

## Sermon Transcript from June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016 Why? Pastor John Mark Comer, Bridgetown Church

Okay. To kick off the night, first thing's first: I want to beat up for a minute or two on one very popular theodicy that is way all over the place, but I think, in my opinion, is really, really dangerous. Now, in theology it's called "meticulous providence." Can you say that? Well done. So, if you just want to sound smart tomorrow at the office, just drop that by the water cooler or whatever. Meticulous providence. Now, at kind of a street level – this is language you may recognize easier – it usually goes by this name "the sovereignty of God."

The basic idea behind this theodicy is that, hey, God is sovereign. Meaning, in this view, He's in control of every single detail in the universe. He's meticulous at literally every single detail. Put another way, everything that happens is the will of God. Now, I would argue this view did not exist for at least the first 400 years of the Church, if not much longer. Prior to that, when people talked about the will of God, what they meant was God's moral intention for the universe. So, God's will was that a man and a woman in marriage are faithful to each other until death, or something like that.

But, after a theologian by the name of Augustine in the fourth century and then John Calvin in the reformation and then a number of people after that, when people talked about God's will, they meant God's control over the universe. That's a very different idea. So, something happens and people say, "Oh, it must be God's will." Or something does not happen and people say, "Oh, it must..." – what? – "...not be God's will."

Right? See, that's a very different kind of take on the will of God. Let me show you a clip of a super famous pastor from the Midwest, a dude by the name of John Piper. Here he is.

[Video]

[End Video]

So, this guy, he's smart as a whip. I don't know him at all. But, my guess is He loves Jesus as far as I can tell. But, he, honest to God, believes that God is in control of every single thing that happens in your life. Good, bad, major, minor. Cancer? That's God. A bullet to the head? God's hand was on the trigger. He believes that all suffering is "for our good and His glory."

And Piper is extreme, but, honestly, he's not alone. A ton of people think like this. Think of a number of the clichés that you hear on a regular basis when bad things go down. For example: "God is sovereign." People say that all the time. "Oh, I know God is sovereign."

Or its follow-up: "God is in control." Do you know that or do you say that from time to time? "God's in control." What people mean by that is, "Man, I don't really get it, but I know God is in control of this. Good or bad."

"God has a plan." You hear that all the time. One critic of this view says it's almost like people believe there's a divine blueprint behind every single event in the story of your life. No matter what it is, good, bad, neutral, in between, something goes down and it's really lousy, but you say, "Oh, God has a plan. I know there's a divine blueprint."

And then, of course, there's the ubiquitous "everything happens for a reason." And everybody says that. Followers of Jesus, people that aren't followers of Jesus at all, that's just out there. "Everything happens for a reason." And a lot of people honestly believe this. People that I love and respect and I think are wrong. I think it is over the top dangerous. Not only do I think this is at odds with the teachings of Jesus, the writings of the Old and the New Testament, but I think it is over the top dangerous. Because, on the front end, this way of thinking gives you comfort.

Like, "Oh, this is really bad. But, God's sovereign. God's in control. Everything happens for a reason. Okay. I just have to wait and see what it is."

But then, on the back end, this view gives you a crisis of faith. "God is sovereign. But, my child was born with cerebral palsy."

God is sovereign over that?

"God's in control."

"Okay. But my college daughter was just raped on campus. God's in control of that?"

"God has a plan. But, I'm 35 and I'm still single and I'm aching for a husband and a family and I don't see it. It doesn't make any sense to me. God has a plan?"

"Everything happens for a reason, but now I've been through a divorce and it's been five years, it's been ten years and I don't see really any good out of it at all. Everything happens for a reason?"

Do you see that? Front end comfort. "Oh, it's okay. It's okay. It's okay." Because we want to know that somebody's in control. If not us, then God. But then, on the back end, God, in your mind's eye, in your imagination, becomes a moral monster. You saw this last week in Job. At first, "The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." But then he starts to follow that line of thinking through to its logical conclusion and, by the end, he's raging against God.

"You are not only amoral, You are immoral," is what he's saying to God. This leads you, in my personal opinion, to a toxic view of what God is like, because you think that God is responsible for all sorts of not only good, but also evil in your life. Now, with great respect to John Piper and the reformed tradition and a lot of my brothers and sisters who think this is right, I do not believe this at all. And, most of us in leadership don't believe it either.

You know, Piper said, and I quote from that video, "Everyone who dies dies because God wills they die."

Compare and contrast that with what Paul writes in the Bible that hopefully is open in front of you. 1 Corinthians 15. Look down to verse 24.

**1 Corinthians 15:24: "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he [Jesus] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."**

And then look at this: "The last enemy to be destroyed is..." – what? – "...death."

So, for Paul, the writer of a huge chunk of the New Testament, death and all of his friends are not God's will, but flat out God's enemy. In his imagery here, God is at war with evil, not in collusion with it. Well, what does this mean? It means that all sorts of things happen every single day that are not God's will at all. In fact, that are deeply at odds and against God's will. Yes, God is all-powerful and all good. But, I would argue that God does not always get His way. You have to factor in the reality that human beings and spiritual beings – we'll talk about that in a minute – have free will to either partner with God for all that is good and beautiful and true, or to rebel and rage against God.

The world is a terrifyingly free, beautiful, wild, dangerous place. And evil is the byproduct of that creative freedom. Dr. Gerry Breshears, just over the river, puts it this way:

"Evil is the result of the morally significant, free actions of God's creatures. Meaning evil is not the result of God at all. Evil is the result of the freedom that God built into the fabric of the universe."

Now, for me, maybe I'm the odd man out, but this seems like common sense. When I open up my Bible in the morning and I start to read, and as I read from Genesis all the way through to the end, I don't see a God in control of every single detail in the universe at all. I see a God in control of some things, but I see a God who created the world out of love. But, this world has been overrun by a hostile, alien invader that goes by the name of "evil." As John writes, "The whole world is..." – listen to this language – "...under the control..." – not of Jesus. He writes, "...of the evil one."

Let that sink in for a minute. "The whole world is under the control of the evil one." He writes that after Jesus' death and resurrection. And when I read the story of God, I see a God who is at war with this evil one and who, through the suffering, love and sacrifice of His Son, Jesus, and His family, his sons and his daughters, you and me, this God is at work to overcome evil with God and, in time, to usher in the Kingdom of God once and for all. But, in the meantime, Planet Earth is the site of a war. It's the site of a battlefield, and there's collateral damage all over the place.

This, obviously, is a very different take on evil. Now, usually when people think about the debate and all the controversy about sovereignty versus free will, usually people think about it along a spectrum. So, on one side you have a high view of God's sovereignty; a high view of how in control of the universe God is. Everybody kind of agrees that God is sovereign. But, nobody agrees on to what extent. And, on this side, you have meticulous providence and then a little close in you have Calvinism and all sorts of well-known writers and teachers over the years.

Then, on the other side, you have Arminianism, which says God doesn't cause evil but God does allow it, and in this view God is a little bit more out of bounds, and it's the result of human freedom or spiritual freedom and God is kind of there and doesn't cause it. But, He does allow it. Then, past that, you have open theism, which is a whole other thing. And if I had to pick, if I was kind of forced into this framework, I would for sure lean more to the free will side of things.

But, here's the thing: both sides argue from the Bible. Both sides have a ring of truth. And I really think there's a better way to come at this conversation. Not as a spectrum with a right and a left, but more as a web or a nexus. Here's my working theodicy. I call this the multi-polar view. I've kind of done this with Dr. Breshears and a number of other teachers.

This is based on Jesus' prayer. So, we say it all the time. "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done..." – where? – "...on earth as it is in heaven."

So, just think about that for just a moment, because we say that all the time. "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth."

Notice that Jesus assumes something in that prayer. He assumes that right now God's will is not done on earth. Does that make sense? Otherwise you would not pray for God's will to be done on earth. Jesus assumes that heaven is the place where God's will is done all the time. But, earth is the place where God's will is not always done. Sometimes it is; sometimes it's not. Why? Because, on earth, there are other wills at play. There are at least five that I'm aware of, if not more.

First off is God's will. As I said, everybody agrees that God is sovereign. Nobody agrees what that means. What I think that means is that God is King and God can do whatever the heck He wants. Do you agree with that? Hopefully most of you do. God is King. He can do whatever He wants. And there are times – and this is honestly hard for me – and I think it's rare, but there are times when God co-ops evil for His own purposes. And there's a lot of irony in that.

He fights evil, at times, with evil. Sometimes to discipline you or me. Sometimes to mature you or me; to grow us up. You need to learn something. God needs to teach me a lesson. Or, other times, to keep evil in check. I mean, think of a police officer fatally shooting a pedophile or something to keep a child out of harms way in a hostage negotiation or something like that. A great example in the Bible is the exile. We just read through that. After hundreds of years of warning Israel to repent for idolatry and injustice. If you know this story, finally God says, "Okay, enough is enough," He takes away His hand of protection and, literally, within months, Babylon is there at the door. Syria up in the north, Babylon down in the south. And Babylon comes in to wipe Jerusalem off the map and take Israel away into captivity.

Was that God? Kind of. It was Babylon, and God did not override Babylon's will. But, that was God. Whether it's direct or indirect, that was God essentially saying, "Okay. Here you go." To discipline you, to mature you, to put a stop to evil. There are times when God causes evil. If not directly, then indirectly. In the language of Piper and friends, "For our good and His glory."

My beef with Piper, with meticulous providence, is I think those times are really rare. I think they are an exception to the rule. He and others think that's always that way. I think it's barely ever that way. Don't assume that evil in your life is from God's hand to

discipline you or mature you or teach you a lesson. I mean, learn all you can out of a time of suffering in your life. But, don't just assume that it's God's hand to discipline you or there's a lesson or to teach you or something like that.

And keep in mind there's a huge difference between Israel going into exile for her idolatry and her rampant, horrific injustice, and a woman giving birth to a stillborn child. Those are two very different stories. So, first you have to factor in God's will. God has a hand in our life. But then, you also have to factor in our will. So, Alexander Solzhenitsyn on coming back to Russia after years in exile, he was criticized for eating and drinking with the corrupt politicians that were still in power. And it was really interesting. When asked about it, he said this. Famous line. He said:

"The line between good and evil runs straight through the middle of the human heart."

What he was saying is that what we want to do as human beings, particularly in the West, we want to locate evil externally, out there in someone else, when the reality is it's located internally, right in here in you or in me. We want it to be us versus them. Right? Good guys; bad guys. Think about the rewriting even of World War II. The Allies and Axis. And I'm not here to argue for Hitler or anything. I'm just saying we rewrite history to make it into good guys and bad guys. Or, in the therapy world, I'm the innocent victim and so and so, my ex or my dad is the guilty perpetrator. Innocent victim; guilty perpetrator.

That's how we want to come at it. But, in reality – and we all know this – our own heart is anything but black or white. It's grey a lot of the time. There's darkness that is in there, even as followers of Jesus. We are responsible for so much evil, not only in the world at large, but evil in our own life. Some suffering, if not a lot of suffering, in our life is the byproduct of our own sin, of our own poor judgment, of bad decisions we make, of immaturity. We can't blame God for that or other people for that or even Satan for that. We have to accept responsibility. Not with guilt, not with shame, but with a humility.

So, there's God's will, then there's our will, then there's other people's will. So, other people have freedom and, just like you and me, a lot of those people use and abuse that freedom. And I know this is not popular at all to say in the west, but there are evil people who do evil things. And if you don't believe that, with all due respect, wake up. There are evil people who do evil things. Often, those evil people fly planes into buildings in the middle of a city. Or, in response, send predator drones and kill innocent women and children on the other side of the world. Or lie about you at work. Or abuse you as a child. Or betray you. Or cheat on you. Or so on and so forth.

Because, just like you and just like me, they're free. And they often wreak havoc in the world and cause, at times, catastrophic suffering in our life. So, some suffering is caused not by us, but by other – not by God – people. Then, fourth, you have to factor in what the New Testament calls Satan and the powers. Now, I know we're in the middle of Portland. Most of you have a college degree and all of that. We're educated. Blah, blah, blah. I know that it's not in vogue to believe in Satan right now or in a spiritual world that's just as real as the physical one.

The Western, secular worldview that we grew up around and were educated into makes evil out to be this abstract concept. I would argue the Western world is incredibly naive in how it thinks about evil. I believe, as a follower of Jesus, based on His teachings, that evil is personified and real. That it has a name, Satan, and this spiritual being that goes by the name Satan through the New Testament is in league with a whole array of other spiritual beings, who knows how many, at war with God and with all that is good, beautiful and true in God's world. And that a huge chunk of this world is right now, not for long, under his control.

The Bible has all sorts of names for these creatures. Angels, demons, spirits, princes, principalities, heavenly beings, gods, powers. The point is, whatever language you prefer, there is a vast society of creatures, some good and others evil, some that partner with God and you and me to usher in the Kingdom of God, but others that are kind of synced up with the Satan and at war with God whose end goal is to drive the world into the ground. As Jesus said of Satan, "He comes to steal and kill and destroy."

Greg Boyd – and, once again, I don't endorse everything this dude has to say. But, I love this quote right here:

"When one possesses a vital awareness that in between God and humanity there exists

a vast society of spiritual beings who are quite like humans..." – listen to this – "...in possessing intelligence and free will, there is simply no difficulty in reconciling the reality of evil with the goodness of the supreme God. It virtually sidesteps the problem of evil."

Now, that last line, I think he overstates it. But still, when you think about evil you have to factor in Satan and his crew. C.S. Lewis, if you've ever read the Screwtape Letters – if not, it's so worth your time – says, "You know, there's a mistake that we make when it comes to Satan and the demonic realm. Either we kind of go crazy..." – and you know people like this who literally think that there's a demon behind every bush, every flat tire, every cold. It's like, "How are you doing?"

"I got in a fight with my wife on the way to church. It was totally Satan."

I'm like, "I think you were just stressed out and a jerk. I don't think it was Satan."

You know? And Satan's not God. He's not omnipresent. He's one place at a time. My guess is he had better things to do than make you be a tool shed. But, there's a lot of people that just blame Satan for everything rather than some things. But then, on the other side – and this is, in my opinion, way more of a problem – we just act educated and progressive and Portlandish and we act as if Satan isn't even real at all. And I think that's even more dangerous because – and I said this last week, but listen carefully – to the degree that you don't take Satan and the demonic realm seriously, you attribute his evil either to other people or to yourself or, worse yet, to God. When, in reality, so much evil is caused not only by human freewill, but by spiritual free will of a vast society of beings that have the exact same freedom that you and I have.

Then, finally, the last kind of factor in the matrix is chaos. So, I'm guessing that most of you have either read at least a little bit of chaos theory in school. If not, you saw Jurassic Park. Right? Or read a Michael Crichton novel? It's all there. Same difference. So, the basic idea is that everything is interconnected. You know, the butterfly effect and all of that. Everything is interconnected. There is such a thing as random chance in the universe. In theology, this is called "natural evil." So, not murder or war or genocide. Natural evil is an earthquake or a tsunami or an avalanche or blight on a crop.

Old Testament scholar, John Walton, who was here a few weeks ago, he has three categories in particular for Genesis: order, disorder and non-order. Order is the world as God intended it to be. The Garden of Eden. Disorder is the byproduct of sin and how sin has warped the world out of shape. So, murder or abuse or adultery. That's disorder. But then, his third category is non-order. That's just the chaos in the universe that has yet to come under the rule and the reign of Jesus and his co-rulers; you and me. Stuff like an earthquake or a tsunami.

So, while I very much believe that God could be involved in a natural disaster and I believe that Satan and the demonic realm could be involved in a natural disaster, but also, it could just be that an earthquake or a tsunami was caused not by God's will or humans will through global warming, but could just be caused by tectonic plates rubbing up against each other. There is, I believe, such a thing as an accident. There is such a thing as luck. Good luck and bad luck. There's a lot of stuff in life that is random. "Everything happens for a reason." I don't think so. I think some things happen for a reason and other things are just weird. That's the technical term for it. "It's just weird."

So, as I think about it, when you run an event, good or bad, in your life through this lens, you have to factor in God's will, our will, other people's will, Satan and the powers and then just life on this side of resurrection in the world. Now, let's test out this model really fast. Let's start with something easy and not horrific evil or whatever. Let's say you lose your job. And that's not to downplay. That's not easy. But, it's easier.

Let's say you lose your job. Okay? The default setting, in particular if you grew up in the Church, is to say something like, "Oh, I know God's in control of this," or, "I know God has a plan," or, "Hey, I know everything happens for a reason."

But, if you think about it, in my opinion, more carefully, it could be that was God. It could be to discipline you; it could be to mature you. It could be because God has something better for you. How many people do you know that story? It's like, "Oh, I lost my job and then, two weeks later, I got the job of my dreams."

That's awesome. But then, I could also tell you story after story after story of, "I lost my

job and then a year later I still didn't have one and then I lost my house and then I lost this," and it's just this horror story. Right? And so, you have to factor in both. So, it could be God or it could, with all do respect, just be you. Like, you were on Instagram and not on Excel. One of those was your job, the other was not. Or you were just snotty with your boss or you were difficult to work with with a coworker or something and you have to – no guilt, no shame – face up to that. Or it could be somebody else. It could be there was a coworker who was just malevolent and mean-spirited and wanted your job and was willing to lie, cheat and steal to get it.

Or it could be Satanic. It could be a demonic attack on your life. Especially if your life, you're a witness there at the office or the job site or whatever you actually do is somehow inline with Jesus and His Kingdom of God and Satan was just really, really angry about it. Or it could just be chaos. It could just be natural evil. It could just be a downturn in the economy or your company's in the red and had to cut back or whatever it is.

Now, here's what's so dang frustrating is that it's not always clear cut. Right? A lot of the time it is. A lot of times you can look to a bad event in your life and you can say, "That was God. That was me. That was my own stupidity and immaturity. That was somebody else who said this about me. That was Satan. I really believe that was just life."

But, a lot of the time, it's not like that. It's complex and it's messy and it's ambiguous. Turn really fast to 2 Corinthians 12. Just one letter to the right and to the very end. This is a well known line that I think is a great case study.

If you look at 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul writes, **"Because of these surpassingly great revelations."** About God and life and what we now have in the New Testament.

**"Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited,"** – listen to this. Second half of verse 7 – **"I was given a thorn in my flesh,"** – we're not exactly sure what he means. Most scholars speculate some kind of a chronic illness. Epilepsy or a back disease or something like that. Listen: **"A messenger of Satan, to..."** – what? – **"...torment me [or torture me]. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"**

So, was this thorn God? "It was given to me." Notice he does not say by whom. By God? By Satan? By somebody else? Or, is this from Satan, a messenger from Satan, to torment me; to torture me? Or was this because of Paul's own pride because of the surpassing revelations to keep me from becoming conceited? The answer is: yes. All of the above. At least three are at play here. And I can read to you about Jesus and His line on the Tower of Siloam and these people that died. I can read to you from the end of Genesis 50 about the how the brothers sinned against Joseph and how God intended it for good. Example after example where it's not one of the five, it's one or two or three of the five all at the same time.

So, our theodicy here is more like a web or a nexus than a spectrum. It's a little bit more either/or than both/and. And, if you say, "That's cheating," you're kind of right. But, hey. Sometimes we can identify. "This suffering was caused by me or by Satan or by God or whatever."

But, there are other times, as we said last week, where we just can't see behind the curtain of the universe. And we have to live in that mystery. But, listen. Here's where I want to kind of flip it for you. And this, for me, was really helpful. What if "why" is the wrong question? "Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does God allow evil and suffering and injustice and war and famine and abuse?"

What if that's the wrong question? When it comes to the problem of evil, we want God to say something about it. We want an explanation. But, instead, what we get in the Bible and in Jesus is that God does something about it. We get a solution and an invitation. What we get in the Bible is not a philosophy. If you want a philosophical, abstract concept about the problem of evil, you're not going to find it in the Bible. You have to go elsewhere for that.

What you instead get in the Bible is not a philosophy, but a story. I would argue that the Bible is essentially written to tell the story of what God has done, is doing and will do about evil and to invite and call you and I to join in that story. So, here's that story really fast to recap. Most of you already know this.



In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Then He created humanity, you and me, to partner with God, to draw out the potential and flourishing of the planet. And, originally, everything was "very good." There was no evil at all. So, that's why you ache for it and you crave and you desire a world with no evil. In spite of everything that you grew up in, science class and evolutionary theory and survival of the fittest, in spite of everything you know at a scientific level, you still, whether you're a follower of Jesus or not, you ache for Eden because it's there in your DNA. That's what God intended.

But, in the fall, if you know this story, everything went belly up. In Genesis 3 there's a snake that we later in the story realize is symbolic for Satan and he's in the garden with no explanation. Where did the snake come from? How did he get into the Garden of Eden? It does not say. He's just there. An alien intruder in God's very good world. But, human beings join in the snake's rebellion against God and, as a result, evil is now officially here to stay. Then God calls out a people to put the world to rights; Israel. But, as you read through the Old Testament, you quickly realize that the people of the solution are not part of the problem.

The Old Testament is simply the story of one failure after another after another. But, it draws evil to a point and all of it leads up to the coming of Jesus. Jesus, who comes as Israel in person, as humanity in person, all of Israel's history devolves onto Jesus' shoulders and He takes evil and all of its forms straight to the cross and there He puts it to death. Now, in theology, how you interpret the meaning or the significance of Jesus' death – which is an event, not an abstract concept or an idea. It's an event. How you interpret that event is called your "atonement" or "atonement theory."

In the West, ever since the reformation a few hundred years ago, the dominant theory of the atonement has been a view called "substitutionary atonement." It's this idea that Jesus died in our place. It's based on the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. He dies, we live. We live and He dies. Now, we believe this here at Bridgetown. I believe this. We believe it deeply. But, it might come as a surprise to a number of you to hear that for the first, bare minimum, millennium, if not millennium and a half, of the Church, the dominant atonement theory was not substitutionary atonement, it was another view called "Christus Victor." That's a Latin phrase meaning "the victory of Christ."

And it's this idea that in Christ's death and resurrection – because you can't piece apart or pull apart the two – Jesus won the decisive battle against evil. Evil was still here, but the cross and the resurrection were essentially, if you know your World War II history, it was D-day to the rest of the war. After D-day, Hitler was essentially done. But, there was still years left of fighting. That's what Jesus' death and resurrection was. He crushed the spine of Satan and the powers, He beat back sin at an individual level and at a society-wide level and He, in His resurrection, defeated death itself.

Now, which one is right? Well, I believe that substitutionary atonement and Christus Victor, I believe in both of them and a number of other atonement theories. I think they all go together beautifully. It's very much a both/and. But, I think that Christus Victor is the knife's edge in how we think about the cross. Again, Greg Boyd writes this:

"Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection reveal that, though God is not culpable for the evil in the world, He nevertheless takes responsibility for the evil in the world. And, in taking responsibility for it, He overcomes it. On the cross, God suffers at the hands of evil."

Let that sink in. You're not alone in your suffering. God suffers at the hands of evil.

"And in this suffering and through His resurrection, He, in principle, destroys evil. Through the cross and resurrection, God unequivocally displays His loving character and establishes His loving purpose for the world, despite its evil resistance."

The war; the pushback.

"He therefore demonstrates that evil is not something..." – listen to this line. It is so dang good.

"He demonstrates that evil is not something God wills into existence, it is something He wills out of existence."

How good is that? It's not good? I think it's really good. Either it's really good and you're like, "Wow," or it's just really hot in here or I'm boring or something. But, now, we're not

done. So, Jesus' death and resurrection are kind of the climax of the story, but it's not the end. Jesus' death and resurrection move on. Jesus then, in the New Testament, calls His followers, you and me, to join in His work, His Kingdom work, to overcome evil with God. And then the New Testament looks forward over the horizon to Jesus' return, to judgment day. Which, for a follower of Jesus, is a good thing. It's a day when Jesus comes back and evil is not kind of, sort of gone. It's all gone for good. Jesus puts the world to rights forever.

This, my friends, is the hope of the Gospel. Over a decade ago, after the tsunami, I remember this. Some of you do as well. Some of you were too young. But, after the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 that killed 230,000 people, John Piper – he does this normally after a natural disaster – wrote an essay in which he said that it was the will of God. He said, and I quote, "Satan is not the decisive cause of more than 100,000 deaths; God is."

In response, there was an Orthodox theologian by the name of David Bentley Hart that wrote an article for the Wall Street Journal that eventually became this masterpiece of a book, and it kind of went viral. It's this beautiful – you can go read it online – loving, humble pushback to Piper and that "this is the will of God" mentality. And at one point in the essay he writes this:

"Of a child dying in agonizing death from diphtheria, of a young mother ravaged by cancer, of tens of thousands of Asians swallowed in an instant by the sea, of millions murdered in death camps and gulags and forced famines, our faith is in a God who has come to rescue His creation from the absurdity of sin and the emptiness of death. So, we are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hatred. As for comfort, when we seek it, I can imagine none greater than the happy knowledge that when I see the death of a child, I do not see the face of God, but the face of His enemy. It is a faith that has set us free from optimism and taught us hope instead.

"It is a faith that has set us free from optimism and taught us hope instead."

I want to end really fast on that note of hope. Just turn a few pages to the left to Romans 8. I want to read to you bits and pieces of a beautiful, moving, kind of haunting passage about the ache that you and I and even, Paul will argue, creation itself has for Jesus to return and put the world to rights.

Paul writes this in Romans 8:18: **"I consider that our present sufferings..."** – whatever it is. Some of you are in a great spot right now. It's summer. Salt and Straw's on the agenda for the night and it's just great. Others of you are really in a living Hell right now and this is a beautiful word for you.

**"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."**

Think about that. If there was a scale, it does not even compute. Not even worth comparing.

**"For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God [you and I] to be revealed."**

He means "set free from sin forever."

**"For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."**

When you and I finally rule over the world as we should.

**"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."**

Trying to bring a new world to birth.

**"Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."**



Romans 8:28: **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."**

That last line right there – how beautiful is that passage, by the way? Man. That would be really great to put to memory if you're in a hard spot right now. But, that last line, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose," which is often misquoted as "all things work together for good." The Bible does not say that. You just read it. It does not say that. But, that is not only one of the most misquoted lines in all of the New Testament, I would argue it is one of the most misunderstood.

This passage is about our present sufferings, as Paul said. And, to compare and contrast that with our hope for the future. And Paul has all this beautiful stuff to say about hope. Hope is not wishful thinking, in Paul's mind. It is the declarative, definitive, resolute, expectation, put your money in the bank and count on it of coming good based on the character of God. But, for Paul, our hope – and please listen to me carefully – is not that one: nothing bad will happen to us. Jesus said flat out the exact opposite. "In this world you will face..." – what? – "...tribulation."

That's like a promise from Jesus. Any of your grandmas have the Pocket Promise Book or something like that? All the promises of the Bible? That one's not usually in there. Here's Jesus: "I promise you life will be hard. I promise you, some of you way more than others, you will bump up, in particular if you follow me, suffering, hardship, angst, loss, death, all of that in the end."

So, our hope isn't that one: nothing bad will happen. And our hope also isn't that everything that happens to us, it's the will of God. "God's sovereign, He's in control, He has a plan, everything happens for a reason."

"I know that sounds really loud or you lost your mom or you lost your child or you're this or you're that or there was a betrayal or there was abuse. But hey, everything happens for a reason. God's in control."

That's not our hope. That, in my mind, is just a gross misreading of what the Scriptures have to say. Our hope is that no matter what happens, Jesus is back from the dead, my friends. He is King over the world, over the universe itself. His Kingdom is here and it's coming. And, no matter what you face, whether your life is easy or hard, whether your dream comes true or you face crushing disappointment, no matter what it is, God is with you, you are not alone. He knows suffering better than anybody and, if you turn over all the broken pieces of your life to Jesus, He has an uncanny ability that God and only God has to take the broken pieces of your life and to turn it into something beautiful; to somehow take evil and, even though it's evil, turn it into good.

So, to bring it all full circle, what if "why" is really the wrong question? What if "what" is the better question? Not, "Why did this bad thing happen to me as I was a child or through my divorce or infertility or singleness or marriage." Not, "Why," because the reality is, man, you might not want to look too hard for the reason behind your suffering. Because, you might find one and you might not. Or you might like what you find and you might not like what you find. Instead, look for what God wants to do out of your suffering.

As you turn over your pain, as you turn over your disappointment, as you turn over your family of origin, as you turn over your cracked relationship with your mom or your dad, as you turn over whatever it is that's in your mind's eye right now, and maybe there's more than one thing, as you turn all of that over to Jesus and you just say, "Jesus, rescue me. Save me. I need you." Three questions to ask. One: what is God going to do in the end?

Spoiler alert. We know the end of the story. A day is coming when God puts out the fire of racism, misogyny, injustice, the dark underbelly of globalization, betrayal, abuse, death, loss and everything in between and it's finally and fully gone forever. So, no matter how bad your suffering is on this side of resurrection, please – and I know, for some of you, it's legitimate – know that this life is temporary. That doesn't make it easy, but it makes it easier. This life is temporary. Your life now, you're 50, 60, 70 or 80 years is a blip on a line that is stretching into eternity as a follower of Jesus. This life is not all there is. And you have to say that to yourself over and over and over again in the Western secular world. This life is not all there is. And the life that's coming is not less real, but more real. And it's not just me up in heaven forever, it's me here on earth living the life that God intended for me all along.

And you have to ask that question over and over. What is God going to do in the end? Secondly, what is God going to do through this in the meantime? In between now and then, the resurrection, what is God going to do through my suffering? Jesus has this bizarre, judo kind of ability where like – I'm not a martial arts guy, but does anybody here do judo? Yeah. One of you. Well done. If I wasn't way over time I would have you come demonstrate. But, not on me. On Gerald or somebody like that. As I understand judo, you use your opponents weight against them. They come at you and you do this crazy, awesome, Jackie Chan move. Well, he probably doesn't do judo. I don't know. Whatever.

You use your opponents weight against them, and Jesus has that kind of bizarre ability to take evil, injustice, divorce, betrayal, and somehow turn it on its head and turn its own weight against it and somehow weave it into a tapestry of beauty. So, as you open up your pain to Jesus, watch for Jesus to do something beautiful in and through your suffering. And don't just watch for Jesus to do something, you join with Jesus. Leverage all of your suffering for what Jesus is on about in the world.

And then, finally, you have to ask the other "what" question. What is God doing or trying to do in me right now? We'll talk a ton more about this next weekend. But, the hard knocks of life are the crucible where Jesus does some of His best work. Some of you are in that spot right now, and please know that suffering will either make you or it will break you. It can be, if you open your life up to Jesus, an incubator to grow and mature into a freedom you never thought possible; into what Jesus called "life that is truly life."

This, my friends, is the hope of the Gospel. Not a flimsy optimism. "Hey, the best is yet to come. No worries. Hakuna matata."

Not that. That doesn't get you very far in reality. But, hope. Brutally honest about the pain and suffering of life, but grounded in the soil under the cross and in the empty tomb that Jesus is King, that He's back from the dead.

In closing, here's a quote from N.T. Wright that I just think does such a great job of capturing tonight's theme:

"We are not told, not in any way that satisfies our puzzled questioning, how and why there is radical evil within God's wonderful, beautiful and essentially good creation. One day I think we shall find out. But, I believe we are incapable of understanding it at the moment in the same way a baby in the womb would lack the categories to think about the outside world. What we are promised, however, is that God will make a world in which all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. And we are given this promise not as a matter of whistling in that dark, not as something to believe though there is no evidence, but in and through Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection and in and through the Spirit through whom the achievement of Jesus becomes a reality in our world and in our lives."

Let's stand and pray.