



July 31, 2016  
Ellis White, Pastoral Intern  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Fearless Q: How Can a Good God Allow Evil and Suffering?* Various Verses

This week Rachel and I hit a significant milestone in our time here at Chapel Hill. 5 years ago this week we got on a plane and moved our lives to Gig Harbor, WA [photo]. Without the help of this congregation, we would not have made it to today, and I am thankful for every single one of you who has housed us, fed us, clothed us, prayed for us, listened to us and loved us. Thank you. But today I need your help again. What I'm going to share today is hard, a little raw, and at times, personal. I would appreciate your prayers as I do this. [Pray]

On July 14, a man driving a 19-ton cargo truck deliberately drove into crowds celebrating Bastille Day on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. 84 people were killed and 303 injured. The next morning, still reeling from the terror of it all, I saw this image. I felt sick. The doll looked identical to one of my daughter's. That girl could have been my precious Evelyn. And it was someone's precious little girl. "How can a good God allow this to happen?" It's not like I don't believe God was powerful enough to have stopped it. God could have done any number of things to result in a different outcome, but he didn't. Why?

In our Fearless Q series, no question received more votes than this one: "How can a good God allow evil and suffering?" And I understand why it generated the most questions. Maybe if the suffering we saw was minor, we could understand it, I mean good parents discipline their children. But what good parent would allow their little girl to be run over by a 19-ton truck?

Stendhal, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French writer put it this way: "God's only excuse is that he does not exist." (Stendhal) And strictly on the basis of logic, this makes a lot of sense. If God didn't exist, then it would simply be survival of the fittest—dog eat dog, kill or be killed. As Richard Dawkins says about suffering from an atheistic perspective:

"In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference." (Richard Dawkins)

Suffering is inevitable, Dawkins says, and it has no meaning, just like the universe. But this response does not satisfy the young mother holding her dead child in her arms. Why? Because we crave meaning in our lives!

Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychologist who survived Auschwitz, where he saw many atheists commit suicide, understood it this way: "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'." (Viktor Frankl) When we have meaning in our life, we can cope with suffering, but without meaning, it is almost impossible. Even if atheism logically can make sense of suffering, it cannot provide the meaning necessary to keep going in the midst of suffering. Christianity, on the other hand, I believe, can provide that meaning.

So how then do we maintain belief in a good God, in the midst of such horrendous evil and suffering? The reality is there is no single, straightforward answer. But I want to suggest an approach. In a court of law, the testimony of one witness may not hold much weight, but the testimony of several corresponding witnesses can. Similarly, I believe we have several corresponding witnesses that provide sufficient evidence for us to believe in a good God. This approach is taken by Vince Vitale and Ravi Zacharias in 'Why Suffering?', a book I highly recommend. Today I want to present five witnesses to you, through my own personal story.

### **Witness of Freedom**

Five months ago, my 59-year old father, John White, [photo] went for a walk with a colleague. Arriving back at the car, he slumped in his seat, took several heavy breaths and then passed away. It was a total shock to all of us. But the autopsy revealed he was suffering with coronary artery disease.

My dad didn't take care of himself. He ate what he wanted and rarely exercised. Recently, I found a three-year old letter to him from his doctor. In it were test results, indicating a 13% risk of a heart disease related event in the next 10 years. To say I was angry was an understatement; I thought, "He killed himself."

The first witness I want to bring is the witness of freedom. God created people who have the freedom to choose right from wrong, good from evil. At the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve were given a choice: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2: 16-17) God gave Adam and Eve freedom. They could eat any tree, except one, with the consequence of death, and what did they do? Choose to eat from the one.

Now God could have chosen to limit their freedom and prevent them from eating of that tree. But he didn't. Why? Because he loved them enough to give them the choice. We must begin by recognizing that the root cause of evil and suffering in this world is human freedom. And this is the freedom that God gave us in love. The opposite would have been slavery, slavery to God's choices. God loves us too much to create us as slaves, he created us as free people. My dad had freedom to choose,

given to him by God out of love, and he might have chosen poorly, but God loved him too much to force him into submission. Freedom is our first witness.

### **Witness of Humility**

As time passed my anger towards my father continued, causing me to ascribe complete guilt to him in his death. It took a long talk with my friend Vince to pull me out of this. As we talked and I kept blaming my dad for his own death, Vince asked me: "Ellis, do you believe God could have kept your dad alive?" "Yes," I responded. And my immediate thought was: "Well, why didn't he?"

The second witness is the witness of humility. If God is good, he must have good reasons for allowing suffering. And it is natural for us to want to know them. I wanted to know why he let my dad die. And God has his reasons, but for us to assume that we can know them is not necessarily the case.

I remember when we got our puppy, Raleigh, and we had to take him to get him fixed. I sat down with him in the morning and let him know what was coming. I commiserated with him about how he was going to lose a part of himself. But I let him know it was for the best. That this way would result in less frustration, that it would be better for him. I told him it would be painful but that he would pull through and be thankful for it. Sadly, he didn't understand any of it and was left in much pain wearing the cone of shame.

It's the same thing with God. Just as there is a gulf between humans and dogs in their ability to reason, there is a gulf between humanity and God in our ability to reason. Isaiah says: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.' (Isaiah 55:8-9) God's reasons are often beyond our understanding, and to think that we could know them is at best presumptuous and at worst, arrogant. We must be humble when it comes to our understanding of this issue and concede that we are not God and He is. I may never fully know why my dad died when he did, not because God doesn't want me to know, but because I just don't have the understanding to comprehend it. That is the witness of humility.

### **Witness of Grace**

Although we can never fully know why God allows suffering, there are a couple of New Testament passages that help us understand an important reason that God does allow it. However, they present it in a strange way. Paul writes: 'We rejoice in our sufferings.' (Romans 5:3). James writes: 'Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds.' (James 1:2). Joy? Seriously? We are called to rejoice, to consider it pure joy, when we suffer? But both writers go on to say why, both using the same Greek word: suffering produces endurance. And in turn, this endurance changes who we are. Paul says it produces character, and James says it perfects us or matures us—the same word that's in Chapel Hill's mission statement: working together to present everyone mature in Christ. Suffering produces endurance which

makes us mature in Christ. This is the third witness and I'm going to call it the witness of grace. Suffering is a grace, it is a gift, because it makes us into the people God longs for us to be; in Christ, suffering matures us.

The last few months have pushed me to the end of myself. I've struggled to get up in the mornings. I've been unable to concentrate at work. I've been ill more times than I care to remember. I would be lying if I said there weren't times when I thought I'd rather be with the Lord than here on earth. But yet, in the midst of this I know God is not done with me. I know God is at work, changing me, shaping me and maturing me through my suffering. He has not yet made me into the person he longs for me to be. He has work yet to do, and my job is to trust him to do it. And so I continue to get out of bed in the mornings, to endure and to trust that somehow, in the midst of the pain, God is at work.

God does not waste our suffering. God does not waste our pain. He is working all things together for good, as Paul says. No matter what you have been through, or you are going through, God is going to use it to make you the person he has destined you to be. Suffering is a grace. We are not the people God longs for us to be, but suffering is perfecting us, maturing us, making us complete. And this can pull us through, can give us purpose in the pain. This is the witness of grace.  
Witness of Eternity

One of my biggest struggles regarding the loss of my dad was the thought of my kids never knowing their grandfather [photo]. It hurt so badly to think of my dear Ezra, born on my father's birthday, never coming to know the man his grandfather was. I shared this with my friend Vince and this was what he said, "Ellis, your dad is with Jesus because he entrusted his life to Him. And one day we believe and hope that both Evelyn and Ezra will be with Jesus too. And when you get there, you will look back on this time you've missed together a bit like a missed lunch." A missed lunch—those words have stuck with me.

### **Witness of Eternity**

The fourth witness is the witness of eternity. We so often live as if this life is the only one we will get. But it is not. And death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. The book of Revelation paints a picture of eternal life with Jesus for those who trust him: 'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' (Revelation 21:4)

I remember watching my wife Rachel give birth to our daughter Evelyn. For those of you who have not been there, let me tell you, it was ugly. There was blood and screaming and shouting and bone-crunching hand-holding. Can you imagine for a moment if you were an alien and the only thing you knew of humanity was a videotape of the birthing room? You would think we were hideous, monstrous, grotesque creatures! Especially doctors! (No offense...)

But in light of the rest of Evelyn's life, that moment of pain and agony appears as nothing... or at least that was what Rachel said when I asked her if she really wanted to go through it all again with our son! Paul writes in Romans 8:18, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' (Romans 8:18) In light of eternity, our present suffering and pain will pale into insignificance. In light of eternity, my dad's unexpected death is just a short interlude, and although it is very painful right now, a day will come when all pain will cease.

This is the witness of eternity, and this leads us to our final witness... freedom, humility, grace, eternity and finally, the witness of the cross. It is only through the cross that we can experience eternity with Jesus. But there is another aspect of the cross that is highly significant when it comes to suffering.

### **Witness of the Cross**

For all that I said earlier about my dad not taking care of himself, there was one summer when I recall him doing something different. I was 14 years old and preparing for the upcoming rugby season. I started a new training regime and wanted to measure my level of fitness at the start of the summer and again at the end. So I borrowed something called a cassette tape, which had a recording on it of the 'Beep Test.' [photo] If you have never experienced the beep test, it is otherwise known as hell on earth. Two cones are placed 20 meters (that's about 22 yards) apart and you run back and forth between them, aiming to arrive at each successive cone in time with beeps that get progressively closer together. Legend has it that some people have actually completed the beep test, but for everyone else you do it until you miss three beeps, or collapse in agony.

For whatever reason my dad decided he would like to join me in this masochistic form of torture. So he donned his incredibly short running shorts (which I think he bought some time in the 70s) and came out to play. What ensued was nine minutes of pure pain for him. The agony on his face was like nothing I'd ever seen before. But here's the thing. My dad had no reason whatsoever to take that test. He knew it would be agony. But nevertheless he chose not to look on as I suffered, but to suffer alongside me.

And when it comes to suffering, we do not have a God who stands far off and lets us experience suffering while he remains untouched by it. The heart of Christianity is that we have a God who came to suffer alongside us, not because he had to, but because he wanted to, in order to redeem us. This is our final witness—the witness of the cross.

In the garden, the night before the cross, Jesus expressed his pain this way: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." (Mark 14:34) Jesus knew the suffering that was coming, and it was overwhelming to him. He says: the sorrow is killing me. If you've ever felt like the pain you are experiencing has taken you to the point of

death itself, you are not alone. The God of the universe has been there too. He knows your pain.

And on the cross was heaped upon Jesus all the evil the world has ever known, and he experienced the consequence of all our evil and suffering throughout history. And our God willingly took that upon himself. We do not have a God who remained far off while we suffered, but we have a God who suffered alongside us, who knows our pain.

When it comes to my own pain, I don't have it all figured out. I haven't solved it all. I still wake up not knowing how bad the pain will be today. But here's what I do know... The same God that suffered on the cross is standing right by me and you in the midst of our pain and suffering today. He is weeping with us as we weep. He is comforting us in all our affliction.

And in the midst of our pain, there is only one place to turn to find true comfort: the cross. It is at the cross we see the love of God for us on display. It is at the cross we see the decisive victory of God over the power of evil. And it is through the cross we encounter the presence of God himself, suffering right alongside us.

Today, I want us to take some time at the cross. The place where our God suffered. The place where evil was defeated. The place where we encounter God's presence. And my prayer is that we may find comfort in the midst of our pain and suffering right there.