

Why Does God Allow Tragedy and Suffering?

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It was the worst mass shooting in American history – 70 people shot by a gunman, 12 of them killed, while they were watching the midnight showing of a new movie just 21 miles from where we're sitting. There are no words to describe the anguish being felt by those who are suffering today; our heart and prayers have – and will – go out to them. There are so many tragic stories, so much pain. And many people are asking the question, "Why? Why did God allow this?"

This has been a heart-rending summer for Colorado. First came the wildfires, which ravaged the houses of hundreds of our neighbors – and prompted many of them to ask the question, "Why?"

And those two tragic events are on top of the everyday pain and suffering being experienced in individual lives – maybe including yours. There's illness, abuse, broken relationships, betrayal, sorrow, injuries, disappointment, heartache, crime and death. And perhaps you've been asking the question, "Why? Why me? Why now?"

That "why" question goes back thousands of years. It was asked in the Old Testament by Job and the writers of the Psalms, and it was especially relevant during the 20th century, where we witnessed two World Wars, the Holocaust, genocides in the Soviet Union and China, devastating famines in Africa, the killing fields of Cambodia, the emergence of AIDS, the genocide in Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. And the 21st Century didn't start any better. There was 9/11 and now the Syrian slaughters, and on and on. Why all of this if there's a loving and powerful God? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Several years ago, I commissioned a national survey and asked people what question they'd ask if they could only ask God one thing. The Number One response was: "Why is there suffering in the world?" Incidentally, I did find an interesting statistical quirk – people who are married were much more likely to want to know why there's so much suffering. I'm just sayin'.

But if you've never asked why our world is infected with pain and suffering, you will when they strike you with full force or they come to a loved one. And Jesus said they *are* coming. Unlike some other religious leaders who wrote off pain and suffering as just being illusions, Jesus was honest. He told us the truth. He said in John 16:33, "You will have suffering in this world." He didn't say you might – he said it *is* going to happen.

But why? If you ask me point-blank, “Why did God allow the gunman to spray the Aurora movie theater with gunfire just two days ago?”, the only answer I can honestly give consists of four words – “*I do not know.*”

I cannot stand in the shoes of God and give a complete answer to that question. I don’t have God’s mind. I don’t see with God’s eyes. First Corinthians 13:12 says, “Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.”

So when you ask about specific individual events and want to know why this particular thing happened, we won’t get the full answer in this world. Someday we’ll see with clarity, but for now things are foggy. We can’t understand everything from our finite perspective. And frankly, the people suffering from the Aurora tragedy don’t need a big theological treatise right now; any intellectual response is going to seem trite and inadequate. What they desperately need now is the very real and comforting presence of Jesus Christ in their lives. And I’m so grateful that so many churches and ministries of this community are helping them experience that.

But for us, let’s focus on the big, overarching issue of why God generally allows suffering in our lives – your life and mine. Friends, this is important: even though we can’t understand everything about it, we *can* understand *some* things. Let me give you an analogy.

Once Leslie and I were driving from Chicago to Door County, Wisconsin, which is that thumb-shaped peninsula that juts into Lake Michigan. We were driving up the highway in the dark, when it started raining heavily and we hit dense fog. I could barely see the white stripe on the edge of the road. I couldn’t stop because I was afraid someone might come along and rear-end us. It was frightening!

But then a truck appeared in front of us and we could clearly see his taillights through the fog. He apparently had fog lamps in front, because he was traveling at a confident and deliberate pace, and I knew if we could just follow those taillights, we’d be headed in the right direction.

And the same is true in understanding why there is tragedy and suffering in our lives and in our world. We may not be able to make out all the peripheral details of why — they may be obscured from our view — but there are some key Biblical truths that can illuminate some points of light for us. And if we follow those lights, they will lead us in the right direction, toward some conclusions that I believe can help satisfy our hearts and souls.

What are those points of light? Let me go through five of them that I’ve personally found helpful whenever I’ve been prompted to ask the question, “Why?” The first point of light: *God is not the creator of evil and suffering.*

This answers the question you hear so often: “Why didn’t God merely create a world where tragedy and suffering didn’t exist?” The answer is: He did! Genesis 1:31 says: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”

But if God is not the author of tragedy or evil or death, where did they come from? Well, God has existed from eternity past as the Father, Son and Spirit, together in a relationship of perfect love. So love is the highest value in the universe. And when God decided to create human beings, he wanted us to experience love. But to give us the ability to love, God had to give us free will to decide whether to love or not to love. Why? *Because love always involves a choice.*

If we were programmed to say, “I love you,” it wouldn’t really be love. When my daughter was little, she had a doll with a string in the back, and when you pulled it the doll said, “I love you.” Did that doll love my daughter? Of course not. It was programmed to say those words. To really experience love, that doll would need to have been able to choose to love or not to love. Again – real love always involves a choice.

So in order for us to experience love, God bestowed on us free will. But unfortunately, we humans have abused our free will by rejecting God and walking away from Him. And that has resulted in the introduction of two kinds of evil into the world: *moral evil* and *natural evil*.

Moral evil is the immorality and pain and suffering and tragedy that come because we choose to be selfish, arrogant, uncaring, hateful and abusive. Romans 3:23 says “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

So much of the world’s suffering results from the sinful action or inaction of ourselves and others. For example, people look at a famine and wonder where God is, but the world produces enough food for each person to have 3,000 calories a day. It’s our own irresponsibility and self-centeredness that prevents people from getting fed.

In other words: look at your hand. You can choose to use that hand to hold a gun and shoot someone, or you can use it to feed hungry people. It’s your choice. But it’s unfair to shoot someone and then blame God for the existence of evil and suffering. Like that old cartoon said: “We have seen the enemy, and he is us.”

The second kind of evil is called natural evil. These are things like wildfires, earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes that cause suffering for people. But these, too, are the indirect result of sin being allowed into the world. As one author explained: “When we humans told God to shove off, He partially honored our request. Nature began to revolt. The earth was cursed. Genetic breakdown and disease began. Pain and death became part of the human experience.”

The Bible says it’s because of sin that nature was corrupted and “thorns and thistles” entered the world. Romans 8:22 says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” In

other words, nature longs for redemption to come and for things to be set right. That's the source of disorder and chaos.

Let's make this crystal clear once more: God did not create evil and suffering. Now, it's true that he *did* create the *potential* for evil to enter the world, because that was the only way to create the potential for genuine goodness and love. But it was human beings, in our free will, who brought that potential evil into reality.

Some people ask, "Couldn't God have foreseen all of this?" And no doubt he did. But look at it this way: many of you are parents. Even before you had children, couldn't you foresee that there was the very real possibility they may suffer disappointment or pain or heartache in life, or that they might even hurt you and walk away from you? Of course — but you still had kids. Why? Because you knew there was also the potential for tremendous joy and deep love and great meaning.

Now, the analogy is far from perfect, but think about God. He undoubtedly knew we'd rebel against Him, but He also knew many people would choose to follow Him and have a relationship with Him and spend eternity in heaven with Him — and it was all worth it for that, even though it would cost His own Son great pain and suffering to achieve their redemption.

So, first, it helps me to remember, as I ponder the mystery of pain and evil, that God did not create them. The second point of light is this: *Though suffering isn't good, God can use it to accomplish good.*

He does this by fulfilling His promise in Romans 8:28: "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."

Notice that the verse doesn't say God causes evil and suffering, just that he promises to cause good to emerge. And notice that the verse doesn't say we all will see immediately or even in this life how God has caused good to emerge from a bad circumstance. Remember, we only see things dimly in this world. And notice that God doesn't make this promise to everyone. He makes the solemn pledge that he will take the bad circumstances that befall us and cause good to emerge *if* we're committed to following Him.

The Old Testament gives us a great example in the story of Joseph, who went through terrible suffering, being sold into slavery by his brothers, unfairly accused of a crime and falsely imprisoned. Finally, after a dozen years, he was put in a role of great authority where he could save the lives of his family and many others.

This is what he said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." And if you're committed to God, He promises that He can and will take whatever pain you're experiencing and draw something good from it.

You might say, “No, he can’t in my circumstance. The harm was too great, the damage was too extreme, the depth of my suffering has been too much. No, in my case there’s no way God can cause any good to emerge.”

But if you doubt God’s promise, listen to what a wise man said to me when I was researching my book *The Case for Faith*: God took the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the universe — *deicide*, or the death of God on the cross — and turned it into the very best thing that has happened in history of universe: the opening up of heaven to all who follow Him. So if God can take the very worst circumstance imaginable and turn it into the very best situation possible, can he not take the negative circumstances of your life and create something good from them?

He can and He will. God can use our suffering to draw us to Himself, to mold and sharpen our character, to influence others for Him – He can draw something good from our pain in a myriad of ways...if we trust and follow Him.

Now, the third point of light: *The day is coming when suffering will cease and God will judge evil.*

A lot of times you’ll hear people say: “If God has the power to eradicate evil and suffering, then why doesn’t He do it?” And the answer is that because He hasn’t done it yet doesn’t mean He won’t do it. You know, I wrote my first novel last year. What if someone read only half of it and then slammed it down and said, “Well, Lee did a terrible job with that book. There are too many loose ends with the plot. He didn’t resolve all the issues with the characters.” I’d say, “Hey – you only read half the book!”

And the Bible says that the story of this world isn’t over yet. It says the day will come when sickness and pain *will* be eradicated and people *will* be held accountable for the evil they’ve committed. Justice will be served in a perfect way. That day will come, but not yet.

So what’s holding God up? One answer is that some of you may be. He’s actually delaying the consummation of history in anticipation that some of you will still put your trust in Him and spend eternity in heaven. He’s delaying everything out of His love for you. Second Peter 3:9 says: “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” To me, that’s evidence of a loving God, that He would care that much for you.

Point of Light #4: *Our suffering will pale in comparison to what God has in store for his followers.*

I certainly don’t want to minimize pain and suffering, but it helps if we take a long-term perspective. Look at this verse, and remember they were written by the apostle Paul, who suffered through beatings and stonings and shipwrecks and imprisonments and rejection and hunger and thirst and homelessness and far more pain that most of us will ever have to endure. These are *his* words:

Second Corinthians 4:17: "For our light and momentary troubles" — wait a second: *light and momentary troubles*? Five different times his back was shredded when he was flogged 39 lashes with a whip; three times he was beaten to a bloody pulp by rods. But he says, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

Paul also wrote Romans 8:18: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Think of it this way. Let's say that on the first day of 2012, you had an awful, terrible day. You had an emergency root canal at the dentist and the ran out of pain-killers. You crashed your car and had no insurance. Your stock portfolio took a nosedive. Your spouse got sick. A friend betrayed you. From start to finish, it was like the title of that children's book: *Alexander & the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*.

But then every other day of the year was just incredibly terrific. Your relationship with God is close and real and intimate. A friend wins the lottery and gives you \$100 million. You get promoted at work to your dream job. *Time* magazine puts your photo on its cover as "The Person of the Year." You have your first child and he's healthy and strong. Your marriage is idyllic, your health is fabulous, you have a six-month vacation in Tahiti.

Then next New Year's Day someone asks, "So, how was your 2012?" You'd say, "It was great; it was wonderful!" And they'd say, "But didn't it start out bad? Didn't you go through a lot of trouble that first day?"

You'd think back and say, "You're right. That *was* a bad day, no denying it. It was difficult at the time. It was hard. It was painful. But when I look at the totality of the year, when I put everything in context, it's been a great year. The 364 terrific days far outweigh the one bad day. That day just sort of fades away."

And maybe that's a good analogy for heaven. Listen to me — that is *not* to deny the reality of your pain in this life. It might be terrible. It might be chronic. My wife Leslie has a medical condition that puts her in pain every single day. Maybe you're suffering from a physical ailment or heartache at this very moment. But in heaven, after 354,484,545 days of pure bliss — and with an infinite more to come — if someone asked, "So, how has your existence been?", you'd instantly react by saying, "It has been absolutely wonderful! Words can't describe the joy and the delight and the fulfillment!"

And if they said, "But didn't you have a tough time before you got here," you'd probably think back and say, "Well, yes, it's true that those days were painful, I can't deny that. They were difficult, they were bad. But when I put them into context, in light of all God's outpouring of goodness to me, those bad days aren't even worth comparing with the eternity of blessings and joy that I'm experiencing."

It's like the story that British church leader Galvin Reid tells about meeting a young man who had fallen down a flight of stairs as a baby and shattered his back. He had been in and out of hospitals his whole life — and yet he made the astounding comment that he thinks God is fair. Reid asked him, "How old are you?" The boy said, "Seventeen." Reid asked, "How many years have you spend in hospitals?" The boy said, "Thirteen years." The pastor said with astonishment, "And you think that is fair?" And the boy replied: "*Well, God has all eternity to make it up to me.*"

And He will. God promises a time when there will be no more crying, no more tears, no more pain and suffering, when we will be reunited with God in perfect harmony, forever. Let the words of First Corinthians 2:9 soak into your soul: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." That's absolutely breath-taking, isn't it?

Finally, Point of Light #5: *We decide whether to turn bitter or turn to God for peace and courage.*

We've all seen examples of how the same suffering that causes one person to turn bitter, to reject God, to become hard and angry and sullen, can cause another person to turn *to* God, to become more gentle and more loving and more tender, willing to reach out to compassionately help other people who are in pain. Some who lose a child to a drunk driver turn inward in chronic rage and never-ending despair; another turns outward to help others by founding Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

As one philosopher said: "I believe all suffering is at least potential good, an opportunity for good. It's up to our free choice to actualize that potential. Not all of us benefit from suffering and learn from it, because that's up to us, it's up to our free will."

We make the choice to either run away from God or to run to Him. But what happens if we run to Him?

I started this talk with part of what Jesus said in John 16:33. Now let me give you the entire verse: "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. But be courageous! I have conquered the world."

In other words, He offers us the two very things we need when we're hurting: peace to deal with our present and courage to deal with our future. How? *Because he has conquered the world!* Through His own suffering and death, He has deprived this world of its ultimate power over you. Suffering doesn't have the last word anymore. Death doesn't have the last word anymore. God has the last word!

So let me finish the story of Leslie and I driving through the fog in Wisconsin. We were following the taillights of that truck when the fog slowly began to lift, the rain began to let up and we entered a town with some lights – things were

becoming clearer, we could see better, and as we rounded a curve, silhouetted against the night sky, guess what we saw? We saw the steeple of a church and the cross of Christ. After driving through the confusion of the fog for so long, that image struck me with poignancy I'll never forget. Because it was through that cross that Jesus conquered the world for us.

As that wise man once said to me: God's ultimate answer to suffering isn't an explanation; it's the incarnation. Suffering is a personal problem; it demands a personal response. And God isn't some distant, detached, and disinterested deity; He entered into our world and personally experienced our pain. Jesus is there in the lowest places of our lives. *Are you broken?* He was broken, like bread, for us. *Are you despised?* He was despised and rejected of men. *Do you cry out that you can't take any more?* He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. *Did someone betray you?* He was sold out. *Are your most tender relationships broken?* He loved and He was rejected. *Did people turn from you?* They hid their faces from Him as if He were a leper. Does He descend into all of our hells? *Yes, He does.* From the depths of a Nazi death camp, Corrie ten Boom wrote these words: "No matter how deep our darkness, He is deeper still." Every tear we shed becomes his tear.

And then the wise man told me this: it's not just that God knows and sympathizes with you in your troubles. After all, any close friend can do that. Any close friend can sit beside you and comfort you and empathize with you. No, Jesus is much closer than your closest friend. Because if you've put your trust in Him, then He is *in* you. And, therefore, your sufferings are His sufferings; your sorrow is His sorrow.

So when tragedy strikes, as it will; when suffering comes, as it will; when you're wrestling with pain, as you will – and when you make the choice to run into His arms, here's what you're going to discover: you'll find peace to deal with the present, you'll find courage to deal with your future, and you'll find the incredible promise of eternal life in heaven.

As I've been saying, all of us will go through pain and suffering. But let me end by going back to this specific tragedy that took place two days ago in Aurora. For all the things it leaves us confused about, one of the truths it clearly illustrates is that life is so fragile and short. These people were going to a movie! They had no clue that this might be their last moments in this world. Friends, in this sin-scarred world, we never know when death will come knocking. Often, we don't get any warning when a heart attack strikes, or when a drunk driver crosses the centerline, or when a wildfire sweeps through a canyon, or when an airplane loses power. And so the question I'm compelled to ask you is this – "Are you ready?"

One of the first verses I memorized as a Christian is First John 5:13: "These things I've written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God in order that you may *know* that you have eternal life."

God doesn't want you wondering. He doesn't want you steeped in anxiety over whether you're headed for heaven. His infallible, inerrant Word says you can know for sure.

Don't rely on the fact that you come to church or you've gone through some sort of religious ritual in the past. The Bible is clear that we can be religious but not be in a relationship with God. Religious activities and affiliations never saved anyone. Salvation comes from knowing Christ personally and receiving His provision for YOUR sin and YOUR future. It comes from making him YOUR Savior, by asking Him to forgive YOUR every sin, and by asking Him to lead YOUR life.

But it doesn't happen automatically. It doesn't come by attending a great church, or being baptized, or taking communion, or hanging out with a bunch of Christians. It comes from deciding in your heart that you want to turn from your sin, to stop trusting in your own resources, and to accept the forgiveness and eternal life that Jesus purchased on the cross and is offering you as a free gift. THAT is how you gain God's peace and confidence.

So settle it now! Resolve this today, at this moment, so that if tragedy were to strike, your eternity with God would be secure. I don't know all the ways God is going to draw some good from this Aurora situation, but wouldn't it be something if He were starting right now, with you personally, and using this message to bring you into His kingdom at this very moment? Let the pain of that tragedy open your heart to Christ. Let's take what was intended for evil and watch God start creating something good from it.

Pray with me right now to receive Christ – so that you can know for sure that even if the very worst thing were to happen to you after you leave the auditorium today, it will immediately be followed by the very best thing of all.

Lord Jesus, I believe that You are the unique Son of God. I confess to You that I'm a sinner. In repentance and faith, I reach out right now and receive the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life that You graciously purchased on the cross when You died as my substitute to pay for all of my sins. Please, Lord Jesus, lead my life – because from this moment on, I am Yours. I pray this is Your name. Amen.

If you'd like more on the question of why God allows pain and suffering, please see *The Case for Faith*, which is available for free through local libraries.