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Title: *Asking for a Friend - Why Do Bad Things Happen?*

Scripture: Matthew 16:21-28

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Well, it is good to be together here on First Communion weekend. And I just want to let you know one other thing. If you're part of our Wexford campus here, the Strip District, Butler, Southpoint, or Online, we had an interest meeting in Beaver a couple of months ago and had over 40 people show up to express interest in maybe having a campus in Beaver of Orchard Hill. And there will be another prayer gathering for that on June 11th. There should be information online if it isn't already there, it will be shortly. Just to let you know if you're interested in that area, that will be going on.

Let's take a moment and pray together. God, as we are gathered here today, I ask that you would speak to each of us and that my words reflect your words in content and in tone and in emphasis. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, what's one of the first questions you ask somebody when you just meet them? My guess is that after you learn their name, maybe where they're from, that one of the questions you ask is, what do you do now? That isn't always a question you want to ask because sometimes it feels like you might be probing something that you don't want to probe. But it's a genuinely safe question because it's fairly inane and it gives you a point of contact to talk about with somebody to say, oh, that's interesting or not interesting.

So, I've been a pastor for over two decades now, and I've had a lot of those conversations where people say, oh, when they find out what you do. And then I'm sure there are a lot of vocations that have an "oh" moment. I did see one survey that talked about the most and least respected professions. At the top of the list were teachers and nurses at the bottom. At the very bottom were drug dealers, then pastors, and then lawyers. And so, I've had this moment several times where I'm having a conversation and someone says oh, you're a pastor.

And what I've learned is there are generally three types of reactions. One is, if you're at a party and this comes up, somebody will say oh, I got to get out of here as fast as possible. This is the, where's the sushi kind of moment. The second reaction is people will often try to recite their goodness as if somehow saying their goodness to me is a good thing. And so, they'll say oh, you know, I go to church, or I used to go to church, I helped an old lady across the street once.

And sometimes it will be almost an after-the-fact. I was at a gathering and a guy that I met spoke several colorful terms at length, and he didn't know what I did at that point. And so, he

was going on and on. I mean, these were comments that would make a football coach blush. And then somebody else came over and said, Kurt! They just happened to say, hey, did you know that Kurt's a pastor? He's my pastor. And this guy, you could just see it, had this moment, and after the other guy left, he said, hey, Father, I'm really sorry. To which I said, I'm not your daddy.

Now, the other thing that people will sometimes do is they will come, and they will start with some of their objections. And it may be just a softball. Maybe it takes a little more of a conversation, but sometimes it'll be something along the lines of, yeah, I don't really believe that stuff. I believe in science. Or it will be I don't like the conclusions that..., and they'll assume that some conclusion they've heard somewhere is a biblical conclusion. And so, they'll say, since I don't like that, I'm not that.

Sometimes it'll be a little more genuine. It'll be something like, how could the God that you say you worship or serve send people to hell? And then there's another objection. And this objection goes something like how could a good God allow so much pain and suffering in this world? And sometimes it's a very personal question. So sometimes it's global. It's there's suffering out there. How could God allow it to happen? But sometimes it's a very personal question. It's how could God if there is such a being, how could your God allow me or somebody I love to go through what they've gone through. And that's an objection that is often for people on their journey toward faith. And it's even an objection or a challenge once you have faith to say how is it that I can believe in a God who would let something like this happen in my life?

Mark Buchanan writes about this in a book that he wrote a couple of decades ago now. It's called *Your God Is Too Safe*. And here's what he writes. He says, "In the town where I live, a little girl is dying. Her name is Caitlin. My daughter Sarah attended preschool with Caitlin. And on the days when I picked Sarah up, I would often find her and Caitlin playing together at the swing set, pushing one another in great stomach-fluttering arcs, or in the sandbox piling pail upon pail of crumbly sand into a kind of replica of the ruined Acropolis. They were two vigorous, joyful four-year-olds. Prankish, cultish, giddy, quick to laugh, dance, cry, or sing. One day, Caitlin's mother, Bonnie, came to pick her up and something was terribly awry."

Here's how Bonnie wrote about it later. She said, "Have you ever had a day when you know that your life changed forever? A day that you would do anything to black out just to fast forward? On February 28th, I arrived at preschool and Caitlin was standing in the playground looking down at the grass and one of her playmates said several times, Caitlin, your mommy is here. I spoke to her and there was no reaction. So, I approached her and lifted her chin up with my finger. When I did this, I realized something was wrong.

Her eyes were vacant. She had no recognition of me. I immediately called the preschool teacher. Caitlin began to waver. I knelt down beside her and I laid her across my lap. The teacher called her name and did other things to get her to respond. Her eyes were open but not focused. They rolled to the right. She remained limp.

The ambulance was called. I carried her inside and started to lay her on her side. When I did this, she began to cry and call for Mommy. When the paramedics arrived, I was holding her and kissing her, and weeping. We were taken to the hospital by ambulance, and I was told that she had a seizure. But she would be fine. Tests were ordered."

Now it's Mark Buchanan again writing about it. He said, "The test agreed with the initial diagnosis. Caitlin would be fine, but Caitlin wasn't fine. She grew more and more pale, her speech started to slur, and she began to fumble things and stumble often. She got more and more clumsy. She couldn't hold things. She walked into walls and door jams, and she fell down a lot. Her speech worsened. Words started coming out in guttural chunks, in sharp, jagged howls, in throaty grunts, and in mournful groans. The other four-year-olds grew afraid of her. Some even made fun of her.

The doctor kept ordering tests. Then one day, Caitlin's mother and father got the news that they dreaded and yet had expected. Caitlin is dying. She has Batten Disease, a rare, incurable congenital degenerative neuro disorder. That means her muscles are petrifying. They're hard, like wood now. And soon they'll be hard like stone. They will harden until one day she can no longer swallow to breathe. Caitlin's parents, her brother, her grandparents, her aunts, uncles, and cousins, her friends, and her church family, all watched beautiful little Caitlin die a slow death. And it seems like they can do nothing.

Caitlin's mother is a Christian and has drenched her bed with tears. She's beaten her fist bloody on heaven's door, trying to get the owner to open it and give her bread. She attends a church full of caring people and they pray. And other people at other churches pray. They pray for many things, strength for the parents, wisdom for the doctors, and comfort for Caitlin. But mostly they pray that God will heal Caitlin. And God hasn't answered that prayer yet. In truth, few now think that he will.

There are some people who lived beside Caitlin, and they won the lottery. More than \$600,000. I know almost nothing about these people, except that they have a lovely house. The house, I was told, is already paid for and it has been for a long time. These people, I understand, had a good, abundant life even before their jackpot win. I'm not sure why they buy lottery tickets or if they do and if they don't, why others buy lottery tickets for them. I'm not even sure they ever prayed to win the lottery or if they even pray at all. But they won the lottery. And in the house next door, Caitlin is dying."

And then Mark Buchanan writes this. He says, "Life isn't fair. There's a lopsidedness and randomness to its distribution of windfalls and pitfalls and pratfalls. Who will get sick? Who will get rich? Who will be beautiful? Who will be disfigured? Is there any sovereign logic to this? And sometimes, and this is more puzzling, more troubling, the lopsidedness doesn't seem random. It seems almost calculated. A cosmic booby-trapping of someone's life."

And what the question is that many of us have is, God, why would you let this happen? And we all know a situation like little Caitlin's. Maybe it's deeply personal, maybe it's somewhat remote. Maybe you've wrestled with this for years. Maybe you've wrestled with it as a person of faith. Maybe it's part of what has kept you at arm's length from faith because you say, how could a God allow this to happen?

Well, we started this series a few weeks ago that we called *Asking for a Friend*, and we're looking at seven instances where Peter, in the Gospel of Matthew had an interaction with Jesus and although he didn't ask a question in each of these instances, there was a question implied.

And in Matthew 16, we see just one such instance. Jesus has His disciples around him, and He predicts His death and suffering. Verse 21, "From that time on, Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer." And then He says that He's going to die. And Peter, not really asking a question, but the text says, rebuked Jesus.

Now imagine this. Here's Peter, Jesus, who they believe is the Messiah, who they believe is going to set the world right, says, I'm going to go suffer, and Peter comes up and says, oh, no, no, no, no, Jesus, you have this wrong. This will never happen to you. Surely this will never happen to you. His implied question was this, and that is, if you are perfect, how could you suffer? If you're the Messiah, how could you suffer? And by extension, the question is really, if somebody is good, why would they suffer if someone's your follower? Why would they suffer? And here's what Jesus says. Verse 23, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

And from this brief interaction, I think we can learn four lessons about suffering. Here's the first. And that is Jesus suffered. Therefore, suffering can have and often does have a higher purpose. Let's see if Jesus, who was God, part of the Trinity, suffered. Then when Peter comes along and says, surely this can't happen to you. When Jesus says you're speaking about human concerns, what he's doing is he's saying you are not understanding that there is a reason. And just because you can't think of a reason for my suffering doesn't mean there isn't one. And the same thing is true for you and me sometimes. We'll say, well, if I can't see a reason for suffering or for hardship, there must not be a reason. But just because you and I can't think of a reason doesn't mean that one doesn't exist.

Let me just show you some scriptures that point to God having reasons for allowing suffering. This is Romans eight, verses 22 through 25. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Second Corinthians chapter four, verses 16 through 18 says this, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

And then James chapter one says this, verses two through four, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

And so, what this tells us is that sometimes God allows suffering because He's doing something that you and I can't fully understand. This last week, an author and a pastor named Tim Keller passed away. He had been diagnosed several years ago with pancreatic cancer. And if you've been around here, you've probably heard me quote Tim Keller a few times. I've enjoyed his books and listening to some of what he said over the years. Years ago, before he was diagnosed with this pancreatic cancer, he wrote this about suffering. He says, "If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in this world, then you have at the same moment a God who's great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. Indeed, you can't have it both ways, so you don't always understand. But if God is big enough that you can blame Him for the evil and suffering, then He's big enough to have a reason that you and I don't fully understand."

And then when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he wrote this. This was an article in *The Atlantic*. He said, "A significant number of believers in God find their faith shaken or destroyed when they learn that they will die at a time and in a way that seems unfair to them." And over the years that he wrestled with pancreatic cancer and the likelihood that he wouldn't be healed, what he wrestled with was saying, how do I still have faith in the goodness of God? And he said, again, quoting from this article, "A lot of people have a belief in God and in an afterlife that does not become spontaneously comforting or existentially strengthening." And his point was that we have this idea that somehow what we do should keep us and hedge us against any kind of suffering.

Maybe a lighter way to think about this is this. This is from the Rolling Stones, you know, we're all over the place here. According to an article in *The Rolling Stones*, Kelly Clarkson, who has a show on daytime talk, has a toxic work culture. And this isn't a new accusation. They just said this about Tucker Carlson's show. Before that, it was Ellen DeGeneres show. And before that, I think it was Dr. Phil. All have toxic work cultures. And what this article says about the Kelly Clarkson show is that it was toxic behind the scenes because the staff was underpaid, verbally abused, traumatized, and put in uncomfortable positions. Okay. That's the line that they used. And when you read through the article and I'll save you from reading through the article, but if you read through the article, what you would find is they talk about the toxic culture paragraph after paragraph after paragraph.

And when you try to find what is the actual toxicity of the culture, here's what you find. The low-level staff people, the people who just started, and want to break into a high-paying, high-visibility industry, are underpaid. And some of them had to take a second job to support their life while they were trying to break into the culture. And one of the bosses yelled a couple of times. Now, the reason I cite this is not that a boss yelling is appropriate or can't be called toxic, not that people should make an excuse for underpayment of employees, but that's kind of a job. And my point is this, and that is, wherever you started in life, you probably started not at the high paying job, not with all kinds of things, but you start and then you make your way through things.

But we have a culture now that says, I shouldn't even have a season of discomfort. If I start somewhere, I should have the corner office, the big payday, and all of the accouterments of somebody who's worked in this industry for decades. And I better not have a boss who yells at me at my first job. Not that you care, but my first job was in construction, and I didn't make enough money to make ends meet. And I moved dirt piles wherever they told me to move them. And the boss yelled sometimes just for his entertainment. And we called it a job. And here's my point. Sometimes, spiritually, what we do is say, God, if I follow you, then I shouldn't have any suffering. But sometimes God allows suffering for purposes that we can't understand.

And here's the second lesson that we learn, and that is Jesus suffered. Therefore, suffering doesn't mean that I'm not loved. Jesus, part of the Trinity, God himself, experienced suffering. And so, what that means is what you and I can't say is if I suffer, if I have a hardship, it means that God doesn't somehow love me. But instead, we have to account for the possibility that in God's love, suffering is somehow bringing about something in our life that's good.

I heard about a young girl who had become disabled and needed to go to physical therapy. And as she went to physical therapy, it was hard because she was trying to learn to walk without braces and it was painful. And she would plead with her parents and say, please don't make me go to physical therapy. I don't want to go. And one day when she was

exasperated, she said, in essence, Dad, if you love me, you wouldn't make me go to physical therapy. And he paused and he said, you know, honey, it's precisely because I do love you that I make you go to physical therapy. Just because you and I can't conceive of a reason doesn't mean that God in his love isn't doing what he deems best.

Jesus suffered; therefore, this is the third lesson, being good doesn't negate suffering. We mentioned that Jesus is perfect, and there's a thought inside the church, outside the church, that says something like this. And that is if I'm good, my goodness, should act as a vaccine against any kind of bad things that will happen in my life. But then what happens is if you encounter something that's truly difficult, bad, or hard in your life, you have twice the pain. You have the pain of the incident itself, and then you have the pain of saying either I wasn't good enough and that's why this happened, or the God that I thought I trusted in isn't good. And the only way around that ultimately is to understand that just being good or in Jesus' case being perfect, does not give us a vaccine against suffering. Instead, Jesus suffered so it teaches us this very simple idea that goodness does not negate the reality of suffering.

And then I have one last lesson, and that is Jesus suffered, therefore, our suffering can be temporary. Notice in this text that it says Jesus said he'd suffer under the teachings of the law and then he would be killed, and the third day raised to life. And then if you look down just below what we read in verse 24, it says, "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." And what is happening in this text is Jesus is pointing forward and he's saying, I'm going to suffer. And because I suffer, if you suffer as well in the cross, then one day you will share, and I will make all things right. You see, Jesus suffered in part so that our suffering can be temporary, that it isn't a stamp that lives on into all eternity.

There's an account in a book called *Good to Great* about an admiral in the military, in the Navy, James Stockdale. And he was in the Hanoi Hilton during the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1973. And he was the highest-ranking officer that was held during that time. And during those eight years, he was tortured twenty-one times extensively. And he had a book called *Love and War* in which he told his story. And Jim Collins, who wrote *Good to Great*, interviewed him.

And here's what Admiral Stockdale said about his being detained for eight years. He said, "I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into a divine, defining event of my life, which in retrospect, I would not trade."

And then Jim Collins asked him. He said, well, then who didn't make it out? And he said, the optimist. And Jim Collins said I was confused because I thought you were just talking about optimism. And what James Stockdale said next was influential to Jim Collins in how he wrote

about it. He said the optimists were the ones who said, we're going to be out by Christmas or we're going to be out by Easter.

And Christmas would come, then Easter would come, and they wouldn't be out, and they'd say, well we'll be out by the 4th of July, we'll be out by Thanksgiving, or we'll be out by next Christmas. And he said what happened was because they kept putting little deadlines on it, they were constantly crushed in hope as opposed to having the ultimate hope that I would one day prevail.

And here's what he said. He said, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end with, which you can never afford to lose, with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever that is." Now, James Stockdale's confidence was in the ultimacy of the United States to prevail and for him to get out. That may have been misplaced. It wasn't in his case. He got out. He lived a long life and did very well for the rest of his life.

But spiritually speaking, if you have faith in Jesus Christ, if you've acknowledged your sinfulness before God and turned to Jesus as your Savior, what it means is whatever suffering you have here and now, ultimately you have the hope of saying, I will prevail because when Jesus returns, He will set the world right and will relieve and reverse all of the brokenness of our world and all of the suffering that we've experienced.

But if your hope is constantly well, by next week this will change, or next year, rather than ultimately, you will be constantly on an up or down kind of ride, a roller coaster ride of emotion. And I'm not suggesting that you don't have short-term hopes or that you don't pray for God to reverse this situation here and now. God is in the business of doing that. But our ultimate hope isn't that God will heal little Caitlin or Tim Keller. But it's in the fact that one day God has already answered the prayer and ultimate healing will be given. And when that is the hope that you live with, the hope that I live with, then we can address the pain of the hard things happening in our lives.

And I don't know how you interact with this issue of suffering if it's a global question or a personal question. But what I know is that at some point it will become personal. You'll want to have a baby and not be able to conceive, or the baby that you conceive won't make it to term. Somebody that you love will get a terminal illness. There will be a broken relationship that you didn't want to be broken. And there will be in some of our lives some hardships that come along and we'll turn and say God why? God, where are you? God, if you're good, how could you have let this happen?

And what we see with the Tim Keller story is that our faith ahead of time actually matters when we get into the crisis because when we're in the crisis, if we're able to say Jesus suffered, therefore suffering has a reason and it doesn't mean that I'm not loved and my

goodness isn't a complete hedge against it. And when I use "good" here, I'm using it in not so much the ultimate sense. If you've been around, you've heard it said that none of us are good, I'm not saying it like that, I'm saying when you put your mind to following Christ and do your best to do that in life, that your goodness isn't a hedge against any kind of suffering, but that ultimately your suffering can be temporary. Then you're able to navigate the hard things that come your way and say, God is still good, and God is still in charge. And that ultimately gives you the hope to navigate those hardships.

Let's pray together. God, I would imagine that as we're gathered this weekend at Orchard Hill, there are a lot of hard things happening right now in people's lives. In fact, I know that that's true. And so, God, we pray that you would show up and do the miraculous in situations that are represented, that you would heal the broken marriage, that you would bring healing, that you would restore the relationship where somebody has been wayward, that you would do what only you can do.

But God, we also pray that you would help us to have faith in your ultimate victory through Jesus Christ that allows us to see suffering for what it is and to know that you are at work rebuilding, restoring, and will one day fully rebuild and restore all that is broken. God, I ask today that you would help me and each person who's here to not make this world our ultimate place, but that we would see that this is at best temporary. It doesn't mean it's unimportant, doesn't mean that we don't want all the best things here and now, but help us to see and understand that at a deep level and live in that reality. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great day.