

The God of Suffering  
Selected Scriptures  
ABC 9/2/18

Seeing how as 20% of regular attenders at ABC just returned from serving at JAF's Family Retreat & that we've heard from many of them this morning, we should expand some on what we saw 2 months ago in Ps 119:65-72.<sup>1</sup> I began that sermon with these words:

*Most people have heard the argument against Christianity based on the fact of suffering in the world. It's been expressed in different ways depending on the viewpoint of the unbeliever who says it. CS Lewis phrases it like this: If God were good He would wish to make His creatures happy, & if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished; but His creatures are not happy, therefore God lacks either goodness or power or both. This is the problem raised by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Though Kushner doesn't deny God's existence, his solution denies God's omnipotence. He says to love God & forgive Him despite His limitations. Remember that? The problem with this argument is that it assumes that the ultimate good is our lack of suffering & the only factors in it are the benevolence & omnipotence of God. Any serious thinker, & all Christians, know there's more to the problem of suffering than this. Nevertheless, the problem of pain is a big one. It's also personal & inescapable, because there's no one on earth who doesn't go through suffering.*

Suffering & affliction & disabilities are common to all mankind in a variety of degrees. In the midst of it, whatever it might be, can we say like the psalmist, **It is good for me that I was afflicted** (Ps 119:71)? Can we acknowledge & accept that He is the one who is sovereign over all suffering, affliction, & disabilities (Ps 119:75)?

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This morning we'll explore this a little further from Scripture & then partake of communion together, remembering Jesus' choosing the ultimate disability, death, on our behalf. PRAY

This past July Robert Latimer asked Canada's Prime Minister Trudeau to pardon him.<sup>2</sup> 24 years ago he put his 12-year-old daughter with severe cerebral palsy into the cab of his truck, ran a hose from the exhaust to the cab, climbed into the bed of the truck, sat on a tire, & watched her die. Latimer & his wife claimed it was for the best that their daughter, Tracy, died. The mother is quoted as saying that after they'd received news that Tracy needed another surgery, *It would be better for Tracy if she died. I knew I didn't have the courage to do it. But I wished it for her.* She says she felt relieved when 12 days later she arrived home from church to find Tracy dead in bed (Robert moved her after killing her). *I was so happy for her, she said. That was the best thing for Tracy, the best thing that happened to her.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Teth, preached 7/1/18 at ABC

<sup>2</sup> [www.ctvnews.ca/canada/pm-justice-minister-asked-to-consider-new-trial-or-pardon-in-latimer-case-1.4010562](http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/pm-justice-minister-asked-to-consider-new-trial-or-pardon-in-latimer-case-1.4010562)

<sup>3</sup> <https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1997/11/17/should-latimer-go-free>

After 2 trials & numerous appeals, Robert was convicted of 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder & sentenced to life in prison with parole possible after 10 years. We're shocked by stories like this. No matter what we want or pray, there will always be those with physical disabilities. If we're honest, we've all wondered why God allows disabilities, starvation, natural disasters, abuse, pain, & suffering. Why does God permit these things? Are they the result of sin? Does He cause them? Doesn't God want everyone to be healed & made perfect? How about the inevitable questions you'll face as a Christian, *How can a loving God allow people to be born with disabilities?* How do you answer? Although the *God can do what He wants* kind of answer is true, it doesn't fully answer the question. Does the Bible answer these questions? Yes, it does, but it's surrounded by some hard truths as well. Truths which some don't want to hear because they don't fit their concept of God. Open your Bibles to Exodus 4. Deficiencies, disabilities, & sufferings are...

**1. PLANNED BY GOD.** As cold as that might seem, to say the opposite contradicts Scripture. In Ex 3 God called Moses to go to Pharaoh & free His people from Egypt. But Moses comes up with what he probably figured was a great excuse. **Ex 4:10**

Jewish tradition says Moses had a severe speech impediment. Whatever the case, Moses felt unable to do what God asked of him. Had God made a mistake in choosing Moses to lead His people? No. God knew Moses as He knows us, better than we know ourselves. God's reply had to have surprised Moses & continues to surprise people today. **4:11**

Think about that. God is saying there's a knowledge & power that He exerts that actually causes some to be born with disabilities! God's claim here is surprising since any physical *defect* is considered awful to our thinking. To be born blind or deaf or even with something as Tracy had is considered the ultimate tragedy. However, if planned by God, is it a tragedy? Moses wasn't humanly perfect, he had a deficiency of some kind. What was God's solution? To cure him of it? Did God say, *Moses you're right. You can't do what I want you to do in your present state so I better fix you?* No. **4:12**

Isn't that a much better solution? This same sentiment is echoed by David in Ps 94:9-11.

**Does he who fashioned the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see? Does he who disciplines nations not punish? Does he who teaches mankind lack knowledge? The Lord knows all human plans; he knows that they are futile (NIV).**

In Latimer's trial the defense lawyer argued that Robert had to kill his daughter & did so out of love. That's futile thinking, that's human thinking. The prosecutor, on the other hand, made a profound statement which is almost biblical. He said, *Pain is a condition of life, not a reason for death.*<sup>4</sup> He's right & that theme is found throughout the Bible. Pain & suffering are a condition of life & yet God knows all about it & has a purpose & plan behind it. Moses tried to get out of doing what God called him to do. But his excuse didn't release him from God's plan. Latimer decided to play God & came up with his own solution. As we think about Tracy & the pain & suffering & evil in this world, the most common question is *Why?* The answer to this question, which is directed at God, isn't always clear. Sometimes the reason is apparent & sometimes it's not. Remember Jn 9:1-3?

**As He (Jesus) passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. & His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" (Common belief)**

**Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him."**

The reason for this man's disability was so Jesus could reveal God's glory through him. How many years had the man had to wait, enduring his suffering, not knowing why he was blind? 20, 30, 40 years? We don't know. What if that was God's answer to you? *This has happened so that the work of God might be displayed in your life.* Would that be sufficient to bring you peace, even if, unlike this man, you weren't healed? Just the simple fact that God would use you for His glory just the way you are, would that be enough for you? God can take the impossible & make it useful for Himself. John Piper describes it this way:

*God's infinite complexity is such that he can look at the world through two lenses. He can look through a narrow lens or a wide-angle lens. And when God looks at a painful or wicked event through a narrow lens, he sees the tragedy of sin for what it is in itself, and he is angered or he is*

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<sup>4</sup> [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/latimer-convicted-again/](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/latimer-convicted-again/)

*grieved at what he sees. "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone" (Ezekiel 18:32) — when God looks at a painful or a wicked event through his narrow lens.*

*But when he looks through his wide-angle lens, he sees the tragedy of sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing from it. He sees it in relation to all the connections and all the effects that form a pattern or a mosaic, stretching into eternity. And that mosaic and all of its parts, good and evil, bring him delight. Psalm 135:6, "Whatever the LORD pleases he does." He is pleased by all that he does and all that he permits in the world. He has his reasons for doing it in the wide-angle lens of things.<sup>5</sup>*

Believers can trust that their sufferings are being viewed through God's wide-angled lens & He is delighted & glorified in the patience & faith that the trials are producing in their lives (Js 1:2). Countless Christians can attest to the fact that Jesus has revealed His glory through their sufferings. Some people say, *But God doesn't have the right!* Oh no? Paul addresses that kind of foolishness in Rom 9:21-23.

**Does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? & He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.**

The theme of God's sovereign right & ability to do with His creation what He wants is very clear. He is sovereign & personally involved in His creation. Charles Spurgeon said,

*I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes; that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens; that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence; the fall of...leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche.<sup>6</sup>*

God is in control & has the right to do as He pleases! Didn't God blind Saul on the road to Damascus? Yet God raised him up to do a powerful work for Him. Do we always know the reason why God causes or allows disabilities, suffering, & pain? No. Does that mean He's not in control or doesn't know what's going on? Not at all. In Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for Faith*, he explores these issues. In his search for answers he interviews Peter Kreeft, philosophy professor

<sup>5</sup> [www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-god-delight-in-destroying-sinners](http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-god-delight-in-destroying-sinners)

<sup>6</sup> Sermon on Ezek 1:15-19 titled, *God's Providence*

at Boston College & author of the book, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. Let me read you part of what Kreeft said.

*How can a mere finite human be sure that infinite wisdom would not tolerate certain short-range evils in order for more long-range goods that we couldn't foresee?*

I could see his point but needed an example. *Elaborate a bit.*

Kreeft thought for a moment, *Look at it this way*, he said. *Would you agree that the difference between us & God is greater than the difference between us &, say, a bear?*

I nodded.

*Okay, then, imagine a bear in a trap & a hunter who, out of sympathy, wants to liberate him. He tries to win the bear's confidence, but he can't do it, so he has to shoot the bear full of drugs. The bear, however, thinks this is an attack & that the hunter is trying to kill him. He doesn't realize that this is being done out of compassion.*

*Then, in order to get the bear out of the trap, the hunter has to push him further into the trap to release the tension on the spring. If the bear were semiconscious at that point, he would be even more convinced that the hunter was his enemy who was out to cause him suffering & pain. But the bear would be wrong. He reaches this incorrect conclusion because he's not a human being.*

Kreeft let the illustration soak in for a moment. *Now*, he concluded, *how can anyone be certain that's not an analogy between us & God? I believe God does the same to us sometimes, & we can't comprehend why He does it any more than the bear can understand the motivations of the hunter. As the bear could have trusted the hunter, so we can trust God.*<sup>7</sup>

Disabilities & handicaps are caused by God with His glory in mind. As the bear could have trusted the hunter, so we can trust God. Is that all there is to it? Nope! One day, it appears to me, He'll fix it all! All of the disabilities, handicaps, & hardships we see or experience...

**2. REVEAL WHAT HEAVEN HAS TO OFFER.** Would heaven be heaven if everything was perfect here? No matter what physical or mental handicap or disability one may have to endure on this earth, even the longest life is only a short time in comparison with eternity. As a butterfly in a cocoon, every Christian is awaiting a greater, glorious day. There are many people who feel that God didn't give them a fair shake. Some have deformities, some have lost limbs, some are paralyzed,

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<sup>7</sup>Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, page 32

some can't hear or see, some have mental problems, others autism or learning difficulties. But God has no intention of leaving anybody in that condition forever. For those who trust in Christ, complete healing is assured. Every disease will be cured, every disability corrected, & every weakness eliminated. & the person who knows that his destiny is glorious & certain will be free to live the most radical life of love & sacrifice here on earth, all for the glory of God.

The Bible clearly teaches that our sovereign God is the One responsible for the disabilities that occur in us. Is that the worst that can happen to a person? No, the worst that can happen to a person is for them to reject Jesus Christ. God uses disaster & hardship & disability to call attention to our sin, guilt, & final destination with the desire that we'll turn to Him. For all who reject Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior, they'll reap the eternal consequences of their sin & rebellion. *Where's God's mercy?* you might ask. It's at the cross. It was there that God offered up His son & Jesus gave up His life to carry away the burden & punishment of our sin. That's the supreme mercy shown to each of us & to reject it means that God will reject you. But He hasn't yet. Now is the time for repentance. Today can be the day of your salvation & the beginning of a new course in your life. Jesus died so no matter our physical condition here, there's new life now & eternal life awaiting those who've received the gift of salvation & deliverance from sin through Jesus Christ. God will help anyone who believes in His Son to make it through this life's disabilities. He may not heal the body or the mind, but the soul will be renewed day-by-day. What a great & precious promise! If your greatest goal is to glorify God, as it should be (1 Cor 10:31), don't view your disabilities as imperfections without purpose. Instead, see them as a means that God has given you to glorify Him (Jn 11:4; 21:19). See them as birthmarks of beauty & be sure to remember that whatever is for God's glory, will bring to us the greatest blessing! Though we may not have all the answers, we must take comfort that God (though He can remove suffering) has a wise & often hidden & good purpose for allowing us to continue in our affliction.

Although Robert Latimer claimed his daughter was in pain & her life was terrible, his wife's journal painted a different picture. Tracy experienced joy & love. 6 days before her murder her

mother wrote that Tracy had *eaten well* and was *quite cheerful*.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to his claim that love was the reason for what he did, at his trial another disabled girl who testified as a friend of Tracy's said something profound. She said, *What happened to Tracy Latimer was not an act of love. She was killed the day love ran out*.<sup>9</sup>

How true. Robert Latimer is still unrepentant & totally convinced he did the right thing. We can only hope that one day he sees his sin & repents before God. But that will only happen when he sees what a beautiful gift from God his Tracy was to him & his wife.

Disability, by definition, means you are unable to do something, right? So what's the worst disability? Is it a physical limitation or a mental one? What would you rate as the worst disability?

An elderly woman stood on a busy street corner, hesitant to cross because there was no traffic signal. As she waited, a gentleman came up beside her & asked, *May I cross over with you?* Relieved, she thanked him & took his arm. The path they then took was anything but safe. The man seemed hesitant & confused as they dodged traffic & walked in a zig-zag pattern across the street. *You almost got us killed!* the woman exclaimed in anger when they finally reached the other side of the street. *You walk like you're blind!* she declared to which the man replied, *I am. That's why I asked if I could cross with you!*

Some think blindness is the worst disability. I disagree. The worst disability is death. When you're dead, your body is the epitome of disabled. It can do nothing! The real problem is the spiritual disability of all humanity. We are dead in our sins (Eph 2:5). Spiritually, all people are dead until God draws them to Himself & they experience new life that is found only in Jesus. He came to this earth to heal sin-sick, dead souls. There's no disease of the world that He cannot cure. There's no form of spiritual sickness He can't overcome. All are curable. He can put a new song in a sinner's mouth & make him speak with love of the God he once ridiculed. He can open the eyes of a person's understanding & make him see God's kingdom. He can open a person's ears & make him willing to hear His voice & to follow Him wherever He goes. He can give power to someone who once walked in the broad way that leads to destruction & guide his feet into the way of life. He can make hands that were once instruments of sin to serve Him & do His will. The time of miracles isn't over. Every conversion is a miracle! Jesus came to open blind eyes & to set

<sup>8</sup> [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/latimer-convicted-again/](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/latimer-convicted-again/)

<sup>9</sup> <https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1997/11/17/should-latimer-go-free>

us free from the incredible weight of the load we carry of guilt, bondage to sin, & condemnation. Without Jesus we remain unable, disable, to find healing & peace & joy. We are weak, handicapped, & incapable to see spiritual truth. It may not appear on the outside as a physical infirmity, but we're crippled by sin & legally incapable of justifying ourselves before God. In our spiritual blindness & darkness Jesus came as the light of the world & breathed life into our spiritual deadness. We live in a dark, diseased, disabled world under the curse of sin. God owes this utterly rebellious planet absolutely nothing. But aren't you glad He desires all to come to Him (Mt 11:28). He came to this unbelieving, sarcastic, skeptical, spiritually dead & dark world to bring His light, His power to save, His ability to sustain, & His willingness to exchange His death for our life. Transformation comes from a God who embraces us with arms stretched out on a cross. As the guys come for communion, let's PRAY.

God's answer to the problem of suffering is that He came right down into it. Are we broken? He was broken like bread for us. Are we despised? He was despised & rejected of men. Do we cry out that we can't take it any longer? He was a man of sorrows & acquainted with grief. Do people betray us? He was sold out by a friend. Are our closest relationships broken? He too loved & was rejected. Do people turn from us? They hid their faces from Him. Does He descend into all of our hells? Yes, He does. From the depths of a Nazi death camp, Corrie ten Boom wrote, *No matter how deep our darkness, He is deeper still.*<sup>10</sup> He not only rose from the dead, He changed the meaning of death. John Stott says,

*I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross.... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples...& stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. & in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands & feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry & intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside His immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh & blood, tears & death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of His. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over*

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Lee Strobel, *Case for Faith*, p 52

*it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering. "The cross of Christ...is God's only self-justification in such a world as ours."*<sup>11</sup>

#### PRAY Pass Elements

Jesus was disabled & died in our place. We remember Him & His death for us as we eat of the bread together.

Jesus shed His blood, He died for us so that we could be forgiven & restored in a relationship with God Himself. We remember His death for us as drink of the cup.

We look forward to that day we dine with Him in our resurrected bodies free from all the effects of sin! Even so, come, Lord Jesus, come.

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<sup>11</sup>John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pages 326-327, last quote from P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, p 32