

If God is so good, why is the world so bad?

Series: The Case for Faith

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This morning we begin a brand new series called The Case for Faith. The series is based on the highly acclaimed book by the same name written by Lee Strobel. In his book Strobel tackles the eight toughest questions that seekers and skeptics alike aim at the Christian faith. Questions that can be real "heart" barriers to faith.

Tim and I met Lee Strobel when we were interns at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. At that time he was one of the teaching pastors at the church. Before that he had been a lawyer, the legal editor of the Chicago Tribune, and an outspoken atheist. He thought Christianity was crock. Then one day a Christian woman invited his wife, Leslie, to Willow Creek where she eventually came to know Christ. And then Leslie invited Lee to church. And at first he was very resistant. There was no way he was going to church. He was also so afraid that he might run into someone at church that might recognize him that when he finally did go he took a legal pad and pretended he was there to do a story for the Tribune. He didn't want anybody to know that he, an atheist, was in church. But eventually he came to know Christ too and over the last twenty years has become a leading defender of the Christian faith.

Why are we doing this series? Because this series is going to do three things for us as a church. First, it's going to bolster the faith of those of us who already believe in Jesus Christ. This is going to be a faith builder that will give us more confidence and boldness in our walk with Christ. Second, it's going to better equip us who believe to defend our faith. There are good, solid, reasonable answers to every one of the tough questions we're going to tackle. And third, this series will answer the toughest questions of those who don't believe so that they can put their faith in Jesus Christ.

To answer these questions Lee Strobel hit the road and interviewed some of the most brilliant minds he could find. And one of the people he interviewed was a man named Charles Templeton. Charles Templeton was an evangelist, an associate of Billy Graham, back in the 1940's when Graham was just getting started. Together they toured Europe sharing the pulpit, preaching to 1,000's. Templeton started a church in Canada that quickly grew to 1,200 people. One magazine said that he was setting a new standard for mass evangelism. Charles Templeton, not Billy Graham, was becoming the most influential Christian of his generation.

But then Templeton started to have doubts, serious doubts about his faith. And in his book Farewell to God he writes, "I had gone through a conversion experience as an incredibly green youth. I lacked the intellectual skills and the theological training needed to buttress my beliefs. Questions and doubts began to plague me. My reason had begun to challenge and sometimes to rebut the central beliefs of the Christian faith."

And eventually, Templeton left Billy Graham, and left his church, and left his faith and became an agnostic, a person who says, "I just don't know anymore if there is a God." And in a tape recorded interview with Lee Strobel he points to a defining moment that ended his faith in Jesus Christ.

Listen as 83 year-old Charles Templeton describes it himself, "I was reading LIFE magazine and there was a photograph in the magazine of a black woman in northern Africa and she was holding her dead baby in her hands and looking up to heaven. And I looked at it and I thought, "How could a loving God do this to this woman? How is it possible to believe that there is a loving or caring creator when all this woman needed was rain?"

What do we say to Charles Templeton who wants to know why God didn't send the rain? That was a defining moment for him. That photograph pushed him over the edge and shipwrecked his faith in a loving, caring God.

What do we say to Jim Bowers, the missionary to Peru, who lost his wife, Roni, and seven month-old daughter, Charity, when their plane was shot out of the sky by an air force jet, because they thought the missionaries were drug runners? Where was God's hand of protection in that?

What do we say to the two year-old daughter of 19 year-old Nafes Johnson, the young preacher who was killed by a stray bullet on a street corner in South Philadelphia when she asks, "Where's my Daddy?" A young man eager to attend Philadelphia Biblical University and become a minister. Where was God when that happened?

Those are the images we see in the news. But most of us have had experiences of suffering in our own lives that have caused us to wonder whether God really is good. Some of us grew up abused and mistreated, some of us have lost loved ones to accident or disease. We've had two young women at Valley View taken by cancer, both of whom left children behind. In one case, very young children. One out of every three families today will experience the effects of cancer.

My first "God why?" experience happened when I was 16 years old driving home from swim practice on a rainy, July night. Passing through an intersection my little Volkswagen Beetle was broad sided, dead center, and I was knocked unconscious. I ended up in a hospital for a month, then in a full body cast for nine weeks after that, and then months of rehab to repair a broken left femur. It was the summer before my senior year in high school and I was working hard to earn a swimming scholarship to college. And I can remember lying in a bed at Jeanes Hospital, looking at the ceiling and saying, "God, why? Why me? Why now?"

Fill in the blank. Most of us can point to an experience in our life that caused us to ask that same question, "God why, if you're so good, why is the world so bad? Why is my world so bad right now?" Surveys say that that question is number one on the minds of spiritual seekers. If they could ask God one thing it would be, "Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?" Maybe that's what you would ask God? Put another way the dilemma looks like this ...

If God is all powerful, he could destroy evil.

If God is all good, he would destroy evil.

But evil isn't destroyed.

Therefore, there is no all powerful, all good God.

At first glance that argument seems to make a lot of sense. Enough sense to keep lots of people from trusting the God of the Bible, enough sense to destroy the faith of Charles Templeton when he looked at the picture in LIFE magazine. So what's our response to the problem of pain? Let's look at the dilemma step by step.

First, God is all powerful. Psalm 147:5 says, Great is our Lord and mighty in power, his understanding has no limit. God is powerful enough to create the universe out of nothing, God is powerful enough to raise Jesus from the dead. But being all powerful doesn't mean that God can do everything. God can't cease to be God. He can't commit suicide, because he's eternal. God can't make mistakes or break promises, because he's perfect. And God couldn't create free moral beings, like you and me, and not at the same time create the possibility of evil entering the world.

God created freedom because it a good thing. We celebrate it every 4th of July in America. We all want to be free. It's one of the good gifts that God created in his universe. Without freedom it would be impossible to love. And love is the highest value in the universe, love for God and love for each other. But with freedom also comes the possibility to hate. Freedom opens the door for choosing evil over God and out of that good thing comes suffering. The majority of pain in our world, not all pain, but much of it comes from our own free choice to be reckless and to break promises and to stray sexually and to be selfish and to slander and to rape and to kill.

God is all powerful and in his power he created a good thing called freedom. He could have eliminated all of the suffering in the world and just made us robots, but then he would have eliminated love. And that was too big of a price for God to pay.

God didn't pull the trigger on that plane in Peru, God didn't shoot that stray bullet in South Philadelphia, God didn't broadside me in that rainy intersection. They were all free choices someone made. God is all powerful. And in his power he created people with free choices and opened the door for love, but also for hate.

God is all good. There is no evil in God. 1 John 1:5 uses the analogy of light and darkness to describe the goodness of God. God is light, in him there is no darkness at all.

God is good enough and wise enough to know that some of the pain in our lives is necessary for our own good. God knows what doctors and dentists, and coaches and trainers, and teachers and parents know, which is that sometimes to be good he needs to allow pain. God knows that sometimes evil can produce good. In his wisdom, he knows that in the long run more people will be better off if he tolerates the suffering than if he miraculously intervenes.

The very worst thing that every happened in the history of the world, the crucifixion of God's Son Jesus, became the very best thing that ever happened in the history of the world. At the time, the disciples didn't have a clue how anything good could come of their dead leader hanging on a cross. But it did. And suffering can bring good for us, if it draws us to God. Even Jesus, the Bible says, learned obedience through suffering.

Lee Strobel has this to say about the purpose of suffering, "God can use suffering to create good. He can use suffering to sharpen our character and to draw people toward God. As C.S. Lewis said, 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.' It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. Any suffering we endure in this world will pale in comparison to what God has in store for his followers in heaven. One Christian who lived a life full of difficulty said, 'In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures will be seen to be no more serious

than one night in an inconvenient hotel.' Now that's a powerful thought. In the end though, God has not abandoned us in our suffering. He has entered into it through the incarnation. It's not that just God knows and sympathizes with you in your troubles as any close friend might do. For he is so much closer than the closest friend, if you put your trust in him. He is in you, and therefore, your sufferings, are his sufferings. Your sorrow is his sorrow. And when he was talking about this I thought, Well, how could I not love a God, who didn't stay distant, and detached, and disinterested. But who willingly enters into our suffering, to bring comfort, to bring consolation. And who will take us to heaven in the end."

I didn't understand what God was doing in my life when I was lying in that hospital bed, day after day, week after week. But looking back on it now I can tell you that God was deepening my faith in him. "Why did I survive when I could have been killed?" God was loosening my grip on my life and teaching me to say not "my will be done" but "thy will be done." And you know what, God gave me the swimming scholarship anyway, to a school close to home that allowed me to stay involved in my local church which created in me an appetite to learn the Bible and eventually go into ministry.

God is all powerful. God is all good. And evil will one day be destroyed by God. There is coming a day when God will settle all accounts and people will be responsible for the evil and suffering they've caused. Criticizing God for not doing it now is like a reading a novel halfway and criticizing the author for not resolving the plot. God will bring accountability at just the right time. Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord in Romans 12:19.

And the suffering that's caused by accident and disease living in a sin cursed will one day also come to an end. I love how God's story ends in Revelation 21:1-4, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men and women, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. The story's not over.

So the biblical response to the problem of pain looks like this ...

If God is all powerful, he could destroy evil.

If God is all good, he would destroy evil.

But evil is not yet destroyed.

Therefore, evil will one day be destroyed.

So what about the woman in Africa who's child died simply for the lack of rain? To answer that specific question, Lee Strobel, interviewed, Dr. Peter Kreeft, professor of philosophy at Boston College, and this is what he said,

"He's entering into her agony. Not just her physical agony, but her moral agony, 'Where is God? Why doesn't he send the rain?' God's answer to that is the incarnation. He himself entered into all that agony. He himself bore all of the pain of his world. And that's unimaginable and shattering, and even more impressive than the divine power of creating the world in the first place. Just imagine what you can't imagine, every single pain that you can imagine, rolled together into a ball, eaten by God, digested, fully tasted, eternally. God doesn't change. In the act of creating the world, God said, 'Let there be not only pretty little bunny rabbits, and flowers, and sunsets, but let there be blood and guts, and the buzzing crowd of flies around the cross.' In a sense, Templeton is right. God is intimately involved in creating a world of suffering, he didn't do it, we did it. But yet he said, 'Let that world be.' And if he did that and then sat back and just said to us, 'Well, it's your fault after all'. Although he'd be perfectly justified, I don't see how we could love him. The fact that he went beyond justice and quite incredibly took all the suffering upon himself, makes him so winsome, that the answer to suffering is, just look! Just look! How could you not love this being who went the extra mile who practiced more than he preached? What more could he do? God's answer to the problem of suffering is that he came right down into it. Many apologists try to get God off the hook for suffering, but God put himself on the hook, on the cross."

God's not detached from our pain. He feels our pain. The answer to the problem of suffering is not an answer at all. It's the Answerer. It's Jesus himself. It's not a bunch of words. It's the Word. It's not an argument. It's a person. Are we broken? He was broken too. Are we despised? He was despised too. Do people betray us? They betrayed him too. Is life unfair to us? Life was unfair to him too. I wish God had us given more information, because I wrestle with doubt over God's goodness, but instead he gave us a person. And he wants us all to believe in that person who suffered and to trust Jesus with the question of suffering.

In closing let me read what British theologian John Stott said about suffering, "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, 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 to turn away. And in my 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. And 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 mark of the cross which symbolizes divine suffering. The cross of Christ ... is God's only self-justification in such a world as ours."

Is God good? Absolutely. Is the world bad? Absolutely. Does God make bad things happen? Absolutely not. Instead he allows bad things to happen. And if we hold onto our faith in a good God, he can bring good things out of the bad things that happen in our life. Just like he did at the cross. But he won't force you to believe that. The choice is yours.