May I never boast...
except...
in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

Date: 9 October 2011   Service/s: all

Series: If you could ask God
Title: Why 54 year old husband is dying of cancer. Why?
Passage: Psalm 73, John 9:1-11

- I think it was most probably the most raw and personal of all the questions we received.
- My 54 year old husband is dying of cancer. Why?
- The full question reads: “My husband has been struck down by terminal melanoma cancer. It’s in his bones and organs. We found out at the end of May. He had no idea, no real symptoms. He has done chemo and radiation and only has weeks to live as the chemo didn't work. He's just turned 54. Why ?????”
- You can feel the pain... the anguish... the genuine confusion.
- It just seems to make no sense.
- And even if you’ve never known such pain as that lady knows, you’ve asked similar questions.
- Like some of the others along this theme we were asked.
- “Why do little children get serious sickness that are fatal?”, and “why is there motor neuron disease”?
- “Why do babies and children have to suffer from abuse? How can they ever know and love God when the only people they trust give only hate?”
- Live long enough in this world and you’ll have such questions.
- “Why didn’t God save Daniel Morcombe?”
- Now – as we said we promoted this series, we don’t have all the answers and I don’t and wouldn’t presume to speak for God.
- But my great hope is this morning is that something of what I share with you will make sense.
- Enough sense for you to find some comfort
- Maybe even enough sense for you to want to know some more
- For some people the issue of suffering is the greatest stumbling block for people considering the claims of Christianity.
- How can God allow such suffering?
- Why doesn’t he do something about it?
- Doesn’t he care?
May I never boast…
except…
in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

- Isn’t he able?
- So some conclude on that basis that there is no God.
- They make two assumptions:
- An all-powerful God COULD end suffering
- An all loving God WOULD end all suffering
- And they conclude: since suffering exists, an all-powerful, all loving God must not!!
- We’ll come back to that argument shortly… but you can understand the logic and the conclusion!
- Just for a moment I want to put the Christian interaction with the problem of suffering on hold…
- … And I want to take you around the room – the portrait gallery if you like of some other world religions.
- If you were a Hindu or a Buddhist how would you answer the question of suffering?
- Or what about a Muslim or even an atheist?
- Let’s have a quick look.

1. Hindu
- Hinduism – oldest of the world’s religions.
- All the events in your life are a result of the way you’ve lived your life in the past – or indeed – the way you’ve lived in a past life.
- Karma is the universal balancing principle.
- Their text puts it this way: *as a man acts, as he behaves, so does he become. Whatever deeds he does on earth, their rewards he reaps.*
- A Hindu family who has just lost a child – in that moment they are reaping Karma for their deeds – in this life or a previous life.
- Businessman – sees a beggar by the road – he knows that what he is seeing is a divinely sanctioned balancing mechanism.
- Hugely comprehensive answer to your suffering – it is simply – and profoundly - the balancing out of your deeds.
- So the answer to our lady who’s sadly losing her 54 year old husband to cancer is – well - it’s the opposite to *Sound of Music* – “somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good”.
- No – this is - somewhere in your youth or childhood – or in a former life – you must have done something bad! What goes around comes around.
May I never boast... except... in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

2. Buddhism
   - Perhaps more than any other religion, Buddhism is a response to suffering.
   - It’s a path to end the pain.
   - A prince who was over a region near the present day borders of Nepal and India – around 500BC – lived in luxury – a palace for every season of the year – he had dancing girls etc, foods – everything he could want.
   - And he had led a very sheltered life. He didn’t know what went on outside the palace.
   - One day as a young man he ventured outside the place – even outside the city walls and he saw great suffering – sickness, the elderly and frail, a corpse...
   - He was so shocked by this that he left his young wife and new born child and embarked on a search for answers.
   - For 7 years he deprived himself of all worldly luxuries and he still did not understand the origin and meaning of pain.
   - And he sat under a tree and determined not to get up from mediating until he understood pain.
   - He eventually had his enlightenment.
   - All suffering he saw is the result of the attachments you have to the things of this world... clothes, foods, relationships – all suffering is the result of attachments.
   - The pain a child a feels at losing a father is not caused by the event, it’s caused by the child’s attachment to the father.
   - A beggar’s suffering is caused by his attachment to the desire for a better life.
   - And if a child can detach from the father and if a beggar can detach from the desire for a better life, suffering evaporates. It’s shown to be an illusion.
   - Relentless logic.
   - But is it possible to live this way?
   - Can a boy faced with the sudden loss of his dad, negate his feelings of sorrow, insecurity, love and rage and still be a normal boy living in the real world?
   - So the Buddhist answer to our lady’s question of the pain of losing her 54 year old husband to cancer is – stop desiring your husband to live and you’ll suffer no more.

3. Islam
   - Islam offers a very different response.
   - In Islam, all events in the universe are determined by an explicit decree of Allah.
   - The finger of God.
   - When a plane falls from the sky or when a child has cancer, it is the finger of God.
May I never boast...
except...
in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

- The reason is unknowable and unaskable.
- In Islam – you will find solace as you submit to Allah. In fact the very word ‘Islam’ translates as ‘submission’ – to the will of God.
- A Muslim is one who submits.
- That is where you find meaning – submitting to the absolute decrees of God.
- Do not ask. Do not dare to question.
- Just submit.
- So Islam answers the woman with the 54 year old husband by saying ‘you must not ask the ‘why?’ question. Just know that this is Allah’s will. And resign yourself to it. Submit.’

4. Atheism
- Final non-Christian perspective – atheism.
- For the atheist, suffering is just the random intersection of time and space.
- Professor Richard Dawkins – one of the world’s most famous present day atheists puts it this way: In a universe of 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 we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows or cares. DNA just is and we dance to its music.
- The question ‘why’ is just overruled and there is no one to put your question to anyway.
- Pain and suffering are evidence of God’s non-existence.
- Back to those two premises I mentioned earlier:
  - Premise 1 – an all powerful God could end suffering
  - premise 2- an all loving God would
  - the usual conclusion – since suffering exists, an all powerful, all loving God does NOT.
  - Sounds all nicely sown up doesn’t it?
  - However – there is a hole in the logic
  - And even atheist philosophers know the proof fails.
  - The problem with this is not premise 1 – but 2.
  - Even atheist philosophers acknowledge that a loving God may just have good reasons for suffering to continue.
May I never boast...
except...
in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

- We don’t even need to **know** the good reasons – but just to see that he **might** have good reasons – the argument therefore fails.
- You can’t use this argument until you can prove a loving God doesn’t have good reasons for allowing suffering.
- So the answer to our lady’s question as far as atheists are concerned: all of this is meaningless. No rhyme. No reason. Blind pitiless existence.
- Atheism offers nothing.
- So - these are the alternatives.
- Are you reaping what you deserve – Karma?
- Is suffering born of desire and the way to escape it is to give up attachments to the things you love?
- Is it all just a decree of God that I cannot question?
- Or are we really staring into an abyss where there is no God?
- Or is there another way?

**Where does a Christian response begin?**

1. **With an invitation to ask**
- The Bible is full of people asking these sorts of questions.
- We read from Psalm 73 – where the author asked – how come the wicked get it so good all the time? – **they have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.**
- Psalm 22:1 – the writer cries out in desperate confusion - **my God, my God, why have you forsaken me...?**
- I feel utterly abandoned by you – why?
- In fact the Psalms – the hymn book of the ancient Jews – so many are what we could call Psalms of complaint...
- Psalm 13 – **how long O Lord? Will you forget me forever?**
- Psalm 64 – **hear me O God, as I voice my complaint; protect my life from the threat of the enemy...**
- Psalm 74 – **why have you rejected us forever, O God...?**
- Or the prophet Habakkuk - **How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?**
- Even now in the presence of God – there are those who have died before us and are asking God – how long Lord before you do something about all that’s wrong with the world. (Revelation 6:10)
May I never boast...
except...
in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

• Then in reading from John’s gospel when seeing a man born blind, Jesus’ disciples ask – who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?
• Jesus doesn’t say – you mustn’t ask that question.
• In that instance – the answer was that work of God might be displayed in his life as Jesus gave him his sight.
• (That’s not a global answer to the question of suffering – but it was the answer for that man’s situation – and is an example of God’s loving purposes in suffering!)
• So the firm witness of the Bible – in fact the encouragement of the Bible – is to cry out to God... to complain, to question, to rile...
• My 54 year old husband is dying of cancer – why? It’s not fair! I don’t like it!!
• In Islam that is blasphemy... in Christianity – it is invited!
• the God of the Bible bids us to approach him with doubts and fears.. because it’s in that moment of personal engagement with him that we are in a place to hear God’s reply.
• The second thing to say in a Christian response is:

2. With an understanding that God has suffered too
• That’s a huge claim
• But if Jesus is God on earth – God visiting our planet...
• He has suffered too.
• He wept with the family of his friend Lazarus who had died
• He wept because the people of the city of Jerusalem did not believe
• In his arrest and trial he was beaten and mocked and flogged
• And when he faced the cruellest execution known to mankind, he took the words of Psalm 22 on his heart and lips – my God, my God, why have you forsaken me...
• One of the early letters preserved for us from the 1st century says that we have in Jesus someone who is able to sympathise with us in every way... (Hebrew 4:15)
• Again this is blasphemy in Islam... that God could be impacted in any way by human action or condition...
• But... God has known – has experienced firsthand – human sorrow and sadness and loss and death.
• Then the Bible presents us...
May I never boast...
except...
in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

3. With an understanding that God is with us in our suffering
   • We read in Psalm 46 – God is our refuge and strength – a very present help in trouble...
   • Or in Psalm 23 – The Lord’s my shepherd – even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, your rod and staff they comfort me...
   • Psalm 16 – because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken...
   • Or early church leader Paul in another letter preserved for us – Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles...
   • The God who welcomes our questions, the God who himself has known suffering...promises to be alongside us in our troubles...to run to as a refuge, to draw strength from and to comfort us in all our troubles...
   • Finally, the Christian response begins...

4. With an understanding that this world is not all that it was and not all that it will be
   • I’m going to have more to say about this next week and I hope you may come back to hear that...
   • But for the moment let me say that the Bible makes it clear that this is a mucked up world....
   • It’s not how God first made it.
   • It was perfect when he made it. He said ‘it is very good’.
   • But that’s not how we see it now.
   • It’s a sad twisted distortion of what it once was.
   • And he also makes it clear that it is not all that it will be in the future...
   • One day – all sickness and even death itself will be gone.
   • And we look forward to that time and in the Lord’s prayer, regularly pray for that day to come as we pray ‘your kingdom come’
   • One day... all sickness, sadness, pain... all gone.
   • And everything will be perfect once more.
   • That may be small comfort to people in pain right here this morning... but for people asking – why doesn’t God step in and do something – the answer is – he has and he will... I’ll explore that more fully with you next week.
   • But let’s finish today by returning to our question.
May I never boast... except... in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

My 54 year old husband is dying of cancer. Why?

- Let me say then what we can’t know and what we can.
- What I can’t tell you is why this has happened in your life right now at this point.
- I can’t tell you why it has happened to you and not someone else.
- Or why it has happened now and not in 30 years’ time.
- But I can tell you this:
  - ... Unlike the Hindu faith - it’s not Karma... it’s not because you deserved this because of actions in this life or a previous life.
  - And I can tell you that unlike Buddhism, no one is asking you to cast off your attachment to your husband so you’ll feel better.
  - And I can tell you that unlike Islam, no one is telling you not to ask that question.
  - And I can tell you that unlike Atheism, it’s not just some random act of meaningless in a pitiless existence.
  - Out of all the world views...
    - ...the Christian one – while it may not have all the answers – is the best one standing...
  - It makes the most sense...
  - It meets you where you are...
  - Because I can go on to tell you
    - That God welcomes your questions, your complaints... he invites you ask, to rail against him, to tell you exactly what you think of him.
    - That he has suffered too. He knows it. Has felt it. He’s wept. He’s been indignant. He’s been humiliated. He’s known great physical pain and great emotional pain.
    - and he promises to be right there with us in our suffering... a refuge, a strength... in it with us.
    - And that this world is not all it once was... and not all it will one day be!! And all that is wrong and utterly painful of this world... will be gloriously and wonderfully and completely finished.
  - That’s what I know.
  - That’s what I can say.
  - and I hope that you’ll reach out to God in your pain and find him very real... and wonderfully comforting...