

2 Kings 17:7–20 (NIV)

[The year is 722 BC. The northern kingdom of Israel has come to the end of the road. Hoshea will be the last king of Israel before the northern tribes are swept away and exiled by the Assyrian empire. Why does this happen? Here is the explanation given by the writers of the book of Kings.]

⁷All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods ⁸and followed the practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced. ⁹The Israelites secretly did things against the LORD their God that were not right. From watchtower to fortified city they built themselves high places in all their towns. ¹⁰They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. ¹¹At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the LORD had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that aroused the LORD's anger. ¹²They worshiped idols, though the LORD had said, "You shall not do this." ¹³The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your ancestors to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets."

¹⁴But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their ancestors, who did not trust in the LORD their God. ¹⁵They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their ancestors and the statutes he had warned them to keep. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, "Do not do as they do."

¹⁶They forsook all the commands of the LORD their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. ¹⁷They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sought omens and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger.

¹⁸So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left, ¹⁹and even Judah did not keep the commands of the LORD their God. They followed the practices Israel had introduced. ²⁰Therefore the LORD rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence.

When tragedy and suffering befall us, we cry out "Why?" We want explanations but are left unsatisfied. If God truly loves us, why doesn't he save us from misfortune?

My wife, Patti, and I have been able to make several trips to Europe and the Middle East. On every trip, we see evidence of countless nations and empires that were once great but now are only ruins. We once stood in ancient Carthage, founded by a Phoenician queen 800 years before Jesus. Carthage was burned by the Romans and covered with salt so nothing could grow there. We've stood in the great Roman Colosseum finished in 82AD. It would still be one of the largest arenas in the world but after Rome's collapse, the iron in the columns was yanked out and the marble facing was removed, all in an ancient recycling project. The greatness of Rome reduced to a tourist site.

Nearly a thousand years before Jesus, the nation of Israel was at its zenith of power and wealth. Solomon ruled over the most powerful kingdom in all Syria-Palestine. Yet, on his death, the kingdom split in two. The northern tribes headed off to forge a second kingdom of Israelites. And two centuries later, all ten northern tribes were overrun by the Assyrians and swept from the map of human history. A scant 150 years later, the southern kingdom of Judah would be overrun as well and Jerusalem burned. Even the grand temple built by Solomon would lie in ruins, the Ark of the Covenant lost.

Why? That's really the question isn't it? How could such horrors befall the people of God? Why were suffering and pain and loss and grief part of their lives? These were the people of

God. The next question follows quickly: Why are suffering and pain part of our lives? These questions never really go away. We may shove them under the rug for a while, but they soon pop again. Something is wrong and we want to know why.

The indictment

Today's reading from 2 Kings reads a bit like a grand jury indictment. It is clear in its sweeping indictment of the kingdom of Israel. The victory of the Assyrians is the consequence of the Israelites' abandonment of God. They've always been tempted to worship some of the pagan deities worshipped by their neighbors. Remember the incident of the golden calf at Mt. Sinai. And now, for centuries the kings of Israel and Judah have led the worship of idols. They have proved to be a faithless people, breaking the covenant they had made with the Lord God.

It is important to remember that this has been a slow and agonizing unwinding of Israel. The Israelites worshipped the golden calf at Mt. Sinai more than 600 years before the Assyrians overran the kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. But across those centuries one can discern the arc of decline and faithlessness that led to the destruction of both kingdoms.

Could it have been another way? Sure. Why would God ordain that his people be faithless? No, the people of God chose their own path, one that led them away from the God who saved them from slavery in Egypt. It was their choice, their freely made decision. Perhaps they thought that it didn't really matter, that God would bail them out no matter how they lived, no matter who they loved. Whatever the reason, these were tragic choices. The Israelites were supposed to be different than all the other tribes and kingdoms; they were God's people after all. But they forsook God for their own way. And it was the way of the fool, the way of destruction.

Sadly, our own society seems increasingly like that of the Israelites. We imagine that we can keep God's teaching to love our neighbors while ignoring the first commandment, to love God. This "second tablet project," as J. Budziszewski calls it, is as misguided now as it was then.

But of course, the Israelites have not been the only people to suffer, to lose their homes, even their lives. This world can be very hard. And our own question is much like that of the Israelites: Why??

Why?

Why do we suffer? That is the question we always come back to. We are like Gideon. When angel of the LORD shows up and tells Gideon to stay strong because "The LORD is with you," Gideon replies, "But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us" (Judges 6:13). We, like the Israelites in 722 BC, would ask the same question of that angel.

Too often, we are so desperate for answers that we concoct all sorts of reasons, many of which can be found in the explanations offered by Job's friends when they come to comfort him after terrible tragedy has befallen Job and his family.

Terence Fretheim lists a few of these and more¹:

- Suffering is the will of God.
- God has sent suffering for a purpose.
- God could have prevented the suffering but chose not to.
- God specifically allows suffering, at least for a time.
- Suffering is God's judgment because of sins committed.
- Suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs.
- To suffer is to bear the cross.

The problem isn't that these explanations are *all* wrong, but neither are they *all* right. As Fretheim puts it, when we come to the Bible we have to be prepared for nuance. We might

¹From Fretheim's book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010.

like the Bible to set things out in black and white, but the Bible simply doesn't when it comes to many of the questions we have. The bumper sticker reading "The Bible says it; I believe it" does an injustice to the full glories of the God-breathed Scriptures we have been given. Fretheim again:²

Faced with the realities of suffering and evil, Christians can say something, but they cannot say everything or even as much as they might like to say. They cannot "explain" suffering or "resolve" the problem of evil or provide "answers" to these issues or develop an airtight "theodicy." . . . [However,] the Bible does give its readers some room to speak between silence and "explanation."

Here are a few thoughts that I find helpful. You might too.

Suffering is a function of human limitations. We break easily. We get lonely and fearful. We are tempted into bad choices. These limitations are not necessarily the result of sin but are simply part of how God made us. Jesus was anxious and fearful in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Jesus grieved over Lazarus. And Jesus was without sin. Could Jesus have cut himself using his carpenter tools? Of course. In the Garden of Eden, could Adam have climbed a tree, fallen out, and broken his leg? Sure. The laws of physics operated in the Garden. Indeed, we can bet that "subduing" creation posed a few challenges even in the garden. Does our sin increase the suffering? Sure. Adam might have been pushed out of the tree. (I won't say by whom, but the suspects were limited).

Suffering results from the freedom we are given. From the opening chapters of Genesis, God pulled humanity into the work of creation. We are to multiply; there is no magic God-wand for making babies; a man and woman must become one flesh. We are to subdue an untamed and often dangerous planet. It is human gardeners who help beautiful flowers to flourish in ways they never could in the wild. How many varieties of roses have humans created? Have they not added to the beauty of God's creation? In this wild world, we have been given remarkable freedom to grow and to be challenged. The challenges of this world are often the means of our growth. How many parents believe that the best way to raise loving, responsible, well-adjusted adults is to give them everything they want and remove every obstacle and source of potential pain? We are built to strive, to contend, to work, to rise to challenges. This is how God made us. And he made a world that requires it of us.

The writer of Ecclesiastes wisely observed, "Again I saw under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all" (9:11). God created a universe into which randomness is woven at every turn. Indeed, at the deepest structures of reality exists a strange, counterintuitive world that seems to be governed by dice as much as by anything. And yet we manage. We still land men on the moon. We still eliminate smallpox. And God is with us in all this.

Finally, suffering also stems from the fact that the LORD God Almighty has chosen to accomplish his purposes through us weak, finite humans. This is the cosmos that God, in his infinite wisdom, *chose* to create. I suppose that God could wave a magic wand and fix all our problems, take away everything that might harm us, but then we would no longer be thinking, loving, and free creatures. What is love without the possibility of not loving? Consider those who have suffered the pain of unrequited love . . . for example, God.

Yes, there is mystery in suffering but it isn't all mystery. And always, we have to bear in mind and heart that God enters into our suffering with us. Far from any sort of remote absentee deity, the *God-Who-Is* has created a cosmos that is ever-changing and ever-challenging. There are many passages in the Bible that speak to God's own suffering, which culminates on the cross in Jerusalem. (For example, Exodus 2:23-25, 3:7-8; Amos 5:1-2; Jeremiah 9:17-18; Hosea 2:14-25 in which God is the unrequited lover).

We proclaim a God who not only suffered and died on the cross, but has always been deeply involved with us and with suffering. It is this God with whom we live in relationship, but like the ancient Israelites we too often forget and run off chasing after our own way, ignoring the one who loves us and has given everything for our rescue.

² *Creation Untamed*, p. 100

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are some reasons that nations fall? You might make a list of reasons that you were taught in school – political, economic, social, etc. What is the biblical explanation for the fall of Israel? What constituted a good king, so far as the Bible is concerned? A bad king? How might the biblical explanations of the kingdoms' fall differ from explanations that you might get in college?
2. You might share some of your own experiences with suffering. Did you search for explanations? Did you shake your fist at God and demand answers? Did you ever feel like God was punishing you? Perhaps it seemed that God had simply disappeared and was nowhere to be found.
3. You might begin by looking at the bulleted list of “explanations” of suffering on page two. How many have you heard used? What were the circumstances? How did the explanation strike you at the time? How many have you used yourself? What do you think of the idea that nuance is demanded? Does that seem like a cop-out?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Jeremiah 9:17-19 God mourns and even cries over his people's faithlessness.	Tuesday, Isaiah 43:23-25 God is burdened with the sins of his people.
Wednesday, Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-8 God suffers with his people. (This is what implied by the Hebrew verbs applied to God).	Thursday, Hosea 4:1-3 The moral order affects the cosmic order.
Friday, Ecclesiastes 9:11, read of all of 9:1-12. What do you make of this passage? What do you think God would want us to take away.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying the Gospel of Mark

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying 1 Peter

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current Series: *Old Testament Turning Points*

Scott Engle and Robert Hasley will be leading a trip to Israel in late October 2014. This will be a land-only trip that will include all the major sites in Israel.

For more information go to www.scottengle.org or email Scott at sengle@standrewumc.org