

## INTRODUCTION

I heard the funny story about a guy who was sitting at his kitchen table working furiously on something. His wife came in and said, “What are you doing?” He said, “I’m putting together a jigsaw puzzle. According to the box it’s supposed to be a rooster, but I can’t get the pieces to fit.” His wife looked at the box and looked at her husband and said, “Put the cornflakes back in the box!” Many folks are like that. They’re trying to put together the pieces of the puzzles of life, and they don’t have the right pieces. One of the greatest puzzles of life is why good people suffer.

In this message I’m going to specifically address the puzzling question: Why do bad things happen to God’s people? A political cartoon in Thursday’s Tyler paper showed a figure of Uncle Sam sitting in a college class room where desks had been overturned. Uncle Sam is sitting alone with his head in his hands and one large is written on the blackboard: “Why?” And you might think that I’m speaking on this topic because of the terrible shooting rampage on the campus of Virginia Tech—and indeed that tragedy makes this a question more pertinent than a week ago. But, the truth is that I selected this text and topic for today last summer when I was on my annual planning retreat. Once again, it’s clear that God knew much better than I did that today would be the perfect time to address this question.

This question is often asked as, “Why do bad things happen to GOOD people?” My response to that question is “Who is a good person?” The Bible says “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:12). Actually, a better question may be, “Why do good things happen to bad people like us?”

We’re not good people, but if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you can be considered one of God’s people. The Bible says we are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” (1 Peter 2:9) And the truth is that even God’s people aren’t immune to pain and suffering. Bad things do happen to God’s people. On the surface it seems to be a conundrum or a contradiction: If God is all good (and He is); and He is all powerful (and He is); then it would seem to make sense that He would use His good power to prevent bad things from happening to people—*especially* His people. But we all know that’s not the case. Christians get shot by crazed gunmen the same as non-Christians. Christians have cancer and heart attacks just like atheists do.

Most of us are drawn to the false assumption that if we’re good, say our prayers, and pay our taxes then nothing bad should happen to us or our loved ones. There’s an old Seinfeld episode where Kramer keeps saying, “Even Steven, Jerry! It all balances out!” Jerry loses a job, then gets a phone call 5 minutes later offering him another job for the same money. Jerry misses his favorite TV show, but then he catches the rerun. Elaine throws \$20 of Jerry’s money out the window and Jerry finds another \$20 bill wadded up in his jacket. “Even Steven, Jerry! It all balances out!” But that’s just TV and there’s no such thing as reality TV!

But God never promised that life would balance out. Phillip Yancey wrote a great book about dealing with adversity entitled *Disappointment with God*. In it he wrote: “Is life fair? Read the story of Jesus and ask yourself, ‘Was life fair to him?’ The cross has demolished for all time the

basic assumption that life will be fair!” I’ve said before, “Life isn’t fair, but God is good.”

In this passage, Paul, one of God’s people writes about his suffering. Let’s read his words in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, and note all the words that describe his pain.

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, and as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”

I don’t have to convince you that bad things DO happen to God’s people. Like Paul, we all have the scars to prove that. Instead, I want us to consider the question, “Why?” What is the purpose behind the pain that God allows us to experience? I don’t have all the answers to that question, but here are five reasons why God allows me to suffer.

### **(1) To make me focus on what’s really important**

Paul was referring to an event that was so painful, he fully expected to die. He wrote in verse 8 “so that we despaired even of life.” The word Paul used for “great pressure” is the word *thlipsis* which means to be crushed. We don’t know exactly what hardship in Asia Paul was referring to, but he might have been referring to what happened to him in Lystra recorded in Acts 14. Paul and Barnabas were preaching in Lystra when a mob attacked him. They dragged Paul outside the city and pelted his body with jagged stones until they thought he was dead. Then they left him bleeding and unconscious beside the road. But later when the disciples came to pray for Paul, he recovered and went back into the city.

When you’re being stoned to death, unimportant issues seem to fade away. After you get a doctor’s report that you have a malignancy, you’re not going to be too upset about the color of the carpet in your hospital room. As Vance Havner used to say, “When you’re up to your neck in alligators, you aren’t interested in calling a symposium on how to drain the swamp.” Adversity has a way of making us focus on the important things in life. Pain gets our attention.

C.S. Lewis wrote two books dealing with suffering. The first was a philosophical treatise on suffering called *The Problem of Pain*. In it he discusses pain dispassionately from an intellectual perspective. At the age of 59, C. S. Lewis married Joy Davidman Gresham, an American who was 16 years younger than him, divorced, a Jew, a Communist, and an atheist before she became a Christian by reading Lewis’ books. When they married she had been diagnosed with cancer and even called their marriage “a deathbed wedding.” She recovered for awhile and they were married for four years before she died. After her death, Lewis wrote his second book on suffering entitled, *A Grief Observed*. This second book about pain was a personal expression of his pain and anguish over the death of his wife. In writing about pain, Lewis made the famous quote you’ve probably heard: “God whispers in our pleasure, but He shouts in our pain.” But

there’s another quote that is also powerful but less familiar. He wrote: “Pain removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.” (*The Problem of Pain*). In other words, when things are going great in our lives, we tend to major on the minors. It’s only when pain comes that the veil is removed and God gets our attention. Suffering makes us focus on the real issues of life and death.

## **(2) To prove to me that I can’t help myself**

Verse 9 contains a great statement behind the purpose in suffering. Paul wrote, “this happened that we might not rely on ourselves.” A few years ago I brought a series of messages entitled, “No, that’s NOT in the Bible.” I used this passage to debunk two of the worst misquotations people say are in the Bible. People say, “The Bible says, ‘God won’t put more on you than you can bear.’” Nope, that’s not in the Bible. In fact, God will often allow us to get to a point of total desperation that is beyond our ability to bear. In verse 8 Paul wrote that his experience of pressure and pain was far beyond his ability to endure. And the reason WHY God allowed him to reach that point of total desperation was to teach him NOT to rely on his own strength. That debunks the second scripture misquotation. People often say, “The Bible says, ‘God helps those who help themselves.’” Wrong again. God helps the helpless. It was when Paul was going through an experience beyond his ability to endure that he learned just how helpless he was.

The Bible says in Proverbs 3:5 “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” You won’t truly be able to fully trust in the Lord until you *stop* leaning on your own understanding and your own strength.

When I was a teenager, I took lessons to become a Red Cross Certified life guard. I remember our instructor telling us if we’re ever faced with the crisis of rescuing a drowning man who is bigger and stronger than us that we should delay reaching them until their strength was almost spent. I remember thinking, “That doesn’t make sense. Shouldn’t I swim out and get him as soon as possible?” But he explained that a drowning man can be dangerous because if he has the strength to kick and fight and panic he’s liable to drown both of us. It’s only when they reach the end of their strength and give up that they can be rescued. There’s a great life lesson there. When we are still kicking and fighting to save ourselves there’s nothing God can do for us. But when we surrender and to the point where we realize we have no strength left that God intervenes and rescues us.

Before suffering or affliction comes into your life you may be tempted to swell up and boast, “I can handle anything!” But when you go through the pain of adversity, and reach the end of your strength and have to admit, “Lord, I’m drowning. I’m going down for the last time, and if you don’t deliver me, I’m a goner.” Once you’ve been there you become a humble person who has to sing again that first song we learned as kids in Sunday School: “Jesus loves me this I know; For the Bible tells me so; Little ones to Him belong; I am weak, but He is strong!”

## **(3) To convince me to trust in God alone**

When Paul came to the place of pain which was far beyond his ability to endure, he did the only he could do: He trusted God. He wrote in verse 10 “On him we have set our hope that he will

continue to deliver us.” He used the word “deliver” three times. He said, “God delivered us (past tense). He is still delivering us (present tense) and He will continue to deliver us (future tense).”

There have been many attempts by hurting people to answer the question “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?” There’s a popular book by a similar title written by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Rabbi Kushner spoke here at our church about 10 years ago. He’s a wonderful gentleman and a scholar, but his answer to that question still leaves me flat. Rabbi Kushner basically says that God is a good God (I agree) but that God is powerless to help us (I respectfully disagree.) To put it in his words, Rabbi Kushner wrote: “Even God has a hard time keeping chaos in check... [God is] a God of justice and not of power.” (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*). My Bible tells me that God is a God of justice, but that He is a God of power as well. In fact, He is God Almighty, the Omnipotent ruler of the universe, and NOTHING is impossible with God.

So, I’m going to politely disagree with Rabbi Kushner’s reasoning. Instead, I choose to believe the words of another fellow struggler, the great pastor, S.M. Lockridge. His initials stand for Shadrack Meshack Lockridge and he was a long-time pastor in San Diego. He may not be as articulate as Rabbi Kushner, but he is far more eloquent: God is enduringly strong and He’s entirely sincere. He’s eternally steadfast and He’s immortally graceful. He’s imperially powerful and He’s impartially merciful. He’s the greatest phenomenon that has ever crossed the horizon of this world. He does not have to call for help and you can’t confuse Him. He doesn’t need you and He doesn’t need me. He stands alone in the solitude of Himself. He’s August and He’s unique. He’s unparalleled, He’s unprecedented, He’s supreme, He’s preeminent, He’s the superlative of everything good you can call Him. And you CAN trust Him! He can satisfy all your needs, and He can do it simultaneously. He supplies strength for the weak and He’s available for the tempted and the tried. He sympathizes and He sees. He guards and He guides, He heals the sick, He cleansed the Leper, He forgives sinners, He discharges debtors, He delivers the captives, He defends the feeble, He blesses the young, He regards the aged, He rewards the diligent, He beautifies the meek, I’M TRYING TO TELL YOU CHURCH, YOU CAN TRUST HIM! He’s the Master of the mighty, He’s the captain of the conquerors, He’s the Head of heroes, He’s the Leader of legislators, He’s the Overseer of the overcomers, He’s the Governor of the governors, He’s the Prince of princes, He’s the King of Kings, He’s the Lord of lords, YOU...CAN...TRUST...HIM!!!

Friend, God allowed you go through tough times in the past because it’s only when you *had* to trust Him that you learned that you *can* trust Him. As the old song says, “When you come to the place where’s He’s all you’ve got; you’ll find that He’s all you need!”

#### **(4) To teach me that I need the help of others**

Paul gave glory to God for delivering him, but he also wrote in verse 10 “and as you help us by your prayers.” That’s a pretty important AND. We should trust God alone, but we need another resource as well. We need the help of God’s people, the church. God never intended us to be lone-ranger Christians toughing it out on our own. Today, there are some people who say they love God but they don’t care for the church. That’s a contradiction. It’s like saying you love swimming but you don’t like water. Or it’s like saying you love to eat, but you don’t like food.

The church isn’t perfect, but it’s the Body of Christ on this earth. It’s God’s only show in town. I’m not talking about a cold, formal, legalistic churchianity. I’m talking about God’s people who love each other and pray for each other. Paul said, “God delivered me, but I couldn’t have made it without your prayers.”

As a church, we exist to “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2) The law of Christ is to love God and to love our neighbors. We love our neighbors by carrying their burdens. That’s why we have a Grief Share ministry, to help you carry the burden of your pain over the death of a loved one. That’s why we have a Divorce Recovery Ministry—to help bear your burden from a devastating break-up. That’s why we have GraceWorks Ministry, to help you bear the burdens of the pains and problems we all face. That’s why we have a Celebrate Recovery Ministry to help you bear the burden of your hurts, habits, and hang ups.

We’re not perfect, but we’re all holding on to each other sustaining each other. I need you and you need me.

The mighty redwood trees in California can grow to be hundreds of feet tall, but you never see one standing alone. The roots of a redwood tree are so shallow it could never stand alone without falling or being blown over. But below the surface of the forest, the roots of redwood trees intertwine with each other and support each other. We’re the same way. I need you to help me stand. We need each other, especially when we’re hurting.

### **(5) To prepare me to help others who struggle**

Since Paul was such a recovering struggler, his words of God’s deliverance helped others. He knew the story of his deliverance would spread among the believers because he wrote in verse 11 “Many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us.” God has a school for His children and it is call the University of Affliction. The tuition is rather high, and the courses are tougher than calculus or organic chemistry. The time and place of the classes aren’t even announced in advance. You just wake up one day in the middle of your pain and discover that class has started.

The class roll has some prominent names of former students. Abraham, Moses, Job, Hannah, David, Job, Esther, Jeremiah, Job (he took the same class several times), Peter, Stephen, and thousands of others who suffered and survived or suffered and died. Their struggles give strength to those of us who are now taking the same courses in the University of Affliction. Are you enrolled? You don’t ever graduate until you move on to heaven. You just keep getting to take more and more graduate courses. But remember, the more degrees you have the better teacher you become.

Like you, I’ve been taking classes in the U. of A. For instance, when a parent comes to me concerned about a child who is suffering from severe depression, I have a little more insight to encourage them to trust God. Before I took that class, I wasn’t qualified to help them. When someone comes to me with the burden of a dying parent, and the question of having to remove life-support when there seems to be no hope, I have personal experience from my time when I

took that same class.

What are some of the painful experiences you’ve been through in the past? Did you lose a child? Lose a job? Lose your mate? Instead of being resentful about that, why don’t you use that experience to help others who are facing the same thing?

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Take-away Truth: Every scar tells a story**

These are five reasons why I believe God allows us to go through time of pain and suffering. As we finish, let me serve you another Take-away Truth: Every scar tells a story. When my daughters were little they would climb into my lap and they would look at my face. It’s hard to see from a distance, but I have a long scar right under my chin. I can remember my girls asking, “Daddy, where did you get that scar?” I would tell them that when I was just a little boy, my mother came home from the hospital with my new little brother, Danny. She wasn’t feeling well, and she was confined to her bed for a few days. I wanted to make her feel better, so I picked some wildflowers growing in our garden and I ran toward the house with this simple bouquet of love for my mother. As I ran up our concrete steps, I tripped. I can remember in that momentary flash thinking, “I can either let go of the flowers and catch myself, or I can hang onto the flowers and take it on the chin.” I chose to hang onto the flowers...and the result was a visit to the doctor’s office to have my chin stitched up...that’s the story behind the scar on my chin.

The scar on my thumb is from when we were building our first house, doing a lot of the work ourselves. I was putting the round sheet metal sections together for a prefab fireplace chimney and as I was climbing down from the roof I fell about eight feet and as I tried to break my fall, my hand hit one of the sheet metal chimney sections and almost sliced my thumb off. They liked that story, too! I have other scars, and they wanted to know the story behind all of them.

Think about your scars. Your scars have stories, too. It might have been a surgery, an injury, an accident or a war wound. You should be proud of your scars, because they prove that you suffered, but you survived. To paraphrase what Paul was really trying to communicate, he wrote, “I have suffered, and I have scars, but I have survived, and I have a story to tell of God’s deliverance.” Your scars should tell you the same thing. You’ve suffered and you will suffer again, but the same God who delivered you before is the God who will deliver you again!

So, don’t fret, don’t worry, don’t weep, instead place your trust in the God who can deliver you through suffering.

The biggest question about our suffering is not “Why?” but “What?” What am I going to do in response to my suffering? You have a choice in the matter. When pain comes, some people grumble, some people gripe, some people groan, others grieve. Some people grunt and growl, but there are some people, like Paul, who GROW. The choice is yours!

## OUTLINE

- (1) To make me focus on what’s really important
- (2) To prove to me that I can’t help myself
- (3) To convince me to trust in God alone
- (4) To teach me that I need the help of others
- (5) To prepare me to help others who struggle

Take-away Truth: Every scar tells a story



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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes