

## Why Does God Allow The Poor To Suffer?

1. Warm-up: On Sunday Jeff shared his new-found passion for Atkins Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough Bars. What's a simple pleasure in life that you're passionate about?
2. God is passionate about the poor. We know because, again and again the Bible hammers this theme. Job 5:15 says, "God saves the needy . . . from the clutches of the powerful. So the poor have hope and injustice shuts its mouth." Luke 6:20 says, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God." Our Scripture reading for this week was a song about the poor. The first half of the song is like the blues, describing the overwhelming feel of despair experienced by many poor people. The second half of the song is like an uplifting ballad, describing God's passion for helping the poor. Read Psalm 10, selected verses as printed on p. 3.
  - a. What insights does the first half of Psalm 10 offer about what it feels like to experience deep poverty? What are the core feelings described there?
  - b. Psalm 10 uses two different Hebrew words for poverty. Both broadly encompass any type of great misfortune, including financial lack, oppression, weakness, depression, being brokenhearted, mourning, feeling beaten down, or affliction of any type. Given that broad definition, when in your life have you experienced the deepest sense of lack or poverty? How did that feel?
  - c. Who is the poorest person you've ever known personally. What was their life like? What caused their poverty?
  - d. When you hear that 1 in 6 six Americans lives below the poverty line, and that 3.3 billion people in this world (40% of earth's population) live on less than \$5.50 per day, what thoughts or feelings arise within you?
  - e. Proverbs 21:13 says, "If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard." What does that verse mean?
  - f. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus describes what it will be like when we stand before him at the end of days. In verse 40, he says, "Truly I tell you, inasmuch as you did [something kind] to one of the least of these my brothers or sisters, you did it to me." Why do you think Jesus identifies so deeply with the disadvantaged? Have you ever known a parent with a differently-abled child? Does that analogy offer any insights into why Jesus is so emotionally identified with the poor?
3. On Sunday, Jeff asked, "If God cares so much about the needy, why does God allow so much poverty and suffering to exist in the world? Why doesn't God do something about it?" That's the same question raised at the outset of Psalm 10, when it says, "In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor. Why, O Lord, do you stand far off [and] hide yourself in times of trouble?" In other words, the poor often feel godforsaken. Jeff suggested a theological reason why. Read the example he gave, printed on p. 3.

- a. Jeff suggests that if God were to intervene too often in human affairs, we would be turned into robots. If we're going to be real creatures who get to experience the thrill of charting our own destiny, God has to step back and give us the freedom to make choices, even bad ones that adversely affect us and others. Do you buy that? Why or why not?
  - b. By definition, miracles are rare. What do you think prompts God in rare instances to choose to supernaturally override human choices or natural forces?
  - c. St. Teresa of Avila wrote a famous poem that captures the idea that God has chosen to step back from direct intervention and instead work primarily through God's people. St. Teresa writes, "Christ has no body now but yours; No hands, no feet on earth but yours; Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on the world; Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good; Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world." What are the implications of this way of understanding how God works? How does it make you feel?
4. If God works predominantly through us to help the poor, it becomes imperative that we find ways of carrying that responsibility that are manageable and realistic. Jeff suggested we think in terms of three levels of response. ***Level 1 – Caring for the needy begins at the personal level when family or friends face great hardship.***
- a. Is there someone God has put in your life right now who needs compassionate care? Describe how you think God wants you to respond to that person.
  - b. Jeff noted that caring for a needy friend or family member can be stressful and often tries our patience. Have you experienced that? What helps you to push through the frustration to be a loving source of care?
5. ***Level 2 – As people of God, we work together through our church to help those experiencing great hardship.*** Many churches can feel like artificial "Disneyland" environments disconnected from the suffering of the world. Do you feel our church is connected enough to the suffering of the world? Are we doing enough? How could we do even better?
6. ***Level 3 – As citizens in a democracy, we strive to mobilize our government to help hurting people, by using our voice and vote.*** Jeff gave the example of Bush's African AIDS assistance legislation that has saved 18 million African lives.
- a. How do you think our state and local governments are doing in responding to poverty and need?
  - b. What's something more you want to push our government to do for hurting people?

## **Psalm 10:1-18, selected verses**

1 Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? 2 In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor – let them be caught in the schemes they have devised. 3 For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the LORD.

4 In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “There is no God.” 7 Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; they sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding-places they murder the innocent. 8 Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless; they lurk like a lion, 9 that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net. 10 They stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might. 11 They think in their heart, “God has forgotten, God has hidden his face, God will never see it.”

14 But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan. 17 O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear, 18 to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed.

## **Why God Steps Back from Direct Intervention (example from sermon)**

Suppose I had the ability to create life, so I created you and said, “I want you to have what I have – real life. I don’t want you to be a puppet or robot. So, I’m not going to micromanage you. I give you the freedom to find yourself in life, to make your own decisions, write your own script, chart your own destiny.”

But then suppose I see you one day about to make a big mistake. Suppose I see you about to date someone who is like Nurse Ratched in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” So I say, “Hey, I know I said I would give you freedom, but I am not going to let you date Nurse Ratched. Permission denied!” And then a week later, I see that you are about to eat a whole bowl of raw cookie dough cause your stupid preacher recommended it. So I intervene again, and say, “I’m sorry, but if I let you do that, you’ll have a horrible stomach ache and could end up with Salmonella.” And I rip the bowl out of your hand. Then a week later, when you’re about to listen to an entire album of Berry Manalo’s “Greatest Hits,” I say, “I will not let you do that to your brain.” And I snatch your phone away from you.

If I your creator say you have freedom, but I’m not going to let you do anything I don’t want you to do, I’ve not given you freedom at all. You’re not living your life; you’re living mine. You’re a robot. God loves us too much to do that to us. God loved us – humanity – enough to make us real. That means God has to step back and say, “You can experience the thrill of making your own decisions, finding your own way, discovering yourself. I give you a zone of freedom in which to live. I won’t intervene except on rare occasions.” Yes, every now and then God intervenes to work a miracle. But miracles must be rare – or we’re not real. So 99.9% of the time, it’s up to us what happens – for better or worse. That’s the answer to the question why God allows so many poor people to suffer. God doesn’t; we do.