

Psalm 46

John 2:1-11

"Where Is God When It Hurts?"

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In C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, which is a collection of reflections on his wife's suffering and death due to bone cancer, he writes:

Where is God? When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, if you turn to Him then with praise, you will be welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away.

What Lewis's reflection describes is a troubling theological problem that has existed for centuries: Where is God when it hurts? Where is God in the midst of suffering? How do we reconcile what scripture says about God - that God is just, and merciful, and loving - with the world in which there is so much suffering, and pain, and tragedy?

As you might already know, there are no easy answers. The Bible itself is full of different stories in which God relates to

humanity in times of tragedy and pain. Some of them suggest that God uses calamity to punish the unfaithful. Others suggest that God uses tragedy to instruct us or improve us. Still others suggest that God remains far off, disconnected, choosing instead to leave us to whatever catastrophes befall us. Rather than speak with one consistent voice on the matter, the Bible suggests different things in different places. And so, the questions about God's presence in the midst of suffering persist. Bart Ehrman, professor of religion at the University of North Carolina, once said in an interview that he turned from his evangelical upbringing and instead became agnostic because he found Christianity incapable of answering a simple question: How could there be a God when there is so much suffering in the world? He found it difficult to believe in a loving God when there is so much in the world that is without love. Where is God in the midst of tragedy? According to Ehrman, God is not. He's certainly not the only person in history to arrive at that conclusion.

Now I may be wrong, but I don't think Dr. Ehrman is here today. Nor do I think there are any biblical scholars in our midst. But you know, you don't have to be an agnostic biblical scholar to

be bothered by the question of where God is in the midst of tragedy.

Throughout the Bible there are stories that give us a glimpse of a God who is seemingly slow to respond when disaster strikes.

Consider Psalm 22, which reads:

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest.

There's also the familiar story of Jesus and Lazarus, which tells us that upon learning that Lazarus was gravely ill, Jesus, instead of immediately going to see him, remained where he was for two days, and in that time Lazarus died. And then there's our scripture reading for this morning from John 2. Typically known as "The Wedding at Cana", this story seems at face value to be a rather benign and simple story of Jesus' power. As it turns out, it is anything but. Jesus and his mother are attending a wedding, and in those days weddings lasted for days on end. There would have been hour after hour of eating, and drinking, and dancing, and singing. This wedding at Cana would have had all that, but in the

middle of the great celebration, one of the worst possible things that could happen, happened. The wine ran out. It would have been a horrible disgrace for the family to run out of wine, and they immediately would have been shamed in the community. Those empty wine jars threatened to turn the celebration into a terrible disaster.

Now if you're reading this story with your thinking caps on, you'll know that this is the moment when we expect the Son of God to spring into action. His mother certainly thinks he should, and she informs Jesus of the situation. "They have no wine!" she says. But instead of springing to action, Jesus offers a harsh rebuttal. "Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come." In John's gospel, this is how Jesus' public ministry begins. It's our introduction to the God we see in Jesus Christ. "My hour has not yet come." Later on, of course, John will also tell the story of Lazarus, and by that point we may find ourselves wondering: Why doesn't this God in Jesus Christ seem quicker to help people in need? Why does God seem to let bad things happen when they could be avoided from the beginning?

That, you might say, is the million-dollar question posed by these passages of scripture. Some would say that these readings just reflect God's tendency to punish us first and bless us later. Just this week televangelist Pat Robertson made news by suggesting that the people of Haiti received an earthquake as punishment for their unfaithfulness to God. People like Pat Robertson read scripture and see a God whose first order of business is punishment. Blessing, if it comes at all, comes somewhere on down the road after we've been buried beneath God's wrath.

Still, there are others who would say that these readings simply reflect the fact that God really isn't there at all. Jesus delays in seeing Lazarus because he reflects an absent God. Jesus seems less than concerned with an impending wedding disaster because the Almighty is content just to sit back and let bad things happen.

And then there are those who seek to read scripture through the lens of the love, grace, and mercy shown by Jesus Christ himself. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a professor of philosophy at Yale and a Christian, lost his son in a mountain-climbing accident. Like C. S. Lewis, he wrote about his struggle, and his pain, and his

questions in a memoir entitled, *Lament for a Son*. "There is a hole in the world now," he wrote. "In the place where he was, there's not just nothing... I cannot make sense of it by saying 'God did it', but neither can I do so by saying, 'There was simply nothing God could do about it.'"

In between the wrathful, punishing God who controls every single event and the distant, careless God who can do nothing against the evils of the world, there is something else. The prevailing picture of God in the Bible is not one who capriciously strikes the world and those who live in it with disaster, as if God looks down upon us and thinks, "You there - you have sinned against me so I'll shake the very earth under your feet... All of you over there, I'll send some lightning to strike the engine of your plane. And as for you there, a stroke during your morning jog is just what I have in mind." No. That's not who God is.

I once heard a grandmother tell the story of trying to teach her granddaughter about how God is involved in our lives. And so, as they played in the backyard she pointed to the flowers and asked, "Sally do you know who made the flowers?" And then she told her granddaughter, "God made the flowers." When it started to rain,

she said, "Sally, do you know who made the rain?" And then she told her, "God made the rain." Later that day the girl made a horrible mess on the living room floor, and her grandmother cried out, "Sally, who made this mess?" And the little girl answered proudly, "God made the mess."

We need to be careful when we talk about God's relationship with the world that we don't end up saying that God made the mess. God made a world in which messes are possible, but God didn't make the mess. I remember vividly upon the sudden deaths of both my grandfather and my uncle in a plane crash in 1997, someone told me that the most horrible event in my life was God's will. I could never believe in that God, a God who willed bad things to happen to those he presumably loves, a God who strikes down grandfathers and uncles for reasons I'm not supposed to understand. No, I never knew the God who wills those things to happen. The God I knew, and continue to know, is the God who loves and grieves for those who suffer tragedy, the God who loved and comforted me when my grief was too much to bear.

That's the prevailing picture of God that we see in scripture. God's power is not in controlling every single event, or in causing

disaster, nor is it the power which merely sits in a far-off throne, disconnected from our sufferings. The uniquely Christian description of God is something else: God is Love. It is love that defines God's power, and it is through love that God's power comes to us.

God comes closest to us, we believe, in Jesus Christ. We see the most we can see of God in the man Jesus, in his life and suffering and death. That is what makes us Christian. We speak of God using the parental language of scripture, calling to mind images of parents everywhere who love their children deeply and will do everything within their power to protect them. But even as we speak of God in the image of parental love, we do so knowing that for every parent there comes a time when protection must be limited and freedom must be given. To speak of God as a parent suggests that God relates to us like that. Out of love for us, God gives us freedom, freedom to live, and do, and be. But in that freedom there is the potential for tragedy. Sometimes bad things like earthquakes or terrorist attacks or plane crashes, happen. That doesn't mean that God willed these horrible events any more than a parent wills skinned knees or broken arms, nor does it mean God is

watching them from afar. To the contrary, with love like that of a father or a mother, God sheds tears with us when lives are lost. God grieves with us and hurts with us when tragedy strikes. God comes to be with us as one of us, in the weakness and suffering of a Savior who was born in a manger and hung on a cross. That is the God we know, and we know that God will be with us whatever happens to us, to rejoice with us, and weep with us, and walk with us every day of our lives up to the very last one and beyond.

Where is God when it hurts? God is in every hug, every kiss, every comforting word. God is in every donation, every care package, every cup of cold water. God is in every batch of mortar, every load of bricks, every foundation rebuilt. In all these things, God is slowly filling up the emptiness of our pain, and our heartbreak, the void left in our hearts when disaster comes. And just when it seems like tragedy has carried the day, God's glory will be revealed. Tears will be wiped away. Mourning will be turned into dancing. Tragedy will be transformed into treasure, like water into fine wine.

Thanks be to God. Amen.