

Sermon 17, “Why, God?” How God Defends Himself, Exodus

5:22-6:1

Frankly, it's insulting to be told “Here's why your pain is worth it. Your pain now will make you x, y, or z later on.” Maybe. Maybe not. There is no one-to-one relationship between pain and character.

Proposition: God defends Himself not by saying “Here's the greater good of your suffering” but by saying “I will keep my promises.”

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this whole book of Exodus has become to us another book of Job — another long engagement with the problem of evil, in which the characters we love suffer horrible things and then sit down and talk with God about what on earth is going on. In our text this evening, Moses presents a five-item gripe list. The first two items on it begin with the word “Why”. And what we'll see is that God doesn't actually answer those “Why” questions. He does not explain the place of the suffering within His overarching plan. Did you hear that? You already know it. But I'll say it again. God doesn't answer “Why” questions.

He doesn't.

God's answer to every “Why” is “Trust me.” He answers Moses' whys with a restatement of His promise to deal with Pharaoh. And in that statement lies the answer to our whys today. We want to know how come; God only reveals to us what, how, and occasionally when. God defends Himself against Moses' accusations not by spelling out the greater good the Israelites' suffering is bringing, but by reiterating His promise. And that, my friends, is how we should comfort one another in our sufferings too.

I. Moses Wants to Know Why, 5:22-23

Let's dive in and look at the five things that Moses has on his gripe list. How many of these sound familiar to you?

A. Why Have You Brought Evil, God?

The first of Moses' why questions is “Why have you brought evil, O Lord?” Most translations render “trouble,” because we know that God does not perform moral evil and that what was

happening to Israel was certainly a moral evil. But I think it's better to keep the literal translation "evil" here, because it's so comprehensive. God had already said that He was going to harden Pharaoh's heart. Furthermore, we know that God allowed Pharaoh to do this evil and sustained him in doing it. God had brought Israel down to Egypt. God did not personally do evil to Israel, but He did ordain, bound, and govern the evil that Pharaoh did. In other words, Moses is on the right track here. You can tell yourself that God couldn't stop the evil that happened to you, and that there is no reason to be angry at Him. But it won't matter. Our default reaction when things go badly is to be angry at God. We have a problem with what He's done to us. And the Bible teaches that we are barking up the right tree. Evil is not God's fault in one sense. He does not do any moral evil. But He allows evil agents to do moral evil, and He most certainly sends the evil of pain and the evil of punishment on fallen people. He even allowed the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

So if you're sick with cancer today, you can be certain that God could have stopped your cancer. You can be certain that He could have prevented this cancer, could have healed you. And you can be certain that He didn't do so for His own good reasons.

So what about asking "Why"? "Why do I have cancer? What possible good does this serve?" Brothers and sisters, God does not explain Himself. There may be lots of reasons for this, the biggest one being that He's God. But the one I want to focus on for just a minute is that the explanation would go right over your head and mine. Have you ever tried to explain to your four-year-old just what a GFI outlet does and why the bathroom needs it but the dishwasher doesn't? In particular, have you ever set out to explain why it has buttons on it and other plugs don't? You may know why. But putting it in a way that a four-year-old can understand is difficult. I know because I tried it this week.

Maybe you want to know why your family has suffered from a history of racial discrimination. Maybe you want to know why you lived when your little brother died in that car wreck. Maybe you want to know why God has allowed Russia more suffering than every other European nation. Maybe you want to know why your health is poor, or why your dad had to have that asbestos exposure in the Navy. Maybe you want to know why some are saved and some are lost, why the gospel took root in England but not in China, why Islam overtook the once-Christian lands of the Middle East. Guess what? God knows. I don't. But I think the explanation, if you could hear it now, would make no more sense to you than what you already know.

We ask why because we know that God knows the answer. He is in charge. But we simultaneously have to train our hearts to accept the reality that we don't know why, and if we did we would be no better off.

B. Why Have You Sent Me to Make Everything Worse?

But the "why evil" question is followed up by an even more urgent one: Why did the evil get worse after I started trying to obey you? Now, brothers and sisters, surely you have felt the urgency of this question in your own life. Why does obedience have to hurt? Why does no good deed go unpunished? Why does the congregation hate me so much after I've worked for their

good day and night for a decade? Why do my kids never want to talk to me when I was always working all those long hours for their benefit? Why did my conversion precipitate my divorce? Why did joining the church make the pastor hate me? Why did my attempt to confront my mom when she was doing something really wrong just poison our whole relationship?

You see, sometimes efforts to obey God really do make it all worse. They can take your circumstances from “okay” to “awful” in just a few minutes.

C. I Did What You Wanted

Moses’ complaint is enhanced by this: I did what you wanted! We tend to be hard-wired for a relationship between being good and being treated well. We were created under a covenant of works, and we live that way. Moses says to God, “I did what you wanted.” As we have seen, that’s a bit of a stretch. And guess what? It’s usually a bit of a stretch when we go to God and say “I did what you wanted.” You and I probably get it 60 or 70 percent right, and then go to God as though we actually got it 100% right. But regardless, Moses says to God, “I did what you wanted.” Maybe you’ve tried to lead family worship, evangelize a co-worker, share a Biblical truth on social media, go on a missions trip or give your time and money to an organization that you thought was doing Kingdom work. And the upshot was disastrous. Why does God do that to us?

D. I Spoke in Your Name

Indeed, Moses highlights that the only thing he delivered was what God wanted: I did it all in your name! What have you done in the name of God? Maybe shown hospitality? Given your all to a Christian non-profit? Loved and worked for and worried over your kids for the last twenty years, only to see them nominal Christians at best? Given a gift to your pastor that he appears to not appreciate at all? Loaned a vehicle to a church member who totally abused it? Tried to share the truth with a loved one? Brothers and sisters, this church, like so many others, is chock-full of people who walk the talk. That means that you are constantly saying Jesus’ name and doing what you think He wants you to do. And sometimes, that brings bad consequences, both from your flawed execution, from the evil of the world around you, and from the bitter Providence of a good and loving Father. If you’re feeling that pain today, you’re not alone! The greatest prophet in history, Moses son of Amram, felt the same way. You know that he is the only person named Moses in the whole Bible? Pretty much every other character, including Jesus, shares a name with at least one other Biblical character or location. But not Moses. He spoke in the name of God, and he did it very well. He was a very great prophet; God spoke to him face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.

E. You Didn’t Come Through

And yet God didn’t come through. He hadn’t delivered the people at all! Maybe He hasn’t rewarded your kingdom work at all today. Maybe you have given lots of money to a dud organization. Maybe you have seen your work for another denomination broken and let go because you follow Jesus rather than the way of the world. Maybe you have prayed for God to convert one of your loved ones, stop a drug addiction, keep your parents together, take away your same-sex attraction, or literally thousands of other scenarios. And He hasn’t come through.

Here's the deal. God does not answer these "Why" questions. He does not defend Himself by telling you how He was right all along.

II. God's Answer: "Now You'll See My Salvation," 6:1

You know that that's the human way. Have you ever brought a complaint to someone about their actions? Of course you have. All of us have done so. And how did that person respond? Most of us respond to complaints against our actions by giving excruciatingly interminable accounts of why we were right the whole time. You've heard it, I know. The answers revolve around "I'm wired that way" or "I was raised that way" or "If you understood, you would know that what I did makes perfect sense and was a much better approach than your half-baked idea" or "I was the helpless plaything of circumstances" or any number of other variations on this theme. I've told you all before that the apotheosis of this is found in Hillary Clinton's memoirs, a blockbuster account of why her 2016 campaign was perfect — or so I've heard. Candidly, I admit that I've never read it and pray I will never have to.

Anyway, if you've ever heard a person answer your "Why" questions, my guess is that you lost interest about thirty seconds in. People's accounts of why they were right after all tend to be tedious at best. God doesn't go down that road.

A. God Will Take Action Against Pharaoh

Instead, He simply says "Now you'll see." He promises results. Why the suffering? He is not going to explain. Maybe you wouldn't like the explanation. Maybe you wouldn't understand it. Certainly it wouldn't make your pain any less. God will hit Pharaoh so hard that the King of Egypt will drive out Israel with a strong hand. That's a promise. God will indeed push evil until it dies and He wins. How He'll do that is not our problem. That He'll do it is a promise He's made and that He intends to keep.

B. Pharaoh Will Send Out the People

Not only will evil be conquered; the good Moses was trying to bring about, viz., the release of the people from Egypt, will happen. It will happen in God's way and in His time, but it's going to happen.

If you have been disappointed in your expectations, if you have tried to serve God and seen everything only get worse, know that He is for you. His work is not in vain. He will conquer. And you will get to see the thing you labored for come to pass, if it's something He promised like the arrival of His Kingdom or the sanctification of your heart.

So comfort one another with these words. Don't speculate to yourself or to your Christian friends about why God sent a particular evil into your life. You may be able to identify some good results of it after the fact. Yet those particular results do not justify the evil, or make something evil into something good. Know that God is against evil, but also that He uses evil. And the answer to your "Why" questions is "God will keep His promises." That's always the answer, and that's the only answer that you and I can know or understand in this life.

As always, Jesus Christ is the greatest example of this. Why have you forsaken me? The Father forsook Him because He always keeps His promises, and He promised to save the world through the death of His Son. That's why evil overtook Jesus and killed Him. But it couldn't

hold Him down, and it can't hold His people down either. Yes, evil is everywhere in this world, corrupting and spoiling the good. But try as it might, it can't and won't win. That's what resurrection (the fulfillment of another of God's promises) means.

Why does it hurt? Why this evil when I tried to do good in the name of God? Because God keeps His promises. The good will triumph. The evil will collapse. You just wait. Amen.