

Teaching: "Pain: God's Biggest Problem"
Text: John 9:1-7

Path

Perhaps the biggest impediment to believing in God (as stated by those who don't) is the presence of pain and suffering in the world. How can there be a God who is benevolent and omnipotent with the sheer volume of grief, misery, travail, and torment at any given moment? In this teaching, Pastor Skip explores the theme of a loving God in a universe pockmarked by pain.

- I. Pain Produces Questions (vv. 1-2)
- II. Pain Defies Our Explanations (v. 2)
- III. Pain Requires Clarification (vv. 3-4)
- IV. Pain Brings an Obligation (vv. 4-7)

Points

Pain Produces Questions (vv. 1-2)

- Pain interferes with our quality of life; nearly one-fourth of adults suffer with chronic pain, costing \$635 billion a year in medical treatment.
- Pain is a real problem for Christians. Atheists and skeptics argue against God on the basis of pain.
- But God doesn't shy away from suffering; it is not a problem to Him.
- Jesus Himself is described as "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3).
- One thing pain does produce is questions, as the story of the blind beggar in John 9 suggests. Why is there suffering?
- It's a question of theodicy: How can a loving and all-powerful God allow evil and pain to exist?
- We can offer evidence for God's existence (teleological and ontological arguments, history, fulfilled prophecy, etc.), but pain can stop us from believing in Him.

Pain Defies Our Explanations (v. 2)

- In John 9, the disciples tried to explain pain, but their explanation was incorrect.
- Here are a few explanations given for pain:
 - Because of sin. Some Christians argue that if you have enough faith, you will have no pain. This is false theology.
 - Because there is no God. Atheist Richard Dawkins and journalist Susan Jacoby, among others, have argued that pain disqualifies a loving God from existing. But if there is no God, where does our standard of goodness come from? How do we know what is good or evil at all?
 - Because God is weak. Deists argue that God is not all-knowing or all-powerful; He is learning day by day, the same way we do. Modern versions of this philosophy include process theology and open theism. The idea is that God would help if He could, but He can't; He's impotent.

Pain Requires Clarification (vv. 3-4)

- Pain needs a biblical answer.
- Jesus didn't give pat answers for suffering but underscored God's sovereignty. He elevated the argument to the level of God doing what brings Him glory.
- In Luke 13:1-5, Jesus provided an answer: God may allow suffering to accomplish a greater purpose, like repentance.
- Suffering in the hands of a loving God can be used for good.
- What people may call bad or evil may be used by God for a great good—like when two harmful substances (sodium and chloride), put together, create something good (table salt).
- Pain can:
 - Strengthen us (see James 1:3).
 - Correct us (see Psalm 119:67; Hebrews 12:6). As C.S. Lewis stated, pain "plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul."
 - Equip us (see 2 Corinthians 1:4).

Pain Brings an Obligation (vv. 4-7)

- To Jesus, pain was not a theological case study but an opportunity to do God's work, to show His compassion.
- The word "day" in verse 4 refers to a temporary increment of time, a moment God has allotted for us to do His work.
- Here's the principle: We don't know how long our "day" is, so now is our time to work.
- Now is the time to show compassion, pray for others, and share the good news.

- How do we deal with the problem of pain? We affirm that God is loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing, and that one day He will eradicate pain.
- Until then, we let pain change us and we help alleviate it in others.

Practice

Connect Up: *Theodicy* means "the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil" (Wikipedia). Discuss the two key words from this definition below. How do they relate to pain and God working all things together for good?

- *Vindication*: the act of clearing something or someone from blame. How does God use pain to vindicate good? How is Jesus the greatest example of this?
- *Providence*: the protection and guidance of God in history. How does providence come into play in the arena of pain? Use Romans 8:28 as a point of discussion.

Connect In: Pastor Skip told us to ponder two questions: Are you willing to embrace suffering if it drives you to God? And are you willing to alleviate suffering to drive others to God? Answer these two questions. How has suffering drawn you closer to God? In what areas are you—or have you been—willing to alleviate suffering in the world?

Connect Out: How would you answer a skeptic or atheist regarding the problem of evil, pain, and suffering in the world? How can you show that Jesus is the final answer to pain, the vindication of God, via His resurrection and future eradication of all evil (see Revelation 21:1-8; 22:3)? Here's food for thought using a summary of Alvin Plantinga's argument: "Though omnipotent, God could not be expected to do literally anything. God could not, for example, create square circles, act contrary to his nature, or, more relevantly, create beings with free will that would never choose evil" (Wikipedia). Plantinga further argued that God could use the moral value of human free will as a morally justified reason for permitting the existence of evil. For helpful resources, see Norman Geisler's *If God, Why Evil?*, Alvin Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil*, and C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*.