



The universal question that all people everywhere have is this: why is there suffering and evil in the world? They ask it in a big picture kind of way—why is there suffering in the world? And they ask it in a very personal way—why did I get a diagnosis of cancer? People have always wrestled with this question and there’s been no shortage of answers put forth, some better than other.

In the late seventies, a conservative Jewish rabbi wrote a best-selling book called, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. This book has sold over four million copies. Here is a summary of his answer to the question of suffering; or to frame it according to the title of this message, What are God’s purposes in our pain?

"If God is God of justice and not of power, the He can still be on our side when bad things happen to us. He can know that we are good and honest people who deserve better. Our misfortunes are none of His doing, and so we can turn to Him for help. ... We will turn to God, not to be judged or forgiven, but to be strengthened and comforted."<sup>1</sup>

Just about every word is completely wrong. The author makes God less powerful than a fairy godmother. Even they possess the power to turn pumpkins into horse carriages. But all this Rabbi’s God can do is put an arm on your shoulder as you are dying. God is no more than an old grandfather in the sky.

I wonder what Lazarus would think of this. We know the story of Lazarus, the beloved friend of Jesus and whom he raised from the dead with these iconic words, “Lazarus, come out.” Lazarus would not have liked this quote from the rabbi very much, wouldn’t you agree?

So back to our main question: why is there so much suffering and evil in the world? Specifically, why did Lazarus and his family have to suffer through this? We are given very clear answers to this question right in chapter eleven. I want to read his entire story but first, let me give you five of God’s purposes for our pain. As I read the passage, you can start to look for them in the text.

1. The Glory of God

2. Love
3. Belief
4. The Substitutionary death of Jesus
5. Eternal life

*1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2*

*It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4*

*But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."*

*5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." 12*

*The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."*

*17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18*

*Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*

*28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30*

*Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"*

*38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.*

*39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by*

*this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” 40 Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” 43 When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” 44 The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”*

First, let me establish the false premise of Rabbi Kushner. He claims that God has no power to help us and can only comfort us in our suffering. Mary and Martha both made the following ‘complaint’ against Jesus. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Now understand that they weren’t complaining to Jesus but pouring out their hearts in grief to him. And what they said is a statement of great faith in Jesus. They knew Jesus well enough to know that he could have healed Lazarus and prevented him from dying. In fact, even if Jesus was not present in Bethany, he still could have prevented him from dying. Jesus often healed people from great distances. Jesus’ power is not bound to geography.

So right from the start we reject the rabbi’s claim of God’s powerlessness. Not only did Jesus have the power to raise Lazarus from the dead, he also had the power to prevent Lazarus from dying in the first place. If you have the power to prevent something from happening, then you de facto become the cause of it as well. For example, picture a roomful of five year old boys and a couple dozen loaded handguns, and then I allowed them to play with the guns, who would be responsible if anyone got hurt? Me!

If we in any way lessen God’s absolute control over life’s circumstances, then you will be forced to agree with another of the rabbi’s conclusions.<sup>2</sup> “God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can’t bring that about. It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.”<sup>3</sup>

Having said that, let me be very clear. God has control over all of life and death but that does not excuse our moral culpability for sinful actions. Acts 4 tells us that Herod and Pontius Pilate killed Jesus according to “whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” But God’s sovereign plan over the most important of acts in human history—and greatest evils—in no way diminishes Herod and Pilate’s responsibility for their incredibly sinful actions.

We have covered these ideas already when we went through John chapter nine. Hopefully you will recall that story, which begins like this.

*As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:1-3)*

Why was the man born blind? So “but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” In other words, God has greater purposes in mind for his pain. So it was with Lazarus and so it is

with us. With all of that in mind, let me break down the five purposes for pain given in this chapter.

### **1. The Glory of God**

When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he said, *“This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”* This is interesting for a few reasons. First, Jesus said that the illness would not lead to death. So were thinking, “Ah, right, but Lazarus died.” What Jesus meant is that the illness would not lead to his ultimate death. Someone like Rabbi Kushner would read this and say, “See, Jesus doesn’t even know what’s going to happen tomorrow, so how can he be the all-powerful God?” Jesus knew that Lazarus would die and he knew that he would raise Lazarus to life again.

And the first reason for Lazarus’ pain is the glory of God. Even though this is Jesus speaking and even though it is a 100% correct statement, this is not the recommended way to have a conversation with a suffering person. If your best friend announces to you that they have cancer, I do not recommend that you tell them that you are glad that God will be glorified through this. It’s true and hopefully the person will eventually wrestle with their cancer and come to this conclusion, but as a friend, you don’t lead off with it. You see what I mean, right?

I have heard people say, “God had made a truth-teller, so I just say what God tells me. I’m not afraid to tell the truth to people.” Others have said, “Well I have the gift of exhortation, so I tell people what they need to hear.” This is what I call pulling out the “God card.” As long as they insert God or the Holy Spirit into their behavior, they think everything is OK. But it’s not. Truth is as much about how you say it as what you say. Truth and love. Love and truth. As soon as you separate these two best friends, you make all kinds of trouble.

So this is not the model for comforting a friend, but that was not the context. Jesus was not comforting anyone when he said this. He was just stating a fact. Lazarus’ illness would turn out for God’s glory. Imagine the stir it caused among those who saw it and heard of his resurrection. And of course it has been preached throughout the world for the past 2000 years. This takes us back again to John 9. The man was born blind so “that the works of God might be displayed in him. God can be glorified in our joys and in our sorrows. This is an enduring principle of pain. When we trust God through our pain, he is glorified.

### **2. Love**

This story begins with word from Mary and Martha. “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Do you know the only other person in the gospels who is called, the one “whom Jesus loved?” Three times in his own gospel, John referred to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He was deeply aware of the secure relationship he had with Jesus.

So Jesus loved Lazarus. And what do you do when you love someone? You help them out, right? Look at verse 5. *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.* Here’s another one of these passages where you scratch your head and go, “hhmmmmm.”

Jesus loved Lazarus so much that he stayed two more days. If we had the opportunity to help someone who was in such desperate need, I trust that we would act a little faster. This is why Ryan is not here this morning. Ryan got a call from his grandmother in Port Washington who is failing quickly. She wanted “Pastor Kappel to come and pray with her. It was important to her that her grandson is now a pastor. Now what of Ryan had received that call and said, “Nah, I’ll wait it out a few days and see how it goes.” We’d think he was a monster for not rushing to his grandmother’s side.

But Jesus’ larger plan was not to save Lazarus from death but to perform an undeniable miracle. Lazarus was in the grave for 4 days when he was raised to life. If it were a day or two, some could have claimed that Lazarus was not actually dead. But four days in the rock sealed tomb would have been an unquestionable miracle.

But what I want us to see is that it was not an absence of love which prompted Jesus’ decision. In fact, it was love which seemed to cause his decision to delay. So it is with us. It is not a lack of love which allows harm to come to us. Lazarus was the “one whom Jesus loved” yet God allowed pain in his life for a higher purpose. What about you. Do you see yourself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved?” Why or why not? Is your pain keeping you from feeling loved by him? Have you equated love with an easy life and the absence of love with a pain-filled life?

If Jesus had been with Lazarus before he died, what might he have said to him? They had a very close relationship so we can guess that they had spent time together not terribly long before Lazarus died. Jesus knew it was going to happen yet obviously did not spill the beans. That would have been a difficult conversation, don’t you think? “Ah Lazarus, there’s something I need to tell you. Next month you’re going to get very sick. In fact, you’ll be so sick that your sisters will send me an urgent message to come and heal you. I’ll get their message but I’m not going to come right away. Oh—one more thing. You’re going to die. Sorry Lazarus, but I’m doing all of this because I love you.”

Do you think Lazarus would have felt like that was going to be an act of love? God’s greater purpose of his love for us and the allowance of pain seems counterintuitive. It’s about as believable as a parent who is about to spank their child who says, “I’m only spanking you because I love you.” The parent’s motives may be 100% pure. It may be necessary but the child does not feel loved right then.

God’s love has our best in mind and sometimes our best is a path of pain. All true believers are “disciples whom Jesus loved.” Even if it does not always feel like like, we need to simply believe that what Jesus said is true.

### **3. Belief**

There are two verses which demonstrate this purpose for pain.

Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. (14-15)

“Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” (41-42)

This is clear as it can possibly be. Jesus' purpose for allowing Lazarus to die was to bring about belief in himself. The resurrection of Lazarus was not for Lazarus. It was for Jesus. His purpose was to show the world that he was who he said he was. He was the God-man, Jesus. He was the Savior of the world and belief must be centered on him and him alone.

This was Jesus' greater purpose which is why John made it the purpose of his entire gospel. *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name* (John 20:30-31).

Our pain may or not lead others to belief in Jesus, but it's possible. When my dad was first diagnosed with leukemia I hopped on a plane to Ohio to visit him in the hospital. At that time, other than when he came to my installation service at my last church, he had not been to church in over twelve years. He was a committed evolutionist and fan of Carl Sagan. I've never been afraid of flying but as I was sitting in the plane waiting to take off, an unusual thought popped into my head. I got this idea. I felt like I should get a piece of paper and write out the gospel message to my dad. I didn't want my dad to die without knowing Christ. I was thinking that if I died in a plane crash, then maybe the last thing my dad would ever read from me was a personal note pleading with him to place his faith in Christ. As odd as my whole thinking was, my thought was that I was willing to give my life for my dad if it would cause him to believe.

As soon as that full thought developed in my head, I heard what was almost an audible voice say, "I already have." I believe that was the voice of Jesus telling me that he already had died for my dad. I took it as great comfort but also as a mild rebuke that I should stop trying to be God and let God be God for my dad.

Unlike Lazarus, our pain may not result in leading someone to belief in Christ but a trusting response to trials and suffering is some of the most powerful witnessing you can ever do.

#### **4. Substitutionary death of Jesus**

If you recall from two weeks ago I told you that the events of chapter eleven took place sometime in the four months before Jesus' crucifixion. The Jewish leaders had often tried to arrest Jesus, stone Jesus or throw him off a cliff. But they were never successful because it wasn't his time. But the resurrection of Lazarus turned out to be the final straw in the fury of the Pharisees.

*But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad* (49-52).

There is such beautiful irony in Caiaphas' statement—*it is better for you that one man should die for the people*. Caiaphas meant it in a totally different way. It was a type of prophetic statement spoken from the mouth of a fool. This miracle of life led very quickly to Jesus' death. He knew

that would happen but he went anyway. Jesus allowed pain in Lazarus' life in order to bring about his eventual salvation.

### **5. Eternal Life**

Finally, verse 25 is probably the most well-known verse in the story of Lazarus. Jesus said these words to Martha. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. Marth and Mary did not understand. They believed in Jesus' power but they did not believe that he was God in human flesh, sent not just raise their brother from the dead, but to raise all believers to eternal life from the dead. "Even though he dies, yet shall he live."

Our suffering does not cause our eternal life but it gives perspective to our eternal life.

Think about what it did for Paul. He said, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." He was torn. He so badly wanted to be with Christ but he also wanted to remain and minister some more. Mindy Seeley always impressed me with her eternal perspective about mission's work. She has grieved and continues to grieve deeply over missing family and friends. That is its own type of pain, isn't it? But he perspective has always been that she will have an eternity to be with these friends and family so she is able to trust God with the work that has been given to them.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, I encourage you to:

- Apply the gospel and the resurrection to your pain.
- Apply the gospel to your joys

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Random House Publishers, © 1981, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Kushner's entire premise is based on the fact that he wanted to get God "off of the hook" for pain and suffering. He was not able to worship a God who allowed such evil. Therefore, he was forced to strip him of all of his power.

"All the responses to tragedy which we have considered have at least one thing in common. They all assume that God is the cause of our suffering, and they try to understand why God would want us to suffer. ... There may be another approach. Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God." (p. 29) The "reason" that he gives in the book are such things as: "God, who neither causes nor prevents tragedies, helps by inspiring people to help." (p. 140) Kind, but impotent reasons to be sure.

<sup>3</sup> Kushner, p. 43.