

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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Apologies: Weal and Woe
Isaiah 45:1-8; Mark 15:24-34

We continue our February sermon series “Apologies” this week, and if you were with us last week, you’ll remember that this month we are focusing on how we account for faith in the face of skepticism or even hostility. In one verse from 1 Peter 3, we are called to “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you,” and that word for “defense” is the Greek word *apologia*, the same word we get the word “apology” from. Point is, when we talk about “apologies,” especially “apologies” for faith, what we mean isn’t saying you’re sorry for something you did wrong, but to give an account or a defense.

This week, we come to a side of evangelism that is as much logical as it is emotional or spiritual. It gets to an aspect of giving an account of faith when we are asked some of the hardest questions, in particular the question that in my opinion is the single most challenging one to have ever faced the church. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

This passage in Isaiah 45 features some of the most direct statements of God’s sovereignty in all of Scripture.

Hear how Isaiah puts it, starting in v. 6: “So that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.” Pretty powerful stuff. Kind of just puts it out there. No apology. “I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe.” “Weal” might be a word you don’t hear quite so often, but it means abundance or well-being. The word in Hebrew there might even be familiar to you. It’s *shalom*, which most often we see translated as “peace” or “harmony.”

And then the other half of the pair, “woe,” is probably more familiar, definitely not something good, like “Woe is me.” Other translations have it as “disaster” or “calamity,” and the word in Hebrew is most often translated elsewhere simply as “evil.” But no matter the word choice, the message is the same: good or bad, peace or disaster, God’s in charge, and there is no other.

On one hand, that might be a real comfort to us. God’s in charge, no matter what. I think that’s the message intended here, given the context. This section in Isaiah has as its backdrop the people of Israel in exile in Babylon. Israel has been conquered, and its people taken away, its faith shaken, and the power of its God called into question. And into that despair comes a word of comfort that no matter what, God’s in charge, so in charge in fact, that God can even use a foreign king to accomplish His will and deliver His people.

That’s what the earlier verses of this passage are about. They’re about how God has chosen and called none other than the Persian Emperor Cyrus. Cyrus was the one who conquered

the Babylonians and then allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. So even though Cyrus doesn't know he's been chosen, God is using him to deliver His people, because ultimately God's in charge. And on one hand, that might be really comforting to know.

On the other hand, there's the troubling thought that if, no matter what, God's in charge, just what exactly does that make God in charge of? "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe."

That starts to creep up on a very troubling line of thought that has gnawed at the church for centuries.

John Goldingay, who's professor for Old Testament out at Fuller Seminary, captures the borders of this challenge better than I can. He writes:

"My wife used to lead a...Bible Study where some...who came...would commonly give the existence of evil as their reason...for not believing in God.... Who created evil? Where does it come from? Was it under God's control, so that God is responsible for it? Or was it not under God's control, so that God is not really [in control]? What about the disasters that happen in the world—the wars and tsunamis and earthquakes? Is God in control of them, so is he responsible? Or does he just let them happen—in which case is he still responsible? Or do they happen against his will, so he isn't really [in control]?"

Put simply, "If God is so good, and God is so powerful, how do all these horrible things keep happening?" And that, in my opinion, is the single most challenging question to have ever faced the church, and we're not going to resolve it today.

The reason I raise the issue is because if we're talking about giving an account for faith, especially in the face of life's hardest challenges, this one is to me right at the top of the list. It's not the only challenging question that faith encounters, but I struggle to think of another one that hits as hard. Theologians have a word for it, and that word is "theodicy," but it's a fancy word meaning "Why do horrible things happen if God is good and all-powerful?" This one has occupied page after page of theological commentary and hour after hour of consternation and debate for centuries.

The challenge isn't even unique to Christianity. Every religion out there, every worldview, has to grapple with the so-called "problem of evil," but some religions have an easier time than others. For example, if a religion claims that there are two equally powerful gods, one good god and one bad god—the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism is an example of this—or even just a bunch of gods with different leanings who are all eternally vying for influence in the universe—the Greek and Roman pantheons are good examples—then evil or something horrible happening is really easy to explain. It's just the result of the bad god doing something.

But that gets a lot more difficult when you say something like in v. 5, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god." Put another way, the buck stops with me.

No doubt many if not all of you have grappled with this question at some point in your life. You might be grappling with it right now, and in your heart, you're thinking, "God, why? If you're there, why did you let this happen?" And questions like that are some of the most heartfelt and gut-wrenching questions we can ever ask, because they are super-charged on both a logical level as well as an emotional and spiritual one. There are plenty of other challenging questions, like how is Jesus both fully human and fully God? That's a challenging question, but I have never seen anyone become viscerally affected by the question of Christ's dual nature, whereas a question like, "How could a good God let my loved one suffer and die?" really hits at the core of

us. Hits so hard that even the most logical explanation falls completely short of addressing the pain we feel.

Here's an example. Many of you may know of the British Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis, really a tremendous blessing to the church in the past century. He's most well-known for books like *Mere Christianity* and the Narnia books. But there's another book he wrote that deals directly with this question of evil, and it's called *The Problem of Pain*. It was in the teeth of World War II, so it's not like there weren't examples of evil and suffering surrounding Lewis. He really tackles this subject matter powerfully, giving good, reasonable ways for us to think about God and evil, and I'd recommend it to you. But if you read it, you'll also find that it comes across as a bit sterile. Yes, it's logical, but this question of evil, of pain, of suffering and trying to reconcile that with God's goodness and power isn't just a logical thing.

Compare that book to something else he wrote late in his life. It's a very short book called *A Grief Observed*. And you want to talk about words from the depths of personal pain, that's it. The backdrop of the book is the death of Lewis's wife. They had married, but then just four years later, after an ongoing battle with cancer, his wife died. Devastated him. And it is out of the depths of that pain that he offers more reflection on the sovereignty and goodness of God, and I'll tell you, the last thing you could say about *A Grief Observed*, as opposed to that first book, is that it's sterile. This is a faithful man being painfully honest about his faith and reason but finds that it doesn't really do something to address the pain.

Here's one thing he says: "At times [grief] feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says.... Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moment when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me."

There may be a time when well-reasoned words of God's control and sovereignty might in fact be comforting, but most of the time, it's the last thing we want to hear. Imagine the most painful time of your life: that could be physical pain, emotional pain, spiritual pain. And then imagine—and this might have even happened to you—someone coming to you and saying, "The Bible tells us, 'I make weal and create woe,'" or "It's all part of God's plan." Would that be comforting? True as it is that God is in control, that God is making all things new, that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, hearing those assurances usually don't feel like an answer to the pain we feel. Just paints over it.

There was a movie about Lewis made a while back called *Shadowlands*, and Anthony Hopkins plays C. S. Lewis. This is a dramatization, so I don't know if this encounter actually happened, but at one point near the end, after his wife had died, he's in a room with a bunch of his colleagues and a priest. Some of them offer their condolences, and he says thank you. But then the priest says—worst priest ever—"Life must go on." Lewis replies, "I don't know that it must, but it certainly does." Then the priest again, "Only God knows why such things have to happen." Lewis again, "God knows but does God care." The priest, "Of course. We know so little. We're not the creator." Then Lewis replies sarcastically, "No, we're the creatures. Rats in God's little laboratory. I have no doubt that the experiment is for our own good." The priest tries to reply, at which point Lewis snaps, "No! It won't do. It's an awful mess and that's all there is to it."

And I bring up that exchange, dramatized as it may be, for two reasons. The first is that at some point you may have been on the receiving end of badly timed platitudes like "God is in control," and found yourself frustrated or even angered by them. Know that those sentiments are normal, because the statement that God is in control, though true, is usually not what resolves the

pain in our hearts, and certainly doesn't feel like an answer to the question, "Why is this happening to me?"

But the second reason, in the vein of this series on giving an account for faith, is because the day may come when you are asked directly, "How can you tell me that this God of yours loves me, when he let this horrible thing happen to me?" When that day comes, the last thing you should say is that "God is in control," or "Everything happens for a reason."

But fortunately, that's not the only word the Lord gives on the matter.

Earlier we read a passage from the Gospel of Mark describing Christ's crucifixion. And at the end, Christ hangs on the cross and cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Try to think what that would mean. Jesus, the Son of God, God himself, hangs suffering and feels utterly abandoned, even by God, and joins in the words of one of the psalms, words of frustration at God's seeming inaction and indifference: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In doing so, our Lord places himself not in a position of removed sovereignty, like an absentee landlord, but one of solidarity and pain, taking on our collective cries of anguish. And among the many things we can say about the cross, one thing we can say is that the Lord we follow and bear witness to is not a Lord who is content to sit aloof up in the rafters and say "Worship me. I am sovereign." He is a Lord who knows all too well our sufferings here. Now that might not feel like an answer that resolves all our questions about suffering and pain and why horrible things happen, but it does tell us that the good news of the Christian faith doesn't just say, "God is in control. Deal with it." It says that the Lord himself knows our suffering and has endured it too.

Two weeks ago, I was sitting in with our Deacons during their meeting, and as you know our Deacons along with our Stephen Ministers head up our church's care ministries. And at that meeting, our own Tom Gilbertson was sharing a few thoughts with them. Tom, you may know, is a licensed marriage and family therapist, and he shared a mantra he came up with during his own training when he served on an oncology ward in a hospital. He took a turn on the usual phrase, "Don't just stand there, do something," and instead said, "Don't just do something, stand there." And his point was that our instinct when we are challenged by pain is to try to answer or to fix it. That sentiment is a good one. If there is pain, relieve that pain. But too often we try to fix something that can't be fixed, or answer something that can't be answered, or at least not just by saying the right combination of things. Instead, sometimes the best thing we can do is not to try to wipe all the pain away, but to be there with that person in that pain, as Christ is with ours.

So friends, if you are looking for an answer to the problem of evil, to why horrible things happen, why there is suffering and pain, on one hand yes may there be comfort, as God's words to his people Israel were meant to be comforting that God is in control and could be at work in the most unexpected ways to bring about deliverance, but right alongside that may you hear and may you testify that when we wonder where God is when these horrible things happen, the answer is, "God is on the cross, crying with us."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.