Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we begin a new sermon series titled, ▶ “Suffering Embraced.” It is designed to help us think through and live through suffering.

I don’t need to sell you on the relevance of this topic. We all suffer. We all wonder why. And many have lost their way because they can’t reconcile the existence of a good God with the prevalence of senseless suffering.

At the outset, let me say that I don’t pretend to have all the answers. There are limits to what God has revealed and what I can grasp.

Nor do I feel particularly qualified based on experience. My own suffering has not been exceptional. Many have suffered far more, some of whom are listening right now.

What I hope to bring is some biblical perspective that is helpful in thinking through and living through suffering.

This series is going to be a little different. Usually, I teach through a book of the Bible verse by verse. But this series is topical. We are still going to be using Scripture, but it will be drawn from various places in the Bible.

This series includes seven sermons. The title for today’s sermon is ▶ “The Problem, Source, and Extent of Our Suffering.”

This first sermon may be the most challenging. It contains a lot of left-brained, logical arguments and no heart-warming stories about my dog.

But I think it is needful because, as C.S. Lewis said, “the heart cannot rejoice in what the mind rejects as false.” If we want suffering to be well with our souls, we need to think through some hard things first.

I am going to disclose the big idea of today's sermon right up front. Then we'll spend the rest of our time fleshing it out. Here it is: ▶ Suffering can tempt us to doubt God, but God gives good reasons to trust him.

Of all the factors that tempt us to reject or lose faith in God, suffering has got to be number one. And it is not surprising. Suffering can be as hard to understand as it is to experience.

But in this sermon, I want to show you that God has revealed enough of himself and his ways to give us strong reasons to trust him with suffering, even when much of it remains a mystery.

Before we go too far, it is important to distinguish between ▶ suffering and evil. They are closely related but distinct.

Here is a working definition of evil: ▶ Evil is the absence or corruption of that which is morally good. One scholar describes it as "a fundamental and troubling departure from goodness."[1]

Now, here's a definition of suffering: ▶ Suffering is the pain or anguish we feel as a result of evil. Suffering is not evil, but it is the consequence of evil.

Evil is the cause; suffering is the effect. If there were no evil, there would be no suffering. Suffering exists because evil exists. In heaven, there will be no suffering because there will be no evil.

If you are suffering right now, it is because of evil. Not necessarily because you personally did something wrong to deserve it. It may simply be because we are all living in a world permeated by evil and its collateral damage. And this can make suffering seem senseless and unfair.

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[1] Alcorn, Randy, *If God Is Good* (New York: Multnomah, 2014), 25-26.

The causal relationship between evil and suffering means that we must think about evil if we are to come to terms with suffering.

In this first sermon of the series, I'd like to try to address some difficult, honest questions that can tempt us to doubt God. There are six.

1. ▶ If God created everything, then is he responsible for evil?

2. ▶ If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why can't he stop evil?

3. ▶ What good can possibly come from evil?

4. ▶ Why must good people suffer more than the bad?

5. ▶ If God cares so much about us, how can he bear such suffering?

6. ▶ Is this really the best world God could have made?

This is not an exhaustive list but is representative of the kinds of questions that can trouble us and tempt us to doubt God.

Let's consider the first question: ▶ If God created everything, then is he responsible for evil?

God did indeed create everything. In ▶ Colossians 1:16, the apostle Paul speaks of God the Son as the creator of all things. He says,

> ESV Colossians 1:16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

This leads us to a logical dilemma. Here's the troubling logic expressed in a ▶ syllogism, which is simply a form of logical argument that applies deductive reasoning.

1. God created everything.

2. Evil is something.

3. Therefore, God created evil.

The logic is very simple and seemingly airtight. And it seems to put God in the position of being a moral monster.

But there's a flaw in the logic. The ▶ second premise is false. Technically, evil is not something. It is more properly defined as a lack of something. It's the lack of good that should exist. To be sure, evil is very real, but it is not a thing in itself; it is the absence of a thing. When the good that should exist is missing, that is evil. Evil is a corruption that cannot exist by itself; it can only exist in the good that it corrupts.

Let me give you an example. Let's say you buy a ream of paper. You pull out a sheet and, much to your disappointment, you find a hole in it. Let the paper represent that which is good. Let the hole represent that which is evil. The evil hole is defined entirely by the absence of good paper. The evil hole is not a thing; it is the absence of something that should be there. Indeed, that evil hole cannot exist without the good paper to define it. No paper, no hole.

So, because evil is not a thing, the troubling logic falls apart, and God is not the creator of evil.

In addition to the logical argument, we have clear statements in Scripture that indicate that God is not evil, nor did he create evil.

In ▶ Psalm 5:4. David addresses God, saying,

> ESV Psalm 5:4 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.

God is not evil.

Nor did God create anything evil. In ▶ Genesis 1:31, it says,

> ESV Genesis 1:31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. . . .

All that God made was not evil, but very good, including Adam and Eve, who were originally created perfect.

If that's the case, then where does evil come from? If God is good, and God created everything, and everything God created was good, then how could evil arise?

In the beginning, one of the things that made humans and angels morally perfect was the freedom to willingly choose. They had the freedom to make unforced decisions. God made them that way so that they could decide to love him freely because forced love is not love at all.

But with the freedom to love came the possibility of evil. They had the ability to choose good. But they also had the ability to choose evil. And they chose evil. God made evil possible. The choice of angels and humans made evil actual.

God made Satan the most beautiful of all angels. But Satan chose to rebel. That was the first sin.

God made Adam and Eve perfect. But they chose to rebel by invitation of Satan, bringing evil to all humans. ▶ Romans 5:12 confirms it.

> ESV Romans 5:12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

We are all born with the sin addiction of Adam passed from one generation to the next.

In Genesis 3 and Romans 8, we see that all of creation was adversely affected by sin, not just humans. Evil is the virus that infected all of creation and corrupted it.

So, evil does not come from God; it comes from the choice of men and angels. The ▶ logic can be expressed this way:

1. God made everything perfect.

2. Among the perfect things God made were free creatures.

3. The free choice of God's creatures is the cause of evil.

4. Therefore, evil arose from creatures, not the Creator.

God is not responsible for evil; we are.

Let's move on to the next question: ▶ If God is all loving and all-powerful, why can't he stop evil?

Indeed, the Bible affirms that God is all-loving and all-powerful. ▶ First John 4:8 speaks of the loving nature of God, saying,

> ESV 1 John 4:8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

And Job accurately testifies to the power of God in ▶ Job 42:2, saying to God,

> ESV Job 42:2 “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”

But how do we reconcile what the Bible says with some troubling ▶ logic which can be framed this way:

1. If God is all-loving, he would want to prevent evil.

2. If God is all-powerful, he would be able to prevent evil.

3. Evil has not been prevented.

4. Therefore, there is no such God.

Countless people have been turned from God based on this thinking because it also appears to be airtight. But it is not. There are a number of leaks in this bucket.

First of all, this is a ***moral*** argument against the existence God. It assumes the presence of objective moral evil.

But that raises important questions we don’t often consider:

- Where do we get the moral sense that evil exists in the first place?
- Who defines what is evil?
- Do absolute moral values exist, such as good and evil, that do not originate with humans?

Scripture tells us that, despite our fallenness, we get a moral sense from God because we were created in his image and his law is written on our hearts (Romans 2:15). Our God-given sense of morality has been defaced but not erased.

But if there is no God, then there is no basis for believing that objective moral evil exists. Without God, we have no moral obligations and there is no absolute right and wrong. Notions of morality are nothing more than adaptive figments of our imagination. This is not my idea. It is the contention of some noted atheistic philosophers.

For example, the renowned American philosopher ▶ Richard Taylor explains the thinking in his book, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason*. He says,

> ▶ *A duty is something that is owed. . . . But something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as duty in isolation. . . . Our moral obligations can . . . be understood as those that are imposed by God. . . .* ▶ *But what if this higher-than-human lawgiver is no longer taken into account? Does the concept of a moral obligation . . . still make sense? . . . The concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God.*[2]

Taylor is not arguing for God. He is arguing that the very concept of evil or moral obligation is unintelligible apart from God.

Now, let's go back to the ▶ troubling logic and apply Taylor's thinking. It makes no sense to argue that the presence of evil disproves the existence of God when, in fact, the very concept of evil requires God.

And that is not the only problem with the troubling logic.

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[2] Taylor, Richard, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 83, quoted by William Lane Craig, "Why I Believe God Exists" in *Why I Am A Christian*, Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 82.

In ▶ Point 2, it is important to understand what all-powerful means. It does mean that no purpose of God can be thwarted. It does not mean that God can do anything.

Let me give you some examples of things God can't do.

God can't lie. That would contradict his character.

Nor can God make a rock so big he can't lift it.

God can't do these things because they are impossibly contradictory.

In the same way, it can be argued that God cannot prevent evil. This assertion may be troubling to you so let me try to trace the ▶logic in yet another syllogism.

First, it is God's will that we love him. This is abundantly clear from Scripture.

Second, loving God is impossible without the freedom to choose. Love cannot be coerced because it is a choice.

Third, to prevent evil would require preventing the freedom to choose.

Now the concluding fourth point: Therefore, God cannot prevent evil, as it would thwart his own purposes for love. You see, God cannot prevent evil because it would also prevent the freedom required to love.

Some of you are perhaps still uncomfortable with this train of thought, so let me dig further. Even though God cannot prevent evil without also preventing love, God can overcome evil; he can defeat it. Moreover, just because he hasn't overcome it yet, doesn't mean he never will. Justice

delayed is not justice denied. So, we can reframe the troubling ▶ logic in this way to fit perfectly with what the Bible says.

1. God is all-loving and wants to defeat evil.

2. God is all-powerful and is able to defeat evil.

3. Evil is not yet defeated.

4. Therefore, evil will one day be defeated.

Ah, that's more like it. You see, Jesus Christ is going to return one day, and the Lord will overcome evil with perfect justice. The scales will all balance in the end. Evil will be defeated. ▶ Hebrews 10:30 quotes the Lord saying,

> ESV Hebrews 10:30 . . . "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." . . .

Let's consider the next question: ▶ What good could possibly come from evil?

The troubling ▶ logic can be framed this way:

1. There is no good purpose for much suffering.

2. An all-good God must have a good purpose for everything.

3. Therefore, there cannot be an all-good God.

Again, this seems to be a compelling argument at first blush. Indeed, the Bible affirms the truth of Point 2 in saying all things work together for good in Romans 8:28. Nevertheless, the ▶ first premise, stating there is

no good purpose for much suffering is invalid. There are at least two reasons.

First, just because we can see no good purpose in much suffering does not mean that a good purpose does not exist. We cannot legitimately assume there is no good purpose just because we don't understand what it could be.

In ▶ Isaiah 55:9, God says,

> ESV Isaiah 55:9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Dr. ▶ Peter Kreeft, a noted professor of philosophy at Boston College provides a very useful analogy. He says,

> ▶ *Would you agree that the difference between us and God is greater than the difference between us and, say, a bear?* ▶ *Okay, then, imagine a bear in a trap and a hunter who, out of sympathy, wants to liberate him. He tries to win the bear's confidence, but he can't do it, so he has to shoot the bear full of drugs.* ▶ *The bear, however, thinks this is an attack and that the hunter is trying to kill him. He doesn't realize that this is being done out of compassion.*
>
> ▶ *Then, in order to get the bear out of the trap, the hunter has to push him further into the trap to release the tension on the spring.* ▶ *If the bear were semiconscious at that point, he would be even more convinced that the hunter was his enemy who was out to cause him suffering and pain.* ▶ *But the bear would be wrong. He reaches this incorrect conclusion because he's not a human being.*

> *▶ Now, how can anyone be certain that's not an analogy between us and God? ▶ I believe God does the same to us sometimes, and we can't comprehend why he does it any more than the bear can understand the motivations of the hunter. ▶ As the bear could have trusted the hunter, so we can trust God.*[3]

There is a second reason it is invalid to say there is no good purpose for much suffering. The fact is, we have numerous examples of suffering that is indeed good.

Scripture teaches us that character is forged through hardship, and that suffering can bring repentance and greater dependence on God.

God has shown us very clearly in history how good can come from suffering. In fact, the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the world turned out to be the best thing that ever happened. God himself in the person of Jesus Christ was perfectly innocent, but he was falsely accused, tortured, and crucified. It was all for a good purpose: so that he could rise again to be our Savior!

Let's go on to the next question: ▶ Why must good people suffer more than bad people?

It is true that some suffer more than others. It is also true that some seemingly good people appear to suffer more than those who don't seem so good.

But the unpleasant truth is that there are no purely good people. To be sure, we are all valuable in God's eyes, and human life is sacred because we are made in the image of God. But morally, we are not good. Our good

[3] Kreeft, Peter, quoted by Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000) 43-44.

deeds are stained with selfishness. Our demands for justice are tainted with a lust for vengeance. Our pious words are blemished by hypocrisy.

▶ Isaiah 64:6 says it plainly:

> ESV Isaiah 64:6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

You may be wondering, "Aren't some people intrinsically better than others?" In ▶ Romans 3:9-10, Paul gives a sobering answer.

> NLT Romans 3:9 Well then, are we Jews better than others? No, not at all, for we have already shown that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin. 10 As the Scriptures say, "No one is good—not even one."

The real question is why doesn't everybody suffer more? Why doesn't God just destroy us all? It is only because of the grace and forgiveness and patience of God—attributes that would not be clearly evident without evil.

Let's consider the next question. ▶ If God cares so much about us, how can he bear such suffering?

Numerous Scriptures point to the attentiveness and compassion of God. For example, in ▶ Luke 12:6-7 Jesus says,

> ESV Luke 12:6 "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. 7 Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows."

God cares so much about us that he has the very hairs on our heads numbered.

If that is so, how can God bear all the evil, all the pain, and all the suffering in this world he created?

▶ Charles Templeton concluded that a loving God could not. Templeton was once a pulpit partner and close friend of Billy Graham, and he once preached to large crowds, inviting people to commit their lives to Christ. But Templeton seemingly lost his faith. Referring to Luke 12:6-7, Templeton says,

> *. . . if God grieves over the death of one sparrow, how could even his eternal spirit bear the sickness, suffering, and death of the multiplied millions of men, women, children, animals, birds, and other sensate creatures, in every part of the world, in every century since time began?*[4]

Good question.

The answer is not theoretical. The answer is not whether a loving God could or could not bear such suffering. The answer is factual and historical. The answer is that our loving God has already done it! Let me explain.

Before he created anything, God could see the evil that would arise from his creatures. Remember, he didn't create evil and the suffering that accompanies it; we're responsible for that. God would have been perfectly justified in saying, "It's their fault. I'll let them burn. I'll condemn them all."

[4] Templeton, Charles, *Farewell to God* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996), 201, quoted by Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 62.

But he didn't. Instead, he tallied all the evil, all the sickness, all the suffering, all the death throughout history. And all the evil that will occur until the end of time. He counted it all.

And then he took it upon himself. He came to earth as a God-man, Jesus Christ. To enter into our suffering. To sympathize with our pain. To pay for the evil that causes it. To demonstrate the depths of his love for us. ▶ First Peter 2:24 says,

> ESV 1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

How could we not love a God like that? A God who entered our world, who suffered our pains, who demonstrated his love for us so completely, who offers himself in the midst of our sorrows. What more could he do to win our love?

Let's consider the final question. ▶ Is this really the best world God could have made?

Thankfully, it is not. This is not the best world God could have made. It is not supposed to be. It is merely the best way to the best world. This world is the best road to heaven. This world is not our destination. The only way for God to defeat evil was to permit it in this world. God permits evil to produce the greatest good in the end.

The best world is yet to come. The best world is heaven. ▶ Revelation 21:4 describes heaven this way:

> ESV Revelation 21:4 "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And that brings us back to the ▶ big idea: Suffering can tempt us to doubt God, but God gives us good reasons to trust him.

Let's pray. Lord, when suffering tempts us to doubt you, help us to remember and embrace the good reasons you give to trust you. Amen.

We are going to close out our service by observing communion, which is the perfect opportunity to remember and embrace the greatest reason to trust God: his love for us demonstrated on the cross.

There are two identically prepared tables up front, which offer the bread and the cup. The bread represents Christ's body given for you and me on the cross in payment for our sins. The cup represents his blood shed for our forgiveness.

On the basis of what Christ has done for us on the cross, he offers us the free gift of everlasting life, which includes forgiveness and adoption into God's forever family and eternal salvation from the ultimate penalty of our sin. All we have to do to receive this gift is to believe in him for it.

If you have not yet believed in Jesus for eternal life, I invite you to do so now. If you do, this communion will celebrate the beginning of your new life.

For those who have already believed in Jesus, as we reflect on Christ's sacrifice for us, let this be a time gratefulness and realignment in light of the reasons God has given us to trust him.

I am going to pray, then music will be played. During the music, you may come forward to either of the two tables to take the elements. You may consume the elements up front, right away, or take them back to your seat for whenever you are ready.

If for any reason you would like to be served the elements right where you are seated, just raise your hand when the time comes, and one of our elders will serve you.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for demonstrating your great love for us on the cross. As we take the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim our faith in you. Amen.