

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to part 7 in our series for the year called Giant Steps. If you have not been here for earlier parts of this series, you are welcome to visit our website and you can find all the previous parts there.
- B. Today, I am still off script. I mean that the sermon I had planned to preach, I'm not going to preach. I feel in my gut the Holy Spirit is still leading me in another direction.
- C. As we get into our topic, I think you'll understand why.
- D. We're going to dive right into Scripture:
  1. *"There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. [2] And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? [3] I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. [4] Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? [5] I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.'"* (Luke 13:1-5)

II. In Your Face

- A. There has never been a time in human history when the pain and tragedies and evils of the whole world are in your face as much as it is today.
- B. With news, with social media, with streaming services, with the immediacy of everyday people posting every day tragedies... no matter when, no matter where, no matter how brutal something is, it shows up in our feeds, on our devices, on our TVs and it, therefore, gets into our hearts.
- C. It can add up, emotionally. The pains, the sufferings, the holocausts and horrors of today's world can add up. Earthquakes, floods, fires, eruptions, violence, riots, wars, dictators, corruption, evil.
- D. It's heavy.
- E. And I can tell you that if I didn't live with an unshakeable confidence of heaven, I don't know how I would get out of bed in the morning.
- F. There is today a magnification, a multiplication, of bad news and human suffering. This world is a dangerous place to be.
- G. And into this tragedy comes the painful question, "Why, God?"
  1. Why the suffering?
  2. Why the tragedy?
  3. Why the pain, the illness, the loss?
  4. Why the death?
  5. Why the heartache, the tears, the inconsolable grief, the hole in the heart that can never be filled?
  6. Where is God when it hurts? Where is God when these things happen?
- H. This is the question Jesus faces here in two short stories.
  1. In the first story, there is moral evil unleashed on innocent victims—the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. We'll call that the temple calamity.
  2. In the second story, there is natural evil on innocent victims—the 18 people who died in a construction accident when a tower fell on them. We'll call that the tower calamity.
- I. The people are asking the biggest question that can be asked. They are asking for an answer to what is called "The Problem of Pain."
- J. In seminary, my church history professor said that "the problem of pain" keeps more people away from God than any other. When he said it, I was skeptical. In those days, most of my friends were stuck on scientific or logical objections, not pain.
- K. But back then, we were bulletproof twenty-somethings.
- L. Then life happened. A friend broke his back: paralyzed for life. Someone's son tragically took his own life. A much prayed-for pregnancy ended in miscarriage. The more we asked why, the more we turned a suspicious eye toward God.
- M. In the oldest book in the whole Bible, a man named Job suffered so much, he accused God of painting a bull's-eye on his back:
  1. *"Have I sinned? What have I done to You, O watcher of men? Why have You set me as Your target, So that I am a burden to myself?"* (Job 7:20).
- N. Job, like anybody who's lived much, crashed into the problem of pain, and questioned God over it.
- O. And now, here in Luke, generations after Job, people again bring up the same questions to Jesus.
- P. I want to say that every system, every philosophy, and every religion has to answer this question. Why all the suffering? Why all the pain?
- Q. I'm going to suggest that if you are not a Christian—if you belong to some other religion or to no religion or if you subscribe to some philosophy—you have a logical duty to push and prod your own system as hard as you would push the Christians in your life for an answer.
- R. And I would further suggest that the quality of that answer should determine whether or not you stay with that system.
- S. And the most important thing I would say then is this:
  1. **There is no system or religion or philosophy that answers the Problem of Pain with the soul-satisfying depth and logical coherence as well as does biblical Christianity.**
- T. Today's topic:
  1. **Step Out of Confusion About Pain**

III. Theodicy

- A. The technical name for this topic is theodicy.
- B. A theodicy is an explanation that justifies God for permitting the problem of pain and the existence of evil.

1. **Theodicy.** the\*od'i\*cy\, n. [...fr. Gr. *theos*, God + *dikaio*s, to justify...] A vindication of the justice of God in ordaining or permitting natural and moral evil. (Websters)

- C. Theodicy is a major topic in philosophy and religion.
- D. But it is a major topic for everyday people in every generation too.
- E. John Stott, one of our generation's most knowledgeable Christian teachers, said, "The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith."
- F. My own experience as a follower of Jesus and a pastor confirms this: the problem of pain is a huge stumbling block for people seeking God.
- G. Let's look at several attempts to reconcile these factors, and then we'll look at how Jesus answered.

#### IV. Theodicy Positions

##### A. Secularism/Atheism: There is no Problem of Pain.

1. Atheists like Richard Dawkins believe that there is not now and never was a supernatural realm to begin with. So no God, devil, angels, demons, or Creator. No prayer. No human soul or spirit. No afterlife. No heaven, or hell, miracles, or eternity. Nothing outside nature's realm at all.
2. Dawkins pokes fun at the idea of a Creator, which he compares to a "blind watchmaker:"
  - a) All appearances to the contrary, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics, albeit deployed in a very special way. A true watchmaker has foresight: he designs his cogs and springs, and plans their interconnections, with a future purpose in his mind's eye. Natural selection... has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all.
    - (1) The Blind Watchmaker (London and New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986) p. 5.
3. What does naturalism say about the problem of pain? It says nothing, because there is no "problem" of pain. The only moral code is not the Golden Rule, it is the opposite: survival of the fittest. Cull the herd of humanity and get rid of the weak. That is the moral implication of secular atheism.
4. The impersonal laws of nature have their way with us, and that's it. We're stuck in a cosmic machine that churns out random life forms and indiscriminate suffering and there is no point to it other than what we make up.
5. The problem of pain is, at root, chemical. Maybe that's why we swallow so many chemicals to solve it.
6. I said that you have a logical duty to push your own system to answer the Problem of Pain, and so I ask you, is this answer satisfying? Does "survival of the fittest" give you comfort in your suffering or a moral code to guide you in the difficulties of this life?
7. What about eastern religions like Buddhism? How do they answer the problem of pain?

##### B. Buddhism/Monism: There is no pain.

1. Monism, from the word for "one," teaches all is one. Monism undergirds pantheism (all is god), panentheism (god is in all), and naturalism (nature is all). Pagan religions, like Wicca, witchcraft, and Druidism, squat comfortably on the "all is one" foundation.
2. So do magic, sorcery, and occultism. The only way the Harry Potters of this world can work their magic is by uniting with the cosmic energy, and letting the power flow through. All is one. Satan loves this philosophy.
3. "The Force" in the Star Wars franchise stands here too.
4. If there were a theme song for Monism, it would be these words from the 1995 Disney animation, Pocahontas:
  - a) You think you own whatever land you land on  
 The earth is just a dead thing you can claim  
 But I know ev'ry rock and tree and mountain  
 Has a life, has a spirit, has a name...  
 The rainstorm and the river are my brothers  
 The heron and the otter are my friends  
 And we are all connected to each other  
 In a circle, in a hoop that never ends.
5. This is the view that says all is one, one is all, and all religions are the same.
6. Buddhism lands here too.
7. But we have to ask how does your view answer the Problem of Pain.
8. For monists and Buddhists, the Problem of Pain is just a problem of perception.
  - a) "If you want to get the plain truth, be not concerned with right and wrong. The conflict between right and wrong is the sickness of the mind," said Zen Master Yun-Men.
    - (1) [From the Hsin-Hsin Ming, quoted in Donald S. Lopez, A Modern Buddhist Bible (Beacon Press, 2002), p. 166.]
9. In this worldview, suffering has no independent existence; it is a state of mind we must grow out of by following the Buddhist path.
10. Pain is an illusion; don't believe it, they tell us. We grow beyond pain by developing a passionless indifference to it, they say.
11. I don't think "passionless indifference" would have healed our broken hearts after our miscarriage or brought me much peace when one of my childhood friends died in his early twenties from oral cancer. Those situations elicited passion from me, and I had plenty of it. My grief felt real to me. It felt right that I could grieve my losses and not gloss over them with passionless indifference.
12. So once again, I ask you if this philosophy offers you a satisfying answer to the problem of pain. For me, it does not.
13. There are other systems, and we can't deal with them all, but let's go back to the days of Jesus.

##### C. Ancient Judaism/Other Religions: It's your fault.

1. In the days of Jesus, the Jews taught that if you were suffering, it was your fault. You brought it on your own head through your sins.
2. This is going to be typical of most world religions.
3. This goes way back before the days of Abraham, all the way back to Job.
4. Job, you remember, suffered immensely. On one day, all his crops were destroyed, all his herds were killed, his finances were devastated, his body was horribly disfigured, and worst of all, all his children were massacred—while worshipping God—all in one day.
5. Job's friends came around to comfort him by explaining theology to him, and Job called them "miserable comforters" (16:2).
6. For 3 whole chapters, one of them, named Eliphaz, goes on and on about how God never punishes the innocent, and he never destroys the upright, so therefore, Job, you must be a very wicked person but you're hiding it.
7. That's in chapters 9 through 11. When you get to chapter 22, he's still at it. "Is not your wickedness great and your iniquities without end?"
8. That was their answer to the Problem of Pain. It's your fault.
9. Over 2,000 years later, the disciples are walking with Jesus, and they come across a man born blind. The Jews said, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, the he would be blind?"
  - a) I want to shout, he was born blind, how could his sins possibly be in view, you idiots!
10. No, no. Jesus is going to say. Not his sins. Not his parents' sins.
  - a) No, no, he says, It is not the fault of the people who were slaughtered by soldiers in the temple calamity.
  - b) No, no, he says, It is not the fault of the people who were crushed by rocks in the tower calamity.
  - c) It was not the fault of the people in the Twin Towers on 9/11 or at the concert on October 7 or on and on.
  - d) Quit blaming the victims.
11. Because, once again, I have to push and prod you to ask about the logical coherence and moral helpfulness of your worldview, and its answer to the Problem of Pain.
  - a) Because if you are going to say that every time a person suffers they brought it on themselves, you are going to be the worst human being to be around forever.
12. We don't have time to deal with animism, which says you suffer because you are cursed, or with fatalism, which says you suffer because you are unlucky and were born under the wrong star, or with Hinduism, which says you suffer because of sins in a previous life, or with evolution which says you suffer because you are genetically programmed that way.
13. None of these offer an answer to the Problem of Pain that is simultaneously logically coherent, morally instructive, and emotionally satisfying.
14. So now, what did Jesus have to say?

#### V. The Answer of Jesus

- A. There were two stories in play: the temple and the tower, the moral evil and the natural evil.
- B. In each case, Jesus says the same thing:
  1. Do you think they were worse sinners in the temple calamity so they died? No.
  2. Do you think they were worse sinners in the tower calamity so they died? No.
    - a) He is correcting their theology, their theodicy, their faulty answer to the Problem of Pain.
    - b) It's not their fault.
    - c) Quit blaming the victims.
- C. So what does he say?
  1. *"I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."* (Luke 13:3)
  2. *"I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."* (Luke 13:5)
- D. What is Jesus doing?
- E. To understand what he is doing, you have to back up 2 verses. There, Jesus says that if you have done something wrong against a neighbor, and you are on your way to the courthouse to get it settled, you better settle your case with your adversary before you get to the judge.
  1. *"When you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle with him, lest he drag you to the judge, the judge deliver you to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. [59] I tell you, you shall not depart from there till you have paid the very last mite."* (Luke 12:58-59)
- F. What is Jesus doing?
- G. Jesus is taking the temple calamity and the tower calamity, and setting them in an entirely different context.
  1. Jesus is like an artist, taking a painting, and putting it into a new frame that is so big and so powerful that the frame redefines even the picture itself.
- H. That is because the way that Jesus, the apostles, the prophets, and all of Scripture solves the problem of pain—Christian Theodicy—is radically different than any other worldview.

#### VI. The Frame

##### A. A Fallen World

1. The Bible treats suffering as an alien invader. It was not part of God's original creation; it wasn't his original story arc. Pain entered later, when sin and evil entered. No death, no sorrow, no suffering, and no pain existed in God's good creation. The biblical authors never blame God for the problem of pain. God didn't create evil or the suffering it birthed.
2. That emerged from Satan and Adam and the moral rebellion of free will.
3. Instead we find that when evil galloped into the world, suffering and death rode in on its back (Romans 5:12).
4. That is why we say this fallen world is a morally broken pain machine.

5. And because of that we have an upside debt with God.
6. And because of that we suffer.

**B. A Suffering Savior**

1. Ultimately, Scripture reveals that God did not stand aloof from the problem of pain; he became human without ceasing to be God, and submerged himself in the depths of pain like no other human before or since. Isaiah prophesied of Jesus on the Cross, *"Many were amazed when they saw him—beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person"* (Isaiah 52:14, NLT).
2. Through the Cross, God is not a stranger to suffering. Jesus feels with you. When it comes to the problem of pain, Jesus goes beyond sympathy to empathy. And he goes beyond empathy to incarnation.
3. He felt unspeakable suffering and he died for your sins.

**C. A Non-Negotiable Salvation**

1. And because of the suffering and death of Jesus, Luke reminds us that Peter reminds us, "There is no other name under heaven" than Jesus. And therefore we must be saved.
2. It is non-negotiable. Jesus said, Unless you repent, you will perish. He was talking about spiritual perishing. Spiritual lostness. And by repenting, he was talking about changing your mind to agree with God that you are a sinner who needs a Savior, and then embracing Jesus Christ as that Savior.
3. Because that is the only way to pay that moral debt that you were in because of sin.
4. Jesus is warning you to settle your debt before you stand before the judge. Because we are all going to stand before the judge because we live in a fallen world and death is universal.
5. Salvation through Jesus is non-negotiable because it is the only way to settle your debt with God... which sets up the next side of the frame.

**D. An Eternal Timeline**

1. Evil and its offspring, pain, cannot be understood fully within time. One day, our limited temporal horizon will give way to an eternal perspective and we will say that God has been better to us than we ever imagined or deserved. Through the centuries, Christians have found comfort in God's astonishing promise: *"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory"* (2 Corinthians 4:17).
2. God invites us into a secret way of understanding it: set your pain in an eternal context.
3. From the standpoint of eternity, even a lifetime of pain is light and momentary. This does not minimize suffering. It does not deny that our suffering can be intense and even brutal.
4. But Scripture puts the problem of pain into a larger context—an infinite one. Christians believe in everlasting life. We believe that we will be with God forever in heaven, with no more pain, no more sorrows, and no more tears.
5. On this earth, we are all living on borrowed time. Our real home is heaven.
6. There is a coming restoration of all things. And an incredible reunion with the ones we love who have died in the Lord.
7. Pain does not have the final say. It does not win in the end. God overcomes it.
8. That belief carries us through.

- E. And with that frame, I come back to where I was earlier.

**VII. Conclusion**

- A. I said that every system, every philosophy, and every religion has to answer this question. Why all the suffering? Why all the pain?
- B. No matter what your perspective, you have to answer the Problem of Pain.
- C. I do not claim to have all the answers.
- D. I confess there will always be unanswerable questions in this topic. There is mystery here that we cannot penetrate.
- E. But this is what I do know:
  1. **Christianity offers a God who felt the fullest measure of human suffering, a salvation from the cause of suffering, a Savior who comforts us in our suffering, a global mission to alleviate suffering, final justice for those who cause suffering, and a coming world that abolishes suffering...**
- F. So I respectfully ask you, "if you are not a Christian, What does your system offer?"
- G. Step out of the problem of pain.
- H. If you are looking for a faith that answers the Problem of Pain in a way that is logically coherent, morally instructive, and emotionally healing, look no further than the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ.