact that you were going through a time of suffering and pain, does not mean that God does not love you. In fact, Jesus' message to you would be that 'I am right here with you. Yes, I see your pain; I see your suffering. And My heart is broken with you. I weep with you. I am broken by that pain and suffering as much as you are.'

And I wish I could leave it right there. Ok? But we're going to go into something which, quite honestly, that much I understood intellectually; but as I've studied over the past few years I realized that it doesn't just end there. And it starts getting real uncomfortable for me, personally, as I wrestle with what comes next. Because, see, I realize that Jesus loves Lazarus, and so I would think, 'Ok, well that just means that if He loves him, then He would have prevented the suffering if somehow He could have.' But that's not the way that it works here in the passage. Ok? That's not the way scripture works with it.

What we see is Jesus makes a very unexpected decision. He makes a very unexpected decision in this passage. What He does, it says in verse 5 and 6, it says

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was.

This gives me a hard time, because think about it saying, 'Now Jesus loved Lazarus, so He stayed two days longer.' Jesus loved Lazarus, and He stays two days longer. That does not compute to me; or it did not compute until I really started wrestling with this. Because I have this mindset...or I had this mindset...that if Jesus loved Lazarus He's going to prevent every little bit of suffering that He possibly can in Lazarus' life. But that's not what He does. I mean, think about this. In short, what it's saying is 'Listen, because Jesus loved Lazarus He stayed longer so that Lazarus could actually suffer and die.' Why? Why does He let that happen? What in the world...how do I make sense of that?

Well, we're going to look at this here. Ok? And what we see is in this passage, first of all, there are two reasons—there are two reasons that Jesus allows, that He explains, that He personally gives in this passage—why He allows Lazarus to suffer and even to die. The first reason is this. He says in verse 4, He says that the reason that He is allowing this illness—it doesn't lead to death.

"It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

That is the first reason that Jesus gives, that He allows Lazarus to suffer...in His love. First of all so that he can glorify Jesus in the midst of suffering and death and what will come afterwards, so that people can be pointed towards Jesus. And that plays into the second reason. The second reason is so that people will believe in Jesus. In verse 14 and 15 He is explaining to His disciples as they're getting ready to go. They don't quite understand, and He explains, 'Listen,

"Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there."

He's saying, 'I'm glad that I let Lazarus suffer and die, and I'm glad *so that you can believe.*' Jesus allows Lazarus to suffer and die for these two reasons—so that God, in particular Jesus Christ, would be glorified, and so that people would come to know Jesus, believe in Him. I can't help but sit here and think. As I was working through this some time back, as I was working through this I had a real difficult time with it because it seems like that's very self-serving to God. It seems like it's very self-serving to Jesus. He's gonna let somebody else suffer so that He gets glory and so that other people come to know Him? And as I did so I was reminded of Westminster Catechism, and I've been lookin' at it, and I was reminded of it again afresh, anew here recently. The first question of this is basically...basically what it points to is 'What is the whole purpose of mankind? What is the reason that I was created? Why do I exist?' And the answer is so that I can glorify God and enjoy Him forever. That is the whole reason that I was created, was so that I can glorify God and I can enjoy Him forever. That is the whole reason that you were created, so that you can glorify God and enjoy Him forever. That is the whole reason each and every one of us were created. That is our purpose. And so as I started looking at that and I started working through it, and it's supported throughout scripture, what I realized is that the very best thing that Lazarus could do with his entire life and death is point to and display Jesus' worth and His power. If Lazarus wanted to live a fulfilled life, he would live a life that points to Jesus, that reveals Jesus' power and His worth.

And what we see is on through the story Jesus does that just that. He demonstrates His power over death. He demonstrates His power over life, and He shows that He, ultimately, has supreme value and worth over everything else. And so Jesus, by allowing Lazarus to suffer and die, actually allowed him to be a testimony even to us today, thousands of years later. He allowed Lazarus to become more than what he could have been on his own, because He allows him to suffer and to die so that the glory of Jesus can be revealed. That is the whole reason that Lazarus was created, was to reveal God's glory, to glorify God and then to enjoy Him forever. Jesus was allowing Lazarus to serve and to fulfill the purpose for which he was created.

And so I sit here and I look at this and I say, 'Well, wait a second. Is this just something that is just a fluke chance? Maybe this was just Lazarus. Maybe Jesus doesn't interact with people like this on a regular basis.' But as I was looking at that and thinking through it I ran into another unexpected decision that Jesus made. And this one is in Matthew chapter 11. And I'm just going to read through this real quickly, Matthew 11: 1-6. To give you a brief background, John the Baptist...he came and his whole message was that every single person, from the lowliest beggar to the greatest political power in the land, needed to repent and turn away from their sin and follow the Messiah. That was his whole message, that was his whole reason for being, was to go ahead and tell people to prepare the way for Jesus, and to turn people away from sin and point them to God. And because he did that uncompromisingly, he ended up in prison and was awaiting death. Because he had the audacity to say that even the political powers needed to repent. And in verse 1 it says

When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, He went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended in Me."

Now as I originally read this growing up, or as I heard this story, I always had this what I believe now is a common misperception, and it's the misperception that John was in doubt. He just needed some encouragement. He's sitting in prison, and so he's sitting here and he sends word to Jesus, and he wants to know, 'Hey, are You really the one, or should I wait for somebody else?' I don't think that's what happened so much anymore. The difficult thing for why it's hard to figure this out sometimes is we can't read tone. But I'll tell you why this is a common misperception and I was mistaken in this reading.

First of all I look at it and the verse prior to that; in verse 2 it says "*Now when John heard in prison...*" He's in prison and he hears about the deeds of Christ. He knows exactly what Jesus is doing. He knows exactly that Jesus is even raising people from the dead. He knows that Jesus is doing all of these things that prophecy says the Messiah will do. These are signs of the Messiah. Not only that, but John was there when Jesus was baptized. Jesus came up and said, 'I want you to baptize Me.' And he said, 'No way! I know who You are—You should be baptizing me!' And Jesus said, 'No. Baptize Me.' John does it; the heavens part; God the Father affirms Jesus Christ and says, "This is My Son in whom I am well pleased." And the Holy Spirit descends on Him like a dove. And John is there in the middle of it. If anybody understood exactly who Jesus was, it was John the Baptist. I don't think he was doubting.

I think moreso what he's saying is, 'Hey, listen; You're doing all these things for these other people. I'm in prison, remember? And I'm here; I'm here because of You. I'm here because I came to point people to You. I'm here because I wouldn't compromise in my faith and my message. So, hey, You're doing this for everybody else. Are You the One? Are You gonna come save me, or should I wait for somebody else?' He's kinda saying, 'Hey! Where are You? Remember me? I'm over here!'

Part of the reason that I think he does this as well, if you continue on in the context and this is where it again gets difficult and makes me think that the stuff with Lazarus isn't a fluke—it's Jesus' response. I really believe that Jesus is refusing, straight-up refusing, to rescue John from his fate. He tells the messengers; He says, 'Listen, you go back and you tell John what you see. You say, "Yeah, I'm helping all these people. I'm healing blind people. I'm making the deaf be able to hear. I am raising up those who cannot walk, and they are being able to walk. And even the dead—I am bringing the dead back to life." You tell him he's right. Everything he's heard is right, and I'm coming through for these other people. I am coming through and I am helping in their suffering and their circumstance, but I am not going to come through for him. I'm not going to come rescue him from prison. That's not what I'm going to do.' And so He says, 'You give John this message from Me. "*Blessed is the one who will not be offended at Me.*" He says, 'John, you will be blessed if you do not take offense at the fact that I'm not going to come through for you like I am for everyone else. You will be blessed.'

And that is a hard thing for me to understand until again I realized and I remembered that John's whole role in life, his whole purpose, was to point to the surpassing worth, and power, and majesty of Jesus Christ. That is the whole point of his life and death, and he had run the race so well; he had not compromised. He had continued preaching the message that God had told him to preach. And here he was; he was on the final lap on the home stretch. And he was saying, 'It hurts! I want it to be done! Aren't You gonna come through and rescue me?' And Jesus says, 'No. I want you to finish.' Jesus looks at it and He sees the overwhelming, amazing, eternal perspective on John's life, and he realizes that 'You are there; you are almost there. You have almost finished the race, and you are about to cross the finish line and enter into the glory of the God and Creator of the universe, who will look at you and say, "Well done, My good and faithful servant." And because I love you, I cannot take that from you. You don't see it. You see the pain. You don't see the finish line yet, and you don't see what is beyond it, but I do. And I cannot take that from you.' Jesus' love let John suffer and die in prison, because He could not take what is the most meaningful, purposeful, fulfilling thing in John's life, the crowning achievement of his career, away from him—his martyrdom.

As I look at that I can't help but think—and this is something that I wrestled with for some time—as I started to realize that this is the way that Jesus sometimes interacts with people who are His followers, I couldn't help but ask if that's the case, how do I make sense of this when the believer suffers? If this is true, then how can I trust Jesus? How can I trust Him? How can I follow Him? How can I trust Jesus if this is true? And my heart was turned to Isaiah 52 and 53, where you see the most powerful, amazing...like it is beyond my comprehension the amount of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual suffering that Jesus Christ went through. In fact, in Isaiah 53: 10-11 it says that God the Father...that the Lord was pleased to crush Jesus. And the word here, "crushing", it is this word picture, it's this image, it's the same thing that you do when you are stomping on grapes in a wine press, where you are stomping on the grape until there is nothing left. All of the pulp, all of the life, every bit, every last ounce of anything in it has been ground out of it, and you are covered in the juice of that grape. That is the illustration of what Jesus is going through. God the Father, the Creator of the universe, is grinding Him into the ground and

crushing Him until there is nothing left, until God the Father is covered in the blood of Christ. And what amazes me is that in the midst of this, out of His anguish...out of His anguish He looks up, He lifts His eyes, and there is something that He sees that causes Him to be satisfied, to remain on the cross and not to come down, even though He could have chosen to do so. And I can't help but wonder what is it that He saw. And verse 10 and 11 tells us. It says when He was...when His soul was making an offering for guilt He lifts up His eyes, and

...He shall see His offspring...

...He will see those who will follow Him. He will see those who are not yet born. He saw me. And He saw you if you are His follower. And that was enough for Him. He was satisfied with that, and so He remained, and He bore our iniquities. He stayed and suffered so that I would not. And when I realized that, the question then becomes—if this is true, how can I *not* trust Him? If this is true, how can I *not* trust Him? He was willing to go through that for me when I didn't deserve it.

The beautiful thing is this—we see one other thing that I want to point out to you in John 11. When the believer suffers...this is one other thing that is beautiful to me. It's the fact that death is not the end for the believer. God...Jesus...promises that death does not win; evil, suffering, grief, pain...all of it...is not the end for the believer. It does not win. In fact, Jesus says...in verse 4 He says that this evil, that this illness, that this suffering, this sickness, it is not, it does not end in death. He says it's not gonna end in death for Lazarus. And then He goes forward and in verse 25 He ends up saying...He tells Martha

"I am the resurrection and the life."

'Even if you die, even if you suffer, even if you have grief and you are broken, and you are filled with pain, it does not matter. I am the resurrection and the life. And even if you go through that, I will give you life. You will live. You will have an abundant life, bigger than you can dream of.'

And He goes through that, and He explains that, and it makes me think of 1 Corinthians 15: 54-55 where it says that death has been swallowed up in victory. Jesus said, 'Listen, I am going to spread My arms wide, and I will receive death into Myself, and I will wrap it up inside of Me, and I will win. And it does not end in death for you.'

Makes me think of Sam Gamgee in "Lord of the Rings", the third book "Return of the King". At the tail end of this trilogy things keep getting worse and worse and worse, until it is so dark that there is no hope left. And finally, the moment of victory, the final moment where everything is won comes. And they're reunited, these friends are reunited, and Sam...he ends up running into this friend, Gandalf, who he has believed to be dead. He thought he saw him die. And he looks and he says, "Gandalf, I thought you were dead! But I thought I had died too." And then he asks this amazing question that I think goes to the heart of this. He says, "Is every sad thing now going to come untrue?" Is every sad thing now going to come untrue?

And Jesus, if He were in that story He would say 'Yes, for the believer it is. I am going to reverse every sad thing. Even death itself will not win. I will take on death itself face-to-face, and I will win. I will have the victory. And that victory will give you life. Lazarus experiences this very personally. At the conclusion of John 11, verses 33 and 34, Jesus goes to the grave and He says "*Lazarus, come out!*" And Lazarus...he gets up out of the grave and he walks out. And Jesus looks at the people around, and He says, "*Unbind him!*" 'Untie him. Take the death shroud off, because he is not dead—he is alive!'

And Jesus' message to you, if you are a believer today, is simply this—it's that His...the fact that you are going through suffering is not a mark that He does not love you. He is right there with you in the midst of suffering. His heart is breaking with you. He does have a purpose, even if you don't see what it is. There is a purpose; there is a reason that He is allowing you to go through it. And the question that you have to ask is can you trust Him. And I look at Isaiah 52 and 53 and I am convinced that yes, when we look at that how can we not trust Him. And He promises that if we trust Him, believe Him, death will not win. It doesn't matter if suffering even comes to the point of death. It will not win, and there will be a point in time, though you may be in the grave, where God...you will hear God's voice, Jesus, the Creator of the universe, calling your name and saying to you, 'Come up! Come out! Come out!' and death is not longer victorious, and will say to death, 'Unbind him; let him go, because he is alive in Me, and I am the resurrection; I am the life.'

That is how the believer answers to the problem of evil in their life, to the problem of suffering. It's the prayer that Os Guinness mentions. It's basically the prayer that says,

Father God, I don't understand You in this situation. I don't understand what You are doing in this circumstance. But I know why I can trust You anyway. And I'll rest in that.

In just a moment here we're going to sing a closing song; and it's a song that is a prayer for our confidence in every single circumstance—whether it is in joy or in tribulation; whether it is in happiness and pleasure or whether it is in pain and suffering. In every circumstance and every situation that we will be able to give witness to the Jesus, to the Christ, to the One who is full of truth and grace, the One who died as Isaiah 52 and 53 said—for us. If you don't know Jesus Christ, I challenge you. Feel free to talk to me after the service. There will be some others up here. But also here's the thing—you don't have to talk to someone. You only have to talk to God. The reason that I would just ask that you come talk to us is so that way we can come alongside of you, we can encourage you, and help you grow as a Christian. But here's the thing—you can talk to God and you can interact with Him right here, right now, on your own. It's simply the simple fact that you look at it and you say, 'God, I know that I am a sinner. I deserve the death that Jesus died, there in Isaiah 52 and 53. I deserve that. I don't deserve anything else, and I will never be able to measure up to Your standards because I am a sinner. I break the moral law. I'm not a good person. But I trust You, and I know that You love me. And so I trust that Jesus has paid the price for my sin, and I trust that. And I throw myself at the foot of Your mercy, because I don't deserve anything, but You still died for me. And I trust that because of that You will forgive my sin. And so I trust that. God, I'm Yours. My life is Yours. I'm all Yours.' If you do that with God, then you have begun on a life lived with Christ.

[Congregation sings the prayer song and is dismissed.]