



Where's God in All of This?

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On Sunday, September 4, 2005, I found myself standing before hundreds of people having to try and explain how a loving God could have allowed the death and devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing chaos. I wasn't alone in my dilemma ... either on that Sunday morning or in the history of human experience. Human beings throughout the ages have been confronted with, as C.S. Lewis put it in his book by the same name, the problem of pain.

Lewis simply and eloquently stated his issue, writing, "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."

A more straightforward and common expression in the midst of suffering is often, "Where's God in all of this?"

Suffering happens all around us. Sometimes it comes in the form of a natural disaster like a hurricane or the tsunami that hit Southeast Asia in December of 2004. Other times it's a form of terror brought on by humans like the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City or the attacks in Madrid, London and Baghdad. Sometimes suffering is fueled by economic or medical conditions like the poverty and AIDS epidemics in Africa. At other times it appears randomly such as the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, mental illness, or an unexpected death. Suffering can happen on a global scale, within a specific community, or be limited to an individual.

Suffering comes in so many different forms, but they all drive us back to that age-old question: "Where's God in all of this?"

Trying to Understand Suffering

Back in the early 90s there was a huge "hidden image" art fad. On the surface, the artwork looked like an odd but somehow balanced collection of colors and shapes. However, when looked at in the correct way, the colors and shapes revealed a hidden image ... something like a dolphin diving through a hoop.

I remember spending what seemed like hours standing before these pictures with my friends and hearing them rave about the images that popped out at them. However, as they would go from one image to the next, commenting and laughing, I stood confused, unable to see the hidden picture.

When I finally got up the nerve to say, "I don't see it," my friends would respond with a variety of suggestions. "Don't look at the art, look through it." Not sure exactly what to do I tried to look through the art, only to see a blurry version of what had once been perfectly clear. Another would suggest, "Try crossing your eyes and looking at it." I crossed my eyes only to find myself seeing two copies of the original image ... twice the collection of colors and shapes that still added up to nothing. Other suggestions would follow, but in the end, all I had was a headache.

When it comes to suffering and the question, “Where’s God in all of this?” there are many people like my friends in the mall that day. They offer a variety of suggestions and ideas that try to explain where God fits into the picture.

To help you focus on some of the answers often given, I invite you to look at a book in the Bible that’s titled after its main character, a man named Job (it’s pronounced with a long ‘o’ like the name Joe). Job was a good man who suddenly lost everything precious in his life ... his animals, employees, and property, his children, and his health. When three of Job’s friends heard of his great suffering they went “to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.” After sitting with Job for a while, each of his friends tried to offer Job their way of looking for the hidden meaning of the suffering in Job’s life ... they tried to help him see the hidden image ... they offered explanations to answer the question, “Where’s God in all of this?”

When suffering strikes, it is our natural impulse to play the role of Job’s friends. This response of speculating answers to explain away the reason for suffering flows from our human nature ... we need some sort of explanation to help make some semblance of sense in the midst of our suffering.

In my case, on that Sunday in September, people were looking to me for answers because I am studying to be a pastor ... because I’m supposed to have answers about God.

So, what did I say?

It’s Just Part of Life

In theory, it would have been easy to take up the fatalistic perspective held by many people in the world today ... a view where suffering is just something that happens and it has no ultimate purpose. However, as a Christian I find it impossible to adopt this view that essentially says God is disconnected from His creation and no longer cares.

Let me explain.

Genesis chapter one, the most known of the Bible’s two creation accounts, describes a God who speaks and things become ... a God who is awesome and powerful ... a God who is beyond human comprehension. This view of God could almost lead to seeing Him as a great clock master, who sets the universe in motion and then lets things play out as fate would have them.

However, Genesis chapter two tells the same creation story from a very different perspective ... a very personal one. Suddenly, this same God is on the earth planting trees, forming Adam from the dust of the ground, and putting His own lips to Adam’s, breathing life into him. In Genesis chapter two, God most high becomes God most nigh.

We see how God the Father—who is intimately involved in His creation—sent His Son to become human. Miraculously conceived by the virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ became one of us, but without sin. Just as we saw in Genesis two, the Gospels (the first four books of the New Testament) tell the story of God, in the Person of Jesus, interacting with His creation here on earth. But He doesn’t just interact ... He comforts, He encourages, He heals, He brings wisdom ... He is, without a doubt, a God who cares.

Could this same God who cared enough to delicately form Adam from the dust of the ground ... who cared enough to breath His very own breath into Adam to give him life ... who cared enough to abandon His heavenly throne to be in our midst ... who cared enough to touch the lives of people like you and me ... suddenly stop caring?

While our introduction quote from C.S. Lewis led to a logical conclusion that suffering indicates that “God lacks either goodness, or power, or both,” it seems to me there is a third option: God, through suffering, is working His purposes to bring about our ultimate good.

In Isaiah, a book in the Bible, God says to His chosen people Israel, “*Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction*” (Isaiah 48:10 RVS). Much as a metal smith will use fire to burn out impurities in the metal, God can use suffering in our lives for our good ... to accomplish His purposes in our lives. The question then becomes “What is God doing?” ... one very similar to “Where’s God in all of this?”

You Did Something Wrong

When we move away from the fatalist perspective, a common answer to suffering is that you must have done something wrong and God is giving you a wake-up call. If you recall Job from earlier, this was the first suggestion brought forward by one of his friends ... that even though Job appeared to be a great guy, there must have been something he did to incur God's punishment.

Just the other day I read a blog that boldly declared that Hurricane Katrina was God smiting the people of New Orleans because of the city's debauchery. The author implied that because of the sexual promiscuity and drunkenness the French Quarter and Mardi Gras are known for, God was punishing them and telling people to get in line with His ways. I heard the same kinds of statements following the 9-11 attacks ... that God was punishing people for breaking His laws and that the nation better wake up or more devastation was in store.

Are there times when suffering is a result of sin? Absolutely. The Bible tells us that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of the people's sinfulness and that the nation of Babylon took the people of Israel into captivity because Israel had rejected God's ways. In other words, everyone who lived there had turned their back on God and His ways.

At the same time, I find it gut wrenching how easily the author of this blog lumps all people in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama into that same category, in spite of the reality that not everybody affected by Katrina lives in New Orleans or participates in wild and rebellious behavior.

Rewind back to the biblical story of Job. The Bible tells us that God Himself called Job a righteous man, and yet he underwent extreme suffering. The same can be seen here. The clouds didn't break; the winds didn't calm, and the floodwaters didn't part around the gulf coast's righteous. Instead, everybody suffered. Hundreds of churches lost buildings and had members displaced or killed because of the storm. They suffered in spite of not leading the rebellious life.

This leads directly into how Jesus was once confronted by a group of people making the claim that the suffering of others was brought about by their sinfulness (see Luke 13:1-9). Some people from the region of Galilee had been put to death in a shameful way, and the crowd wanted to know if they were killed because they were more sinful than others. However, rather than discuss those killed, Jesus pointed back to the crowd and declared, *"No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*

Then, just in case the crowd missed the point, Jesus also brought up another incident where a tower fell and killed 18 people. Once again Jesus declared, *"No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*

In other words, Jesus told the people not to assume what God had not revealed. Instead, they should use this moment to look at their own lives and their own relationship with God. It's the old "when you point a finger there are three pointing back at you" approach. Instead of looking at those who are suffering and identifying the cause, look at your own life and see if God is either making Himself known to you or calling you to restore your relationship with Him.

While it didn't make sense at the time, this is what happened to a young woman named Lisa who lives in Texas. Lisa was a faithful Christian who regularly prayed, went to church, and spent time with God. Then her fiancé broke off their engagement because he was still in love with his ex-girlfriend. At the time, this felt like the end of the world to Lisa, and she kept asking herself the question, "Who am I if he doesn't love me?"

At first the breakup actually worsened her relationship with God. She didn't understand where God was in all of this, felt He wasn't listening when she prayed, and quickly grew sick of everybody at church saying, "God has someone better for you." However, over the next year, as the pain of the breakup healed, God slowly revealed His purposes and how He was working through her suffering.

Lisa now realizes that she was rooting her identity in her relationship with her fiancé rather than her relationship with Christ. While before the breakup she said to herself, "Who am I if my fiancé doesn't love me?" she now roots her identity in Jesus, thinking, who am I if Jesus Christ doesn't love me?

Can the answer to "Where's God in all of this?" be that He's using suffering as a way to bring about or correct your relationship with Him? Absolutely! But that's not the only possible answer, so that isn't how I answered the question on Sunday, September 4.

My Answer

So, what did I say as I stood before hundreds of people on Sunday, September 4, 2005, trying to explain how a loving God could have allowed the death and devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina? How did I explain to them, “Where’s God in all of this?”

I gave them the only honest answer I could: “I don’t know.”

While it’s not the most comforting answer ... while it doesn’t ease our wondering ... while it doesn’t make sense out of everything, it’s the only thing I could say because God hasn’t revealed His purposes ... He hasn’t let us know how He’s going to work through the storm. In fact, He very well could use Katrina to accomplish thousands of different purposes in thousands of different lives because there is no single answer to the question.

At the same time, I didn’t just say, “I don’t know” and leave it there because there is something I do know ... something that has been revealed ... something God has made clear when it comes to suffering ... something God has done to let us know where He is in all of this. Some 2,000 years ago, on a hill outside of Jerusalem, God did something about the problem of pain that stems from what we’ve done wrong: God’s Son Jesus Christ took our wrongdoing upon Himself and died in our place.

Paul, an early missionary in the Christian church, once wrote to a group of churches in the region of Galatia (modern-day Turkey) that anybody who lives under the Law is cursed (Galatians 3:1-14). Fleshed out, Paul’s argument states that when God created the world, there was a natural order that enabled our relationships with each other, with God, and with the world around us to function smoothly. Ultimately, God revealed the details of this order in His Law. However, when people don’t live according to this natural order not only does the entire system break down, but God punishes those who have gone against His design ... God curses those who break His Law.

However, Paul continues by pointing to Jesus Christ, who, being the very Son of God, lived in every way according to God’s established order, so He could willingly take humanity’s curse upon Himself ... enduring the punishment of that curse on your behalf, so you could have a restored relationship with God.

Now, when we feel the effects of the curse in our lives, when suffering strikes, we can look at our lives and see where our relationship with God stands. Are we living according to His will ... are we finding our identity in Him ... are we doing the things He has called us to do? If we’re not, suffering could very well be God calling us to return to the root of our faith—Jesus Christ crucified—and a life lived in the shadow of His cross.

At the same time, God has done something about the problem of pain that comes when our relationship with Him is solid ... when suffering seems almost fatalistic and without purpose. Again, it was 2,000 years ago, but this time it happened at a tomb outside of Jerusalem when Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

Once again, Paul provides some clarity: this time in his letter to Christians in Rome. He begins with the statement, “*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 NASB). In other words, for those who have faith in Jesus Christ, the worst thing that could happen to you today will ultimately seem like nothing when compared to the joy that eternity will bring. At the same time, while Christians are certain of a perfect future, the resurrection of Jesus also gives them strength to live through the trials of today.

Not only is there hope and anticipation for eternity, but Paul also says that God’s Spirit is there to help us in the moments of suffering. Paul says that in our moments of weakness when we don’t know what to pray that God’s Spirit intercedes for us ... this Spirit restores struggling faith with the promise that “*for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose*” (see Romans 8:28 ESV).

In other words, God’s Spirit comes to Christians and reminds us that even in the midst of seemingly pointless suffering, God has a purpose, and it will ultimately work for our good because God has called us as His children.

And God wants that for you. Are you asking these same questions? If you would like to receive additional information about connecting with others who can help, please call us at Lutheran Hour Ministries at 1-800-876-9880.

For Further Thought

When preparing for writing this book, we at Lutheran Hour Ministries interviewed some people who had gone through a variety of struggles. That's how we got to know Lisa and how she dealt with losing her fiancé, as mentioned earlier in this booklet. We asked each person the same questions. Below are their answers, as delivered individually. We share them with you to help frame your own perspective.

Interview: Getting dumped by fiancé

What's your name?

Lisa

Where do you live?

Texas

How would you describe your walk with God before the event/circumstance?

Walking together—close relationship, prayer, regular church.

What happened?

Fiancé broke off relationship. He said he was still in love with his ex and didn't want to hurt me. I know people deal with much worse, death, losing a home, but the end of this relationship was like the end of the world for me. My whole future was gone. I was rejected and confused, doubted everything about myself.

How did you deal?

Throwing myself into work at first. Cutting the guy out of my life, even though he wanted to be "friends." Making changes helped, like a new apartment.

What was your biggest question?

Lots at first—why, what did I do wrong? But the one that stuck in my mind the longest was "Who am I if he doesn't love me?"

What is your biggest understanding after going through it?

I don't need others to define me; I don't have to be in a romantic relationship to be complete.

How is your walk with God different now?

At the time it suffered. I stopped going to church and withdrew from church friends. I couldn't handle one more "God has someone better for you" comment. I felt sort of numb when I prayed and didn't know what to ask for. It was more than a year later before I started to pray and seek God and start visiting church again. Listening to Christian rock music also helped me feel stronger in my faith, more than anything else.

Interview: Long-term illness

What's your name?

Michelle

Where do you live?

Minneapolis, Minnesota

How would you describe your walk with God before the event/circumstance?

We are walking together. Very consistent in a strong, faith walk.

What happened?

Came down with the symptoms of multiple sclerosis and was finally diagnosed.

How did you deal?

1) Did a lot of self-talk. Reminded myself that in the big picture of life—mainly my perspective regarding how the big picture is about my relationship with Jesus for ETERNITY—his wasn't the end of the world or anything. 2) I also let myself go through the stages of grief (denial, anger, etc.) whenever I needed to. 3) I also gave myself a limit as to how long I could have a pity-party. 4) I made a decision to be a positive person through all the yucky circumstances of life.

What was your biggest question?

I can't choose the biggest, but here are some I had ... How could I now be a missionary overseas with a disease like this? MS messed up my dreams and plans. Will I become a burden on my husband? Can I be a good mom now? I never asked God "why me?" I know that almost everyone has some kind of ailment to deal with these days. I just happened upon MS.

What is your biggest understanding after going through it?

When I was in India recently, I heard the national Christians say that God chose to heal people or raise animals from the dead "for the sake of the kingdom." But when there was a situation where healing or raising wasn't necessary for the kingdom, it didn't happen. So now I understand this to be my perspective on my MS. I got MS because sin is in the world and my body is a junker. But as of today, God doesn't need to heal me for the sake of the kingdom, so that is all right with me. I know He will see me through it and knows what I need.

How is your walk with God different now?

Maybe it should be different, but I'm not sure it is that different. I have to ask God for more help for little things, and I do ask for healing. But day to day it is quite the same.

Interview: Re divorce

What's your name?

Daphne

Where do you live?

U.S.

How would you describe your walk with God before the event/circumstance?

We are walking together, but sometimes I don't pay that much attention to who is at my side. I am often too busy with the things of this world.

What happened?

My husband suffered a complete breakdown, which worsened over several years. In the midst of another bout of mental illness, he decided that there was no place for me in his life. He decided he was not committed to saving our marriage and that he would be stronger on his own. In his saner, kinder moments he acknowledged that he was being dreadfully abusive to me and that I would be better off without him. Still, he never let down his guard enough to acknowledge that we could benefit from counseling, nor would he ever let us honestly talk about what was going on.

How did you deal?

Through support of friends and family who I believe became the mouthpieces of God. It occurred to me that while my husband was an atheist, every one of my friends were Christian or at least spiritual in some way. They helped (and continue to help) talk me through the wordless darkness that overcomes me, moments of doubt, bouts of crying, episodes of self-pity and paralyzing depression.

What was your biggest question?

The biggest is the perennial "why do bad things happen to good people?" I know that probably sounds egotistical, proclaiming myself to be a "good person," but I hope readers will be understanding that in general I do try to live a good life, had been faithful, and had tried so hard to save our marriage. I put up with years of unhappiness because I took my vows seriously. And now I was facing what I considered an enormous stigma, a severing of ties to someone I'd planned to grow old with (I had hoped things would improve and we would eventually live happily ever after ... if only I could figure out how to make him happy and please him). Next down on the list of questions were what was God's plan? How in any way shape or form could this be a good thing? I know that divorce (and apparently even an annulment) is possible under the circumstances, but it hardly seems what the church (and God) would want. WHY?

What is your biggest understanding after going through it?

I don't have one, except that I made a poor choice marrying him. The experience has left me with a greater appreciation for my family and friends.

How is your walk with God different now?

It's just Him ... and me now. I know that I'm getting more support to get through this still very painful period of my life. I've become much more aware of Him in my life and find myself offering silent prayers of thanks for little things that happen I'm thankful for. I am grateful for His presence in my life and for my faith. I am still far from healed, but as your poetic metaphor describes it, it's a different walk now.

Interview: Spouse loses job

What's your name?

Laura

Where do you live?

South America at the time, now Missouri

How would you describe your walk with God before the event/circumstance?

We were walking together.

What happened?

Several years ago my husband, who is a professional church worker, didn't have his contract renewed. The reason was based on differences in point of views regarding practices in the church.

How did you deal?

I was able to deal with it in a very healthy way thanks to the help and support we received from my husband's colleagues and our community of faith, but it was very painful, and it took a long time to heal completely.

What was your biggest question?

How could God allow this to happen to us when we had been faithful and had done nothing wrong?

What is your biggest understanding after going through it?

That being a Christian doesn't mean being perfect. That those of us who make up the church are subject to making mistakes as much as anybody else. That "bad" things also happen inside the church.

How is your walk with God different now?

I'm closer to God than I ever was before because I've learned that He doesn't expect me or anybody else to be perfect. What He does expect of those who follow Him is to be willing to ask for forgiveness.

Interview: Tsunami survivor

What is your name?

Somboon

Where do you live?

Phuket, Thailand

How would you describe your walk with God before the event/circumstance?

I have known God from my sisters and brother who are Christians. Especially so, from the husband of my sister (brother-in-law). My sister and her family, who are committed Christians, together they pray to God to bless me, to protect me, my relatives, and friends. This is a beautiful and very good thing that they have God to watch over each step and every minute, like God is with them all the time. From this experience that I have closely with them, I feel that God is a refuge for happiness.

What happened?

The disaster from the tsunami which was caused by nature, which can happen at any time and anywhere, had occurred on December 26, 2004, throughout the Phuket Province (Patong beach, Gata beach, Garon beach, Gomala beach, etc.), Phangnga Province, Ranong Province, Grabi Province, Tang Province, and Satoon Province.

How did you deal?

I feel very sad for those who had lost their family members, relatives, friends and their properties, the things which they love very much.

What was your biggest question?

- *Why did this thing happen?*
- *The tsunami cannot be stopped, but there should be some kind of warning so that the people have time to evacuate. So that there would not be so much loss.*
- *The responsible parties should come in and try to survey to do their best jobs.*
- *When will the victims who are sad and full of grief and feel unsecured be able to feel secured, safe and full of life again.*

What is your biggest understanding after going through it?

I understand more about helping others, loving others, having compassion for fellow human beings. I was very sad and with much grief when I went with my family, brother and sisters to see the great destruction caused by the tsunami to many villages. I also visited the people who are staying at a refugee camps and see that they still need help.

How is your walk with God different now?

When my sisters and brother love and commit and give their lives to help and have compassion for others, I feel that God is with them, and I also believe that God is also with me.

Interview: Diving accident survivor

What's your name?

Justin

Where do you live?

Missouri

How would you describe your walk with God before the event/circumstance?

Sometimes we were far apart.

What happened?

I was having a fun filled weekend at the river. Got a little carefree and decided to run and jump in. However, when I got to the river's edge, I was about to trip over a root sticking out of the ground and instead of just jumping into the river I dove, thinking I would be able to make it further. Needless to say, I didn't make it very far and drove my head right into the bottom of the river, with all my weight on top of me. In doing so, I broke one vertebrae, compressed three, and chipped one in my neck. The doctors said that I should have been dead right away, but now looking back, the Lord lifted me, as I walked to the car and was transported to the hospital.

Even after all the moving around I did after the accident, I still was carried in the Lord's hands and was not even paralyzed. According to the doctors, 99 percent of people should have died in this specific incident; the other 1 percent is paralyzed. On top of that, it should have taken up to three months wearing a back brace and not doing anything besides sitting around the house. In my case, so far, the doctors expect me to be completely healed in approximately two months.

Most people, when told about what has happened or hearing about my accident, say I am extremely lucky, but the truth is that luck has nothing to do with it. Ever since then, I have hated the word "luck," not because I hear it so much, but because without the Lord with me, holding me in His arms, I should have been dead or paralyzed. Instead, He has been bringing me back to full life, giving me more than I had before the accident: true faith in Him that He can heal. He doesn't always give us little things we think we need like an exact way to end a depressing time in our life. But He heals it and it works out, just like He gives new life. It's not only once when you're born into this world, or twice when you become baptized, but again when you do something stupid and you make a mistake. He lets you start all over.

How is your walk with God different now?

Life isn't taken for granted any more. Something like this makes you see that life is short, and you've got to give God the praise He deserves. All it takes is one small accidental decision on your part, and you could be diving headlong right into your grave.

What was your biggest question?

Why would God save me? After all the stupid things I have done, this might be the worst mistake I have made in my life. But I am not the only one who has done something dumb. Reality is, the Lord has His reasons for having all of us here. We might not know what it is, but even the worst of all people will someday know what their life was about. I always thought I wasn't here for any reason. I didn't have anything to tell people about God. I didn't pay attention in Bible class. Sure enough, through many hard times and struggles with life God was there, and I did have something to tell others about when it came to God.

Your Turn

What is your name?

Where do you live?

How would you describe your walk with God before the event/circumstance? Choose one:

- We are walking together.
- Sometimes we are far apart.
- I'm unsure but still searching.
- Walking with God is not important.

What happened?

What do you think might become your biggest understanding after going through it?

How are you dealing with it?

What is your biggest question?

How do you think your walk with God might become different after walking through this?

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