

105. The Gospel of John—11:5

“How Can a God of Love Allow Sickness and Suffering”

(6/21/20)

Last week in our study in the Gospel of John we entered into chapter 11 and were immediately confronted with the story of one of Jesus’ dear friends Lazarus who had contracted a serious illness which left him teetering on the brink of death.

John 11:1-5 (NKJV)

¹ Now a certain *man* was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was *that* Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. ³ Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." ⁴ When Jesus heard *that*, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

This begs the question that if Jesus, being God, loved this family so much—why did He allow Lazarus to get sick in the first place—"**Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?**" (v.37)

Why does God allow bad things to happen to seemingly good people if He’s a God of love who cares about them?

This question has not only plagued unbelievers over the centuries so as to keep them from coming to Jesus—but it has also driven away many people who had professed faith in God at one point in their lives.

➔ Talk about Charles Templeton

Or just a few weeks ago a Christian performer walked away from the Christian faith:

“The lead singer of a Christian rock band and the son of a pastor announced on Instagram that he no longer believes in God.

‘I’ve been terrified to post this for a while-- but it feels like it’s time for me to be honest,’ Jon Steingard, the front-man for the band Hawk Nelson, wrote in the caption of a lengthy note on May 20, ‘After growing up in a Christian home, being a pastor’s kid, playing and singing in a Christian band, and having the word ‘Christian’ in front of most of the things in my life — I am now finding that I no longer believe in God,’ he said.”

One of the reasons Jon gave for his renouncing of the Christian faith was the age old ‘problem’—*“if God is so good and loving why does He allow evil to exist.”*

Apologist and author Norm Geisler wrote,

“The most powerful argument ever devised against the existence of God is this:

‘If an all-powerful God exists who created the universe, and if He is all-good who put morality into the heart of man to show us that He is a good and moral God—then why does evil exist in the world? If God is all-good so that He would eliminate evil; and if He is all-powerful so that He could eliminate evil, yet evil is not eliminated therefore—an all-good, all-powerful God cannot exist. He could be partly good and partly powerful but He can’t be both, because if He was all-good He would eliminate evil; if He was all-powerful He could eliminate evil and since evil has not been eliminated no such God exists.’”

Please indulge me for the remainder of our time this morning because, even though this deviates from our study in John’s gospel a little—it is important enough for us to take the time to explore this subject—as the apostle Peter admonishes us:

1 Peter 3:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;

Norm Geisler goes on to say that for the atheist and skeptic they believe that this is an airtight argument against the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God—*“If God is all-good so that He would eliminate evil; and if He is all-powerful so that He could eliminate evil → yet evil is not eliminated therefore an all-good, all-powerful God cannot exist.”*

But the problem with that argument is that it is built on a faulty assumption—that just because evil hasn’t been eliminated **yet**—it never will be.

If the atheist phrased the argument correctly it wouldn't prove his point.

If he said, *"If there is an all-good God who would eliminate evil; and an all-powerful God who could eliminate evil and since He hasn't yet eliminated evil—He can't exist."*

If the question was phrased like that, our response would be—*"Just because evil hasn't yet been eliminated—doesn't mean it won't be eliminated someday."*

If the atheist could say with all certainty—*"If God is all-good He would; if He is all-powerful He could, evil has not yet been eliminated and it never will be therefore no such God exists"*—now he's got a good argument against the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God.

But the only way anyone could make a statement like that would be if they were all-knowing and knew the future perfectly.

The Book of Revelation tells us that one day God will settle all accounts and eliminate all evil.

Criticizing God for not doing it right now is like reading half a novel and criticizing the author for not resolving the plot.

The atheist would then argue, *"If God is all-good and all-powerful and He made everything then where did evil come from—God must have created evil which means He can't be all-good or evil would not exist."*

This argument goes back at least as far as Augustine—

Augustine in 400 A.D. said, *"To say God created everything, evil is something, therefore God created evil, is to miss the real nature of evil. God is the author of everything, we accept that premise, but evil is not 'a thing,' it is a lack in a thing, hence it does not follow that God is the author of evil."*

Dr. Norm Geisler—“*Evil is a privation or a lack. Evil is like rust to a car or rot to a tree. It’s a kind of parasite; it exists only in something else. The Bible teaches that a good God created a good universe but gave man a good thing called free will, which allowed for the possibility for evil to enter God’s universe and corrupt it.*”

God made evil possible by giving us a good thing called ‘free will’—just like Henry Ford made every automobile accident in America possible, along with the pain and fatalities they have brought.

Are cars then evil along with the man who invented them simply because the people driving those cars haven’t always acted responsibly behind the wheel?

Even so, the Bible teaches that this world is not the world God originally created for us to live in—man (Adam) messed it up thru sin.

“Did God know we were going to sin before He made us?” Yes!

Rev. 13:8

All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb **slain from the foundation of the world.**

“If God knew before He ever created us that we were going to blow it—why did He let us—why didn’t He stop us?”

You mean force us? That would remove our free will and turn us into robots—and God didn’t want robots (automatons).

He wanted people who of their own free will would love Him and obey Him.

True love cannot exist unless freely given through free will and choice—“*Forced love is rape, and God is not a divine rapist.*” (Norm Geisler)

He goes on to say—

“The classic defense of God against the problem of evil is that it’s not logically possible to have free will and no possibility of moral evil. In other words, once God chose to create human beings with free will, then it was up to them, rather than to God, as to whether there was sin or not. That’s what ‘free will’ means. Built into the situation of God deciding to create human beings is the chance of evil and, consequently, the suffering that results.”

The skeptic cries, “Aha! Then God is the creator of evil!”

Lee Strobel, *A Case For Faith* —

“No, He created the possibility of evil; people actualized that potentiality. The source of evil is not God’s power but mankind’s freedom. Even an all-powerful God could not have created a world in which people had genuine freedom and yet there was no potentiality for sin, because our freedom includes the possibility of sin within its own meaning. It’s a self-contradiction—a meaningless nothing—to have a world where there’s real choice while at the same time no possibility of choosing evil. To ask why God didn’t create such a world is like asking why God didn’t create colorless color or round squares.”

“If He knew we’d bring so much evil and heartache into the world—why did He even bother to create us in the first place?”

Because God is love and wanted to share that love with us even though He knew there would be problems between creation and culmination (heaven).

Someone has said, *“The only way to get to the Promised Land was through the wilderness. The only way to form diamonds is to put pressure on coal. The only way to produce first order good is to allow second order evil. If you never allow evil, you’ll never be able to defeat it. If you don’t allow sin, you’ll never have the higher good of forgiveness. If you don’t allow tribulation, you’ll never produce patience. God permits evil, but He does not promote evil.”*

“Yes, but evil is bad—if God is good why doesn’t He protect us from it?”

First of all, whatever evil is in the world came through man (Romans 5:12-14), and now that man has exercised his free will in rebellion against God and has brought all these negative consequences upon the human race—God is using them to break the wicked (salvation) and develop His children (sanctification).

Norm Geisler—

“This is not the best of all possible worlds, but I think it’s the best of all possible ways to get to the best of all possible worlds. A true believer is something like tea, their real strength comes out in hot water. God permits suffering to produce the greatest virtues in us. Job said, *‘When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.’*”

Romans 5:3-4 (NKJV)

³ And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

James 1:2-4 (NKJV)

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

God allows pain to bring about the greater good.

One author—

“Every athlete, especially an Olympic athlete, goes through incredible pain and suffering in training—why? For the joy and glory of victory! If victory wasn’t greater than the suffering it takes to get there, no one would ever endure it—so every athlete endures pain to bring about the greater good.”

But secondly, for the people who can’t understand why, even if man messed up this world, God doesn’t just ‘fix it’ and make it problem free again.

They are harboring under a faulty assumption—that the absence of all suffering would be the greatest good for mankind.

Or to put it another way—they feel a God of love would never or could never use suffering or pain for our good and His glory.

But is it possible that God could use suffering and tragedy to teach us important lessons that help us grow as believers while drawing us to God in a way that nothing else would?

In other words—can God use for good what Satan intended for evil?

The answer is ‘yes’—He has already.

God has already demonstrated how the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the world ended up resulting in the very best thing that has ever happened in the history of the world—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. (Explain)

Don’t forget that the God who said, “*The soul that sins shall surely die*”— is also the same God who said, “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life.*”

When it comes to suffering on account of sin—God took His own medicine by becoming one of us and suffered more than any of us ever would if we lived a million lifetimes.

One author said,

“How could you not love this Being Who went the extra mile, Who practiced more than He preached. Who entered into our world, Who suffered our pains, Who offers Himself to us in the midst of our sorrows? What more could He do?”

John Stott—

“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 in different Asian countries and 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. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and 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 and blood, tears and 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 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.”

“I’m still having a problem understanding why a good God permits so much evil in this world, and why some Christians die young and evil people live long?”

J.B. Phillips—*“If God were small enough to figure out, He wouldn’t be big enough to worship.”*

Deuteronomy 29:29 (NKJV)

²⁹ "The secret *things belong* to the LORD our God, but those *things which are revealed belong* to us and to our children forever...

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NKJV)

⁸ "For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts, nor *are* your ways My ways," says the LORD.

⁹ "For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.

Sometimes God will call upon His people to suffer for His glory and even to have loved ones taken from us too soon—at those times we need to trust Him.

The story of David and Svea Flood (from Jim Cymbala’s book, *Fresh Power*)

“Back in 1921, a missionary couple named David and Svea Flood went with their two-year-old son from Sweden to the heart of Africa—to what was then called the Belgian Congo. They met up with another young Scandinavian couple, the Ericksons, and the four of them sought God for direction. In those days of much tenderness and devotion and sacrifice, they felt led of the Lord to go out from the main mission station and take the gospel to a remote area.

This was a huge step of faith. At the village of N’dolera they were rebuffed by the chief, who would not let them enter his town for fear of alienating the local gods. The two couples opted to go half a mile up the slope and build their own mud huts. They prayed for a spiritual breakthrough, but there was none. The only contact with the villagers was a young boy, who was allowed to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week.

Svea Flood—a tiny woman of only four feet, eight inches tall—decided that if this was the only African, she could talk to, she would try to lead the boy to Jesus. And in fact, she succeeded.

But there were no other encouragements. Meanwhile, malaria continued to strike one member of the little band after another. In time the Ericksons decided they had had enough suffering and left to return to the central mission station. David and Svea Flood remained near N’dolera to go on alone.

Then, of all things, Svea found herself pregnant in the middle of the primitive wilderness. When the time came for her to give birth, the village chief softened enough to allow a midwife to help her. A little girl was born, whom they named Aina.

The delivery, however, was exhausting, and Svea Flood was already weak from bouts of malaria. The birth process was a heavy blow to her stamina. She lasted only another seventeen days. Inside David Flood, something snapped in that moment. He dug a crude grave, buried his twenty-seven-year-old wife, and then took his children back down the mountain to the mission station. Giving his newborn daughter to the Ericksons, he snarled, *"I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife, and I obviously can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life."* With that, he headed for the port, rejecting not only his calling, but God himself.

Within eight months both the Ericksons were stricken with a mysterious malady and died within days of each other. The baby was then turned over to some American missionaries, who adjusted her Swedish name to *"Aggie"* and eventually brought her back to the United States at age three.

This family loved the little girl and was afraid that if they tried to return to Africa, some legal obstacle might separate her from them. So, they decided to stay in their home country and switch from missionary work to pastoral ministry. And that is how Aggie grew up in South Dakota.

As a young woman, she attended North Central Bible college in Minneapolis. There she met and married a young man named Dewey Hurst.

Years passed. The Hurst's enjoyed a fruitful ministry. Aggie gave birth first to a daughter, then a son. In time her husband became president of a Christian college in the Seattle area, and Aggie was intrigued to find so much Scandinavian heritage there.

One day a Swedish religious magazine appeared in her mailbox. She had no idea who had sent it, and of course she couldn't read the words. But as she turned the pages, all of a sudden, a photo stopped her cold. There in a primitive setting was a grave with a white cross and on the cross were the words SVEA FLOOD.

Aggie jumped in her car and went straight to a college faculty member who, she knew, could translate the article. *"What does this say?"* she demanded.

The instructor summarized the story: It was about missionaries who had come to N'dolera long ago...the birth of a white baby...the death of the young mother...the one little African boy who had been led to Christ...and how, after the whites had all left, the boy had grown up and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village. The article said that gradually he won all his students to Christ...the children led their parents to Christ...even the chief had become a Christian. Today there were six hundred Christian believers in that one village...All because of the sacrifice of David and Svea Flood.

For the Hurst's' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, the college presented them with the gift of a vacation to Sweden. There Aggie sought to find her real father. An old man now, David Flood had remarried, fathered four more children, and generally dissipated his life with alcohol. He had recently suffered a stroke. Still bitter, he had one rule in his family: *"Never mention the name of God—because God took everything from me."*

After an emotional reunion with her half-brothers and half-sister, Aggie brought up the subject of seeing her father. The others hesitated. *“You can talk to him,”* they replied, *“even though he’s very ill now. But you need to know that whenever he hears the name of God, he flies into a rage.”*

Aggie was not to be deterred. She walked into the squalid apartment, with liquor bottles everywhere, and approached the seventy-three-year-old man lying in a rumpled bed.

“Papa?” she said tentatively.

He turned and began to cry. *“Aina,”* he said, *“I never meant to give you away.”*
“It’s all right Papa,” she replied, taking him gently in her arms. *“God took care of me.”*

The man instantly stiffened. The tears stopped.

“God forgot all of us. Our lives have been like this because of Him.” He turned his face back to the wall. Aggie stroked his face and then continued, undaunted. *“Papa, I’ve got a little story to tell you, and it’s a true one. You didn’t go to Africa in vain. Mama didn’t die in vain. The little boy you won to the Lord grew up to win that whole village to Jesus Christ. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today there are six hundred African people serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God in your life...Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you.”*

The old man turned back to look into his daughter’s eyes. His body relaxed. He began to talk. And by the end of the afternoon, he had come back to the God he had resented for so many decades.

Over the next few days, father and daughter enjoyed warm moments together. Aggie and her husband soon had to return to America—and within a few weeks, David Flood had gone into eternity.

A few years later, the Hursts were attending a high-level evangelism conference in London, England, where a report was given from the nation of Zaire (the former Belgian Congo). The superintendent of the national church, representing some 110,000 baptized believers, spoke eloquently of the gospel’s spread in his nation. Aggie could not help going to ask him afterward if he had ever heard of David and Svea Flood. *“Yes, madam,”* the man replied in French, his words then being translated into English. *“It was Svea Flood who led me to Jesus Christ. I was the boy who brought food to your parents before you were born. In fact, to this day your mother’s grave and her memory are honored by all of us.”*

He embraced her in a long, sobbing hug. Then he continued, *“You must come to Africa to see, because your mother is the most famous person in our history.”*

In time that is exactly what Aggie Hurst and her husband did. They were welcomed by cheering throngs of villagers. She even met the man who had been hired by her father many years before to carry her back down the mountain in a hammock-cradle.

The most dramatic moment, of course, was when the pastor escorted Aggie to see her mother's white cross for herself. She knelt in the soil to pray and give thanks. Later that day, in the church, the pastor read from John 12:24: "*I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.*" He then followed with Psalms 126:5: "*Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.*"

I don't know what lies ahead for our nation—I do know people's ears are dim and their hearts are hard.

C.S. Lewis said in, *The Problem Of Pain*,
"*God whispers to us in our pleasures...but shouts in our pain. It is His megaphone to arouse a (morally) deaf world.*"

God may have to bring some pretty severe national calamities to get our attention—and we will be affected by it as well.

Are we ready? Will we understand what God is doing and go along using the pain to bring others to Jesus or will we like David Flood turn away from God and rail against Him?

Why doesn't God put an end to evil and suffering?

He intends to, but right now He's giving people the chance and choice of living in His kingdom (a new world where there will be no injustice, evil, suffering or death)—or to go on living in rebellion against Him and spend eternity apart from Him—the choice is theirs to make.

Just like He gave Adam and Eve a choice to live in paradise, but they rejected God's offer and chose to rebel—He's now offering everyone else the same choice.

To live in God's Kingdom, you have to bow to Jesus as your King—Now!