

## **Victory of the Lamb – Glad You Asked - Why does God let bad things happen? John 9:1-41 – June 26, 2022 Pastor Ben Sadler**

**How can a good God let bad things happen to good people?** This is the question we are going to tackle as we continue our sermon series, **Glad you asked**, a sermon series based on the questions that you submitted. In many ways this is the question behind every other question. This is the one that most people struggle with. This is the reason beyond all other reasons why people lose their faith and walk away from Christianity. This is a classic philosophical question that has been debated for thousands of years.

Now, one way that you could respond to this philosophical question is by starting at the very beginning of the Bible. You could see that God created the world good with good human beings. Part of his goodness was to give humans the ability to choose right and wrong. Unfortunately, the first two humans decided that instead of trusting in God, they wanted to be their own gods. In other words, they chose to do wrong. They chose to be selfish, self-centered, and self-righteous. Their sin brought evil and wickedness into God's world.

As you keep reading from the book of Genesis you will see that this sin snowballs, reaching to the very ends of civilization. But then God singles out one family, the family of Abraham. He chooses this family to be a blessing to the whole world. But they show that they are just as corrupt as everyone else.

You see Abraham's great-great-grandchildren become envious of their brother Joseph, and they sell this good man into slavery. While he is in slavery in Egypt, his life gets even worse. Due to no fault of his own he is falsely accused of sexual harassment, and he goes from slavery to prison.

As you read about all Joseph's unjust suffering you have to wonder, "How can a good God allow such bad things to happen to such a good person. But then he is released from prison and is raised up as a leader over all of Egypt. When he finally sees his brothers at the end of the book he tells them, **You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20)** So Joseph says that God used the evil and suffering to bring about something good.

Joseph's story is really the same story as our Savior. Jesus was treated as a slave and sold for 30 pieces of silver. Jesus was wrongly accused, suffered, and even died. But God used all this evil and suffering for good. He raised Jesus and used his death as a payment for the sins of the world.

Throughout the Bible we hear that same idea. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8 he says, **And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)**

So there you have it. **How can a good God let bad things happen to good people?** The Bible says and shows throughout history that **God uses the bad things for our eternal good.**

But the problem is that is not really a good answer for most of us. Because most of us don't just want to know why bad things happen in general, in the world. What we really want to know is: **How can a good God let bad things happen to ME?** Many of you have told us your story. Many of you are suffering from problems going on in our families. Some of you are struggling with auto-immune diseases, a number of you have Lyme's disease. A number of you have cancer. A number of you are struggling in your

marriages or your marriages failed. A number of you have severe financial challenges. You look at all of your suffering and it doesn't make sense. You wonder, "Why did God allow this? What good could come from this? Why is this happening?"

Last week, I read a book written by a Christian philosopher named Gregory Schulz. He was who is a professor of philosophy at Concordia University also suffered great loss. He lost his daughter before she was one of a debilitating disease. He also lost his son when he was a teenager, also to disease. He wrote a book called *The Problem of Suffering*., And in this book he came to this conclusion about understanding our suffering. He said, "**I cannot justify God's ways with my children.**" He found out that in the midst of suffering, there is no good philosophical answer that takes the pain away or justifies why God did not intervene and stop this suffering.

So if you would ask this Christian college professors of philosophy, who has suffered a great deal, **How can a good God let bad things happen to ME?** Here is what he would say:

**I don't know.** We just don't know the ways of God.

But that doesn't mean we have nothing to say. You see, I think there is a better question that we can ask and one to which we have an answer. Because I can't answer why God would allow bad things to happen to you. I would like to answer this question: **How can we continue to live in hope while we suffer?** And to answer that question I would like to go to the Bible's ancient prayer book, the book of Psalms. And I would like to specifically walk through Psalm 73.

This Psalm was written by a man named Asaph. He was one of the priests during the days of King David. And a leader of one of David's choirs. This man was a religious expert. And that is why it is so surprising to see the open words of his prayer. He says,

<sup>1</sup> Surely God is good to Israel,  
to those who are pure in heart.

<sup>2</sup> But as for me, **my feet had almost slipped;**  
I had nearly lost my foothold.

<sup>3</sup> For I **envied** the arrogant  
when I saw the **prosperity of the wicked.**

As a religious leader, Asaph knew the Lord, but he also went through a period of deep doubt. He says that his feet had almost slipped. He had almost lost his faith. Why? He saw the prosperity of the wicked. He saw that the people who had no time of for God seem to be doing great without him.

Then he goes into a long list of reasons why he envied the arrogant. He says,

<sup>4</sup> They have **no struggles;**  
their bodies are **healthy and strong.**

<sup>5</sup> They are free from common human burdens;  
they are not plagued by human ills.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace;  
they clothe themselves with violence.

<sup>7</sup> From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
their evil imaginations have no limits.

- <sup>8</sup> **They scoff, and speak with malice;  
with arrogance they threaten oppression.**
- <sup>9</sup> **Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
and their tongues take possession of the earth.**
- <sup>10</sup> **Therefore their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.**
- <sup>11</sup> **They say, “How would God know?  
Does the Most High know anything?”**

When Asaph looks at those who are wicked he says, their life seems to be doing great. They have good health, wealth, and success. Not only that, but then there are a great deal of people who follow them and look up to them as their leaders.

I think we can sympathize with Asaph’s feelings. We look out into the world and we see the huge wellness industry. And it seems like there are countless numbers of lifestyle coaches who have found a way to be happy, healthy, rich, and successful and they have no time for God.

But Asaph sees something else that is even more troubling:

- <sup>13</sup> **Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure  
and have washed my hands in innocence.**
- <sup>14</sup> **All day long I have been afflicted,  
and every morning brings new punishments.**

Not only are unbelievers flourishing without God, but all the spiritual practices that Asaph is following doesn’t seem to help. He prays, meditates on the Scriptures, and does what he can to live a pure and godly life, but all day long he experiences afflictions, and each morning brings new punishments. He wonders, “Why try? Why try to follow the Lord if it seems to make no difference at all?”

Again, we can probably relate. Not only do we see unbelievers who seem to be flourishing, but it also seems like following the Lord does no good. In fact, following God seems to bring more pain and more punishments. Christians still get sick and get cancer. Christians still have broken families. Christians still lose loved ones. Christians have failed businesses and failed relationships. So why even try?

#### *LAMENT*

What I find so helpful about these verses is that they are even in the Bible as a prayer. Asaph is crying out to God about what he sees as an injustice and God seems to be silent. This doesn’t seem right or fair or good. And God doesn’t seem to be doing anything about it. And Asaph has the boldness to say all this to the Almighty God.

In the same way, we can lament when we experience deep pain and suffering, when we experience evil, and injustice and God doesn’t seem to be responding. In fact, so much of the Psalms and the book of Job are lament in God’s presence. There is even a whole book of the Bible devoted to lamenting called the book of Lamentation. So it is ok to cry out to God. It is ok to say, “This is not right! This is not good! Why is this happening?” You can cry out to God. God can take it.

But you will notice that Asaph doesn’t stay there. He goes on to say:

<sup>16</sup> **When I tried to understand all this,  
it troubled me deeply**  
<sup>17</sup> **till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.**

When Asaph tried to understand his suffering and try to reason it out, he could not. There was no answer. He was just deeply troubled. Until finally he entered the sanctuary of God. For Asaph that meant going into the Tabernacle of God, to go into the presence of God and meditate on his Word.

For us, to enter the sanctuary of God means to gather with God's people, read God's Word, pray together, take the Lord's supper together. And when we do let's see what we learn in the sanctuary of God.

<sup>18</sup> **Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.**  
<sup>19</sup> **How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!**  
<sup>20</sup> **They are like a dream when one awakes;  
when you arise, Lord,  
you will despise them as fantasies.**

Those who reject God might seem outwardly successful, but worldly success is fragile. And human beings are fragile. Even the healthiest and the wealthiest among us will one day get old and weak and die and have to face God. When Asaph looks at the wicked through the eyes of God's Word, he no longer envies their fleeting success.

As Asaph was in the sanctuary of God, he remembers what his strength really was. It was not his prosperity or his health or his wealth. He said,

<sup>23</sup> **Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.**

Asaph has faith that God is with him. He is not alone, but God is holding his hand, walking with him, and guiding him like a good Father guides his son through the challenges of life.

This is why people love to read that poem, *Footprints in the sand*. It tells the story of a man walking with God and he looks back at the footprints in the sand and he sees only one set. And the man asked, "Jesus, there was only one set of footprints back there. Why did you leave me? And Jesus answers, "I didn't leave you. I was carrying you."

That's what Asaph learned. God was going to hold his hand and carry him through his suffering.

<sup>24</sup> **You guide me with your counsel  
and afterward you will take me into glory.**

As we walk through suffering, God and his Word directs our steps. He gives us wisdom and encouragement to keep going and not give up. He teaches us which way to walk. And when our journey

is over, we will enter glory. But that is not our final destination. Do you know what Christians really believe about life after death? We say it every other Sunday in the Nicene Creed: **We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.**

We believe that what happened to Jesus will happen to us. He suffered for our sins and died. And in this life, we will suffer too. And we will die. But just as he rose from the dead with a renewed body, so also, we will rise from the dead on the last day with a new body. And not only that what happened to Jesus will happen to this world. This world is groaning and suffering, and this world will one day die. But Jesus going to come back and resurrect this world.

God is going to guide us through this suffering with his counsel and then he will take us into glory. He will resurrect our bodies and this world, and he will make all that is wrong right again.

Asaph goes on:

**<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.**

As Asaph struggles, he clarifies what his priorities are. As everything else gets stripped away he sees the only thing he really needs is God himself.

I don't know about you, but I've learned an incredible amount from people who have suffered. When I talk with people who suffered, they have a whole new set of priorities. They see what really matters and what doesn't. They see that all they need is Jesus and his forgiveness. And they see the beauty and the grace in the simplest gifts of God.

In that way, those who suffer are modern day prophets. They help us cut through all the clutter and distraction so that we can see clearly what truly has value, what truly matters. If we have God, we have all that matters.

**<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.**

Asaph is honest. He knows that his body might continue to wear out. His flesh may fail and one day he is going to die. So he is not going to put his trust in his physical health or earthly prosperity. He knows that his faith is going to struggle. He might continue through periods of doubts. He knows that his faith may fail.

But even if his body and soul give out, his real strength is in God. God is his strength. God is his portion, meaning God is his prosperity and his inheritance.

Asaph closes his prayer with these words,

**<sup>27</sup> Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.  
<sup>28</sup> But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds.**

Asaph believes life is about proximity and not prosperity. Those who are far from God have no real lasting foundation and hope. But those who are near God have a lasting and sure hope. It is not about prosperity but proximity that matters.

Asaph's prayer doesn't really tell us *why* God allows us to suffer. But he does teach us how to walk through suffering with hope. So let's answer that question:

**How can we continue to live in hope while we suffer?**

**Our strength is not in our prosperity, but our proximity to God.**

As you suffer, your strength is not in your health or your wealth or your ability. Those are all good gifts of God. But they can all be taken away. Your real strength is not in your prosperity but your proximity to the Almighty God.

So how do you stay close to God? **Sit in the sanctuary of your Savior.** Sit in the presence of God. That is what Asaph did. When he suffered and when he was overwhelmed by doubt, he sat in the sanctuary of God. What does that mean for us today? Sit in the sanctuary of God by coming to worship and being surrounded by the body of Christ, God's people. Receive the Lord's supper and be convinced that Jesus' body was broken and his blood poured out for you. Sit in the sanctuary of the Savior by opening up God's Word.

When you suffer and God doesn't seem to do anything about it and there doesn't seem to be any good answers as to why God would allow you to suffer, you are going to be tempted to distance yourself from God. You are going to be tempted to say, "Well, if God is not going to do anything about my suffering, then I'm not going to go to him anymore. It doesn't seem to matter anyway." But if you walk away from God in the midst of your suffering you lose your strength. Even though we might not know why you are suffering and what God's purposes are, we do know where your strength to endure suffering comes from. Your strength does not come from your own health and prosperity. Your strength comes from your proximity to God. So, sit in the sanctuary of your Savior. Let the one who suffered for you suffer with you. And his peace that surpasses all understanding will be your strength. Amen.