

I. Introduction

- A. Today is part 7 and in our series, I'm Too [Blank] For Faith.
 - 1. Too Successful.
 - 2. Too open-minded.
 - 3. Too guilty.
 - 4. Too put-together.
 - 5. Too fun.
 - 6. Too not-interested.
- B. We have been filling in the blanks with the reasons, excuses, evasions, and rationalizations that people use to shove God out of their lives.
- C. Today, I want to add one more to the list. Today's [blank] is basically the toughest one of all. It is also the most painful.
- D. Please think with me today on the very difficult topic:
 - 1. I'm Too [Hurt By God] for Faith
- E. The world's pain stares us in the face every day. The suffering. The loss. The cruelty. The darkness. When the insurance company talks about hurricanes, wildfires, and tornadoes, they call them "Acts of God."
- F. Where is God when it hurts? Why doesn't God intervene? Why did he let this bad person ever get near me? Why doesn't he answer my prayers?
- G. In philosophy and in theology, this is called "the problem of pain." It is the number one reason why people leave the faith.
- H. A former professor at Moody Bible Institute — one of the most biblically conservative schools in the country, Bart Ehrman, wrote:
 - 1. "About nine or ten years ago I came to realize that I simply no longer believed the Christian message. A large part of my movement away from the faith was driven by my concern for suffering. I simply no longer could hold to the view—which I took to be essential to Christian faith—that God was active in the world, that he answered prayer, that he interviewed on half of his faithful, and that he brought salvation..."
- I. Bart Ehrman declared he was too hurt by God for faith, and so he left his Christianity behind. He's not the only one.

II. The Problem of Pain

- A. My history professor in seminary said that "the problem of pain" keeps more people away from God than any other. When he said it, I was skeptical. Most of my friends were stuck on scientific or logical objections, not pain.
- B. But back then, we were bulletproof twenty-somethings.
- C. Then life happened. A friend broke his back: paralyzed for life. Someone's son killed himself. A much prayed-for pregnancy ended in miscarriage. The more we asked why, the more we turned a suspicious eye toward God.
- D. 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).
- E. Job, like anybody who's lived much, crashed into the problem of pain, and questioned God over it.
- F. Let's do the same.

III. What is the Problem of Pain?

A. The Problem Stated

- 1. One of the oldest philosophical statements of the problem comes from a Greek philosopher named Epicurus (341-270 B.C.). He wrote,
 - a) God either wants to eliminate bad things and cannot, or can but does not want to, or neither wishes to nor can, or both wants to and can.
 - b) If he wants to and cannot, he is weak—and this does not apply to God.
 - c) If he can but does not want to, then he is spiteful—which is equally foreign to God's nature.
 - d) If he neither wants to nor can, he is both weak and spiteful and so not a god.
 - e) If he wants to and can, which is the only thing fitting for a god, where then do bad things come from? Or why does he not eliminate them?
- 2. A logically formal statement of the problem of pain.
- 3. Epicurus never solved this problem; he just lived with it. It was said that his whole goal was to make people give up the delusion that god cares about them.
- 4. Philosophers also call this statement the "Inconsistent Triad." It involves three ideas that some say can't all be true:
 - a) 1) The existence of evil.
 - b) 2) An all-good God.
 - c) 3) An all-powerful God.
- 5. Whenever we give voice to the problem of pain, we're suggesting that at least one of the three ideas has taken a break.
- 6. The Inconsistent Triad poses such a great problem that 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." 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.

B. Theodicy

- 1. Yet another, more technical name for this topic is *Theodicy*.
 - a) the*od'i*cy, n. [...fr. Gr. theos, God + dikaios, right, justice...] A vindication of the justice of God in ordaining or permitting natural and moral evil.
- 2. In the Bible, the book of Job is a theodicy. Ancient Egyptians had their theodicies. So did the Greeks and Romans. So do many philosophers today.
- 3. They are all "justifying" God for permitting the problem of pain and the existence of evil.

4. The thought of justifying God makes me jittery—like I sent him to the principal's office to explain himself—when I know deep inside that I need to explain myself to him.
 - a) That's one of the beautiful things about God: that he can humble himself without losing himself.
 - b) He lets low life-forms like me put him on trial.
5. So let's ask the question, what would Jesus say to the person who says, I'm Too [Hurt By God] For Faith?

IV. What Would Jesus Say?

A. Suffering is an alien invader in the beautiful world I created.

1. Pain was not part of God's original creation; it wasn't his original story arc.
2. Everything God made was good. Very good, to use the phrase in Genesis.
3. Pain entered later, when sin and evil entered. No death, no sorrow, no suffering, and no pain existed in God's good creation. It was beautiful.
4. The biblical authors never blame God for the problem of pain. God didn't create evil or the suffering it birthed.
5. We brought that on ourselves, collectively speaking.
6. So, the authors of Scripture add that, when evil galloped into the world, suffering and death rode in on its back. St. Paul explains, "by one man sin entered the world"—referring to Adam—and he adds, "and death by sin" (*Romans 5:12*).
7. The sin of Adam opened a Pandora's Box of troubles and pains into the world.
8. The Bible is very clear that God is not the author of sin.
 - a) *You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness... (Habakkuk 1:13).*
 - b) *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. (James 1:13, NKJV).*
9. The Bible says the world's sufferings are basically as much fun as labor pains (*Romans 3:22*, I'm not making it up).
10. But, through suffering, like labor pains, God can create something wonderful. That's going to be our hope. The problem of pain gets fully solved. We'll come back to that.
11. This fallen world is a morally broken pain machine.
 - a) Bad things happen to good people.
 - b) Bad things happen to bad people.
 - c) It's random. It's not always your fault. Pain comes. Suffering comes. Heartache comes.
12. Suffering is our lot. It is the common lot of mankind. It is a world of tribulation. It is fallen. It is cursed. It is broken.
13. But IT IS NOT FROM GOD.
14. Let that sink in. Not from God. Not from him.
15. But you say, can't he stop it?
16. Why doesn't God stop it?
17. And so many people conclude that God isn't real, or doesn't care, or isn't present, and they erase him from the equation of their lives.
18. This is the heart of the problem of pain.
19. Let's look at the second thing Jesus might say to a person who is too hurt-by-God for faith.

B. Erasing God from the problem of pain doesn't erase the problem of pain.

1. Jesus would say, If you erase me, then what?
2. You still have all the pain, all the suffering, and all the cruelty, and the only thing you've done is to eliminate the comfort.
 - a) Why is there suffering in the world? If you erase God, all you can say is "It's random. We evolved that way."
 - b) So then if suffering and evil are part of the evolutionary process, why fight them? Why work to alleviate them? Why strive for justice?
3. If you knock the "God is good" corner off the so-called Inconsistent Triad, you still have all the pain, only with no explanations and no comfort.
4. If you dethrone the Christian God on the basis of the problem of pain, then what are your alternatives? Do they offer any hope in your pain? Do they alleviate your pain? Do they make better sense of your pain?
5. I think I'd rather be optimistic enough to believe in an all-good, all-powerful God and struggle with the problem of evil than to kick a corner off the triangle.
6. Erasing God from the problem of pain doesn't erase the problem of pain.
7. Here's the third thing Jesus would say:

C. Maybe you're thinking about this the wrong way.

1. There's a flaw in the logic of this triad.
2. The flaw assumes that pain and love are logically incompatible.
3. The unspoken premise of the Inconsistent Triad is that a good and loving God is morally obliged to give us a pain-free existence.
4. This makes me ask, Why. Why does the fact that something hurts obligate God to make it stop hurting? Why? And why can't God have goals that are more valuable to him than a pain free existence in the people called "time"?
5. Let me put on my professor hat and get theological with you.
6. I would like to talk about the Will of God. How God accomplishes his plan, his purposes, and his will in the world. When you read the Bible, it's pretty easy to organize the topic of God's will into several categories, but let me outline main two.
7. The Will of God
 - a) The things that God decrees and directly causes to happen.
 - (1) God decrees the universe into existence, the sun to come up every day, and the process of respiration that makes oxygen flow to every cell in your body. God decreed the birth, life, death, resurrection, and second coming of Christ. God decreed the plan of salvation. God decreed his grace.

- (2) There are many things that happen and will happen because God commands that they will happen. God is sovereign. He is the caring and powerful ruler of our lives and our world. All the cosmos does his will.
 - (3) The Bible says: *"God works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11).*
 - (4) In theology, this is called THE DECRETIVE WILL OF GOD. It is stuff that he *decrees*, stuff he directly causes.
 - (5) But there are many things that happen that God does not directly cause. So here's the second category.
 - b) The things that happen by other agencies, good and bad, that God permits.
 - (1) Adam and Eve sinned. God did not cause that, though he permitted it. You have sinned too, right? You have added x-number of pounds to the net weight of suffering and darkness to the world. Other people have been hurt by your choices. God did not cause that. He permitted you to make your choices and you did.
 - (2) Ditto for the devil. God did not cause his evil, the devil did.
 - (3) When Joseph's brothers beat him up and sold him into slavery, God did not cause that. When his master's wife falsely accused him, God did not cause that either.
 - (a) God has created a world in which free-will beings exercise their own limited sovereignty, and heap the consequences of their choices on themselves and others.
 - (b) In theology, this is called THE PERMISSIVE WILL OF GOD. It's stuff he permits.
 - i) So far so good?
 - (4) Now, the question is this: why doesn't a loving God stop the evil before it happens? Why does he permit it? That's the so-called problem of pain. Why doesn't he stop the suffering, the evil, and the sin?
 - (5) I have three answers, and the first one is a question:
 - (a) 1. How long would you last in a universe where God stomps on sinners before they sin?
 - i) Would you make it through even one day?
 - ii) The permissive will of God allows you to be you, even when you're an idiot. You should be glad, even though other people might wish God would just stomp you into a gooey little splat on the sidewalk.
 - (b) 2. There is something about free will that is more important to God than our pain-free existence.
 - i) Free will goes with love. Free will goes with nobility. Free will goes with human flourishing. It is an expression of the image of God in us; a measure of divine sovereignty by virtue of the image of God.
 - ii) Free will is the essence of faith, and God loves faith.
 - iii) Free will turns out to be one of the most important elements in all of God's creation. So, in this world, his permissive will allows will free reign, even when the choices are bad. It is more important than our pain-free existence.
 - (c) 3. Just because human logic can't fit together the world's pain and God's love doesn't mean they can't fit together in the end.
 - i) Human logic is limited. It is a tiny fraction of the divine genius. It is a black and white TV in a full color universe. Human logic is a goldfish in a bowl pontificating on the milky way galaxy.
 - ii) Illustration: suppose I have two pieces on a puzzle board, and they just don't fit together. One piece represents suffering in the world. The other piece represents the goodness and love of God.
 - iii) The don't fit together. There's a gap.
 - iv) But what if that's only because you're putting the pieces together in two dimensions.
 - v) What if you lift the love of God into a third dimension?
 - vi) But, if you lift the love of God into a third-dimension plain, these seemingly incompatible pieces mesh together perfectly.
 - vii) We see and think in two dimensions. God has all the dimensions in the world.
 - (1) *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9, NKJV).*
 - (6) If I'm stuck inside a pain machine, I would rather cling to the love of an omniscient God than to the randomness of an impersonal universe.
 - (a) God doesn't cause evil.
 - (b) God doesn't eliminate evil.
 - (c) God redeems evil and brings about good in spite of it.
 - c) If you're ready to throw away God because of the problem of pain, think again. Maybe you're thinking about it the wrong way. Don't call your thinking logical when it's basically emotional.
- D. Whatever else you might say about the problem of pain, you can never accuse Jesus of standing aloof from it.
 1. *God 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. Please don't think Jesus used his divine powers as a narcotic to deaden his pain. Jesus encountered the problem of pain in its fullness as a man—without resorting to his divine powers (Philippians 2:5-8). God understands the problem of pain through direct experience. *"Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18, NLT).*
 3. No matter how much you hurt, you are never alone. God comes alongside you and is ready to embrace you with an empathy that knows no bounds.
 4. He has felt what you feel, with the same limitations that limit you.
 5. There is no other belief-system that offers anything like this

6. No other religion even comes close. No other God-became-man suffered and died as our sin-bearer. No other god satisfied the demands of cosmic justice relative to evil, while providing the final solution to the problem of pain.
 - a) If you don't like the biblical answer to the problem of pain, do you have a better one?
 7. One last thing Jesus would say:
- E. Pain Is temporary; heaven's blessings are eternal.
1. Pain is temporary. I know, I know. No pain ever feels temporary. My friend has endured twenty surgeries for chronic back pain. I'm sure her pain doesn't feel temporary. When your child suffers. When you see the pain the world, it fills the lens like it's the biggest thing in the world.
 2. But it's not.
 3. In the end, all evil and pain are a blip on the eternal radar screen that appeared for a moment and was gone.
 4. 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 awesome promise:
 - a) *"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).*
 5. How could a hunted, slandered, tortured, persecuted Roman prisoner like St. Paul call anybody's affliction light and momentary? I don't know what you feel like when you're hurting, but for me, pain feels heavy and forever. So God invites us into a secret way of understanding it: set your pain in an eternal context.
 6. Compared to 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.
 7. Scripture just 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. Pain does not have the final say. It does not win in the end. God overcomes it. God punishes those who perpetrate it. He balances the scales of justice in the end, forever and ever and ever.
 8. In the end, the pain machine gets eaten by the grace machine and spit into oblivion forever.
 9. That belief carries us through. Isn't that incredible?
 10. But it gets better.
 11. The most amazing part of Paul's statement is that our afflictions produce something: "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." I'm not sure of all that it means, but it sounds great. It offers a hope that no other system promises: that suffering isn't wasted. No tear is wasted. God keeps track, and it all means something.
 12. And every minute of suffering on earth that you mix with faith instead of bitterness, faith instead of disbelief, faith instead of revenge, faith instead of dysfunction... when you mix trials with faith, that faith (prayer, praise, confidence, courage) rewarded in heaven a million times over so that you are going to say, "It was worth it all".
 13. You will trade your momentary, light, afflictions for a far more eternal and exceeding weight of glory.
 14. It will be worth it.
 15. It will be worth it.
 16. It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus.
 17. Are you looking for an answer to the problem of pain? Christianity offers a God who felt the fullest measure of human suffering, a Savior who comforts us in our suffering, a global mission to alleviate suffering, final justice for those who cause suffering, a coming world that abolishes suffering, and rewards every sufferer with blessings words can't describe... What does your system offer?"
- V. Conclusion
- A. I want to do something different as I close my message today.
 - B. I want to pray with you to let go of bitterness against God. I want to bring that voice in your heart forward — that voice that says, "I'm too [hurt-by-God] for faith." That voice. That inner child. That wounded spirit. I want to create a safe space and a safe moment to bring forth that part of your memories, your soul, your spirit.
 - C. And I want to help that part of you talk to God... and to in a sense, forgive God, for letting bad things happen. I know, I know, God needs no forgiveness. This isn't his need; it's yours.
 - D. So please let's all bow our heads, and I want to lead you in a simple prayer.
 1. Father... today I say the problem of pain wasn't caused by you. It is being unwound by you. I have been caught in its teeth. I remember my suffering.
 2. Lord, I have blamed you for it. I have blamed you for not stopping it. I have pushed you away. I have distanced myself. I have been hurt, and mad, and confused.
 3. Today, I let it go.
 - a) I let go of my anger.
 - b) I let go of my bitterness.
 - c) I let go of my endless cycles of grief.
 4. And I say, thank you for being with me, even in the more horrible moments. Thank you for restraining the evil in my life to whatever degree you did.
 5. You are not the author of evil.
 6. You are unwinding it. You are healing it. You are avenging it better than I ever could.
 7. And you are more loving, more faithful, more powerful, and more merciful that I have ever imagined before.
 8. Thank you for loving me so much.
 9. In Jesus Name, Amen.