

## Why Does God Allow Suffering?

Texts: Gen. 1:27-28, Rom. 7:15-25a, (8:18-25)

July 10, 2011

We received an e-mail in the Church office last week concerning a young man, Dalton Williams, 18 years old from Lorena. He was in a terrible crash of an 18 passenger church van in Oak Grove, LA on June 23 riding home from the church following a Bible class. His mother, sisters and two others were killed. Dalton was critically injured with a crushed skull and numerous other injuries. He is stable now and making progress. They were asking for donations to help transport him back to Waco when he gets well enough to travel. We hear about tragedies too frequently. There was no apparent cause for this accident and the driver was not believed to have been impaired in any way. Perhaps mechanical failure, or it could be just one of these accidents that could not be avoided.

People say all kinds of things about such events. One of the most common offered by well-meaning Christians is "It was God's will." I have known people who believed that and were angry with God for a long time. Is that the kind of God we have that causes the death and injury of seemingly innocent children and adults? I and many theologians believe that is **nothing like our God** we know from Jesus and the rest of the Bible. We read in the book of 2 Peter 3:9 that our God is not willing that anyone should die, but that his will is that everyone come to know him through repentance and enjoy eternal life with Jesus, our Lord.

So, "If God is a good and loving, all-powerful and all-knowing God, how can he allow this to happen," some have asked? Questions like that were among the most common turned to me. Actually, it is the most common question asked in other surveys. What they are asking may imply that, "If God is all-powerful, if he didn't cause it, then he could have kept it from happening; either way he is at fault."

We are told repeatedly in the Old and New Testaments that God is good. Psalm 34:8 says, "O, taste and see that the Lord is good." God is a good and loving God and is concerned for OUR GOOD. But, what does it mean? When we think of "God as good" C.S. Lewis says in *The Problem with Pain*, that we most often mean "nice," someone who is mostly concerned about us feeling good, not telling us the truth if we need correcting. If God has our ultimate good in mind, then we cannot accept that God causes or wills people to suffer by his design. What is the answer? Isaiah 55:8(CEV) says, "*The Lord says: 'My thoughts and my ways are not like yours.'*"

God gave Jeremiah (ch. 18) an analogy at the potter's shop one day. He showed him that the potter molded the clay into whatever he wanted. If the clay didn't cooperate and the vessel was spoiled, he put the clay back in the bin and worked it hard to make it more pliable and useful before putting it back on the wheel. God told Jeremiah that He was like the potter and the people like the clay. God is like an artist working with us like human clay to make beautiful works of art and he isn't content to leave us unfinished, but he continues to work on us to make us more and more like the image he has in mind for each of us.

The creation story in Genesis is followed in chapter 3 by the temptation and disobedience of the first human couple. What had been a utopian garden in paradise became a crime scene. Because, God gave the humans an incredibly beautiful and dangerous gift, **FREE WILL**. God wanted creatures to have the power to decide for themselves whether to obey his laws or not. Wouldn't it have been easier if God had not given humans the power of choice? What would they be then – only robots without a will or soul – certainly not "fully human" as we know it. Why was that so important? Only persons free to decide for themselves could truly love God and respond to God's love. As we think about free will, even our pets have a degree of free will. We teach them our rules and reward them when they do right and gently "correct" them when they disobey. That is the way we show them our love. Our older dog is very obedient and loves to make us happy. The smaller and younger one has

a more stubborn streak. But, after several years of work, she is coming around very well. She used to run away if she got out, but now she realizes that we love her care for her. Now they both will stay with us unleashed outside the fence and obey several commands. They are free to decide whether to disobey or choose to love us back by trying to please us.

As insulting as it may seem, we humans are similar in our relationship with our Creator. We have to decide if we are going to “do our own thing” or cooperate with God’s rules and learn his ways, even if we do not understand them. They are “higher” than ours, and may make no sense to us. We are a lot more intelligent than dogs, so we have a more difficult challenge in obeying God’s rules. Some of us tend to think our ways are better than God’s. Rather, all of us as Paul points out in Romans 3 quoting from Psalm 14. We decide to do things our own way very often even if we know better. That is what is called the human “sinful nature.” We often chose ways that are not God’s. God has offered us guidelines and rules that will lead us in a life of joy and peace in close relationship with him. Paul said in Romans 7, we read that he hated that about himself, knowing what the right things were but doing the wrong ones, over and over. I believe our dogs have it easier than we do, because we have an evil force trying to blow us off course, to destroy God’s people. When we do that which God has said is wrong, that is what the Bible calls **SIN**, or literally, “missing the mark.” I don’t think this is news to anyone here. The result is suffering for us, for others, and often both.

Sometimes suffering is caused by a powerful group within society, even the government with willful disregard of others’ wellbeing and/or rights, like the death of hundreds in India from toxic chemicals from a chemical plant explosion several years ago. When we think outbreaks of conflict leading to massive flight of refugees, of oppressive poverty, malnutrition and starvation, preventable and curable diseases, they often could be relieved by people with resources if they would – sins of **OMISSION**.

Suffering comes to every life to some degree as we all know. There can be several causes:

1. It may be the result of someone’s choice affecting another
2. It may be the result of someone’s own choice
3. It may be the result of an accident

1. There are plenty of examples we could point to about suffering and perhaps death caused by another person. You may have heard and seen a lot about the Casey Anthony case that concluded last week. Police believe Casey murdered her three-year-old daughter, Caylee. The state tried her, and you probably heard she was acquitted. What a horrible crime and sin! Some will ask, “If God is loving and all-powerful, how could God allow that to happen?” Because of “Free Will,” God doesn’t intervene in every accident or sin. It is necessary the natural consequences occur in order for the offender to see the result and realize the suffering they caused. God doesn’t cause this pain but uses it to show them their sinfulness in hope they will repent and turn toward God. As Christians we believe that every person will stand judgment for their sins if they do not accept Christ for forgiveness; God’s justice will come.

Even after we are in a living relationship with Jesus we still “miss the mark” even when we don’t meant to. The closer we are to God the sooner we realize our sin and feel the pain as a consequence of our disobedience, as well as the pain it causes others. God is not going to give up on anyone, especially if they are trying to go God’s way. He is always trying to mold us more and more into that perfect image he has in mind for us, as long as we live this life.

There are other causes for suffering that cannot be attributed to disobedience to God’s will. Diseases produces suffering that often cannot be attributed to anything other than perhaps genetics. This is difficult to accept for many of us having seen loved ones suffer and eventually die. We have a loving God who feels our pain, grief and sorrow. Jesus became a human to show us how much God cares

about our suffering. Thank God for the wonderful health care professionals who give their lives to try to stop diseases and reduce suffering. They are rich gifts from God. There are things all of us can do to help; practicing good hygiene can help to reduce infection, but won't stop disease. We must continue to look to God as our source of strength and hope believing that beyond the blessings of health care God does send miracles.

Natural causes are a great concern the last several years with so many disaster of epic proportions: drought, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, tornados, wildfires, volcanoes have killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions of victims the last several years causing untold pain and suffering that cannot be attributed to individuals or groups. In past times the blame was directed at God, but now we know that all these natural events are part of the normal functioning of our earth. The only thing that could be said would be that people may choose not to live in places where these natural events are known to be likely, like hurricanes in Florida and earthquakes in California, and floods along major rivers. Advances in construction methods have helped reduce the damage and suffering. But these events are just a part of life on this planet, not God's fault. But, God's people can help with rescue and repair like our mission team last month or helping with Dalton Williams' family with financial support and prayers.

The bottom line for me is that God allows suffering as a result of the necessity of free will for us humans and the whole of creation. The book of Romans has an interesting passage in chapter 8:18ff about suffering. Paul says that the whole creation suffers with us as we wait hopefully for our redemption as children of God. He goes on to assure us that the Holy Spirit himself is working with us to strengthen and sustain us through suffering no matter how severe or cruel. The stories of the martyrs finding God's strength and grace sufficient in their unbelievable suffering assures us that God's ways are not ours; they are beyond our understanding. He promises all things will work out for good for those who are working to accomplish God's will in each circumstance. What a beautiful promise. God loves us and won't give up on us or desert us when we suffer. Though God doesn't cause pain, suffering and death, he assures us that he will be walking with us through the flood and through the fire of suffering. He says, "My grace is sufficient for you" in every trial, in every crisis, in every disease, in every sorrow, and even death, because death is nothing but the doorway into the eternal joy and peace in his loving presence. Our God is a **GREAT** and **LOVING GOD**, all powerful, Creator who loves us so much he sent his Son to suffer and die so we will know God is with us in whatever we have to go through. We are not alone! **The best of all: GOD IS WITH US!**