

**Making Sense of Life  
When It All Falls Apart**

John 11:32-37; 15:13

September 11, 2005

John 11:32-37

*32When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."*

*33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*

*34"Where have you laid him?" he asked.*

*"Come and see, Lord," they replied.*

*35Jesus wept.*

*36Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"*

*37But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

I have a friend who used to live 30 miles from down town New Orleans, and another 50 miles away, and a nephew who used to live in Montgomery, Alabama. They all *used to live there* but all moved away, the most recent just a few months ago. So I have no one on the front line. Maybe you do. Maybe you had someone on the frontline on 911. My friends from New York lost friends in the towers. And an author I enjoyed, Barbara Olsen--the wife of the Solicitor General of the US, Ted Olsen--perished in the plane that attacked the Pentagon.

We've been dealt a blow again. I couldn't help noticing that the airport in New Orleans is Louis Armstrong International. The city of jazz named its airport for one of the greatest musicians our nation has ever produced. Funny, when I think of Louis Armstrong, I can

hear his voice singing, "And I think to myself, what a wonderful world..." How ironic.

I know it's my job to help us all think Biblically about events like 911 and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. So that's what we're going to do. And then I want us to think about the qualities of character that tragedy brings out in us. And we will see that will bring us right back to the Lord Jesus, who laid down His life for His friends.

One thing that is so different from 911 about Katrina is that the national emotions about the devastation of New Orleans are so different. One was an attack of an evil enemy, the other a natural catastrophe. So initially, while people were upset and concerned and heart-broken, they weren't angry. Later, the anger set in. Blame FEMA. Blame the Governor. Blame President Bush. Blame the mayor. Blame the looters. Blame the whole blankety-blank US government. What a waste, but I understand it. I'm not in the middle, it's not my family, and I learned long ago that people aren't rational when it comes to family. That's OK.

**But why not blame God?** Where was God when Hurricane Katrina hit the coast? When the South Asian Tsunami took out a quarter million people? When the planes hit the towers?

John 11 tells the story of the death of Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus. It's important to remember that no gospel is as clear that Jesus is God in the flesh than the gospel of John. Jesus is described as "the word" who was "in the beginning" with God and as being God (John 1:1-2). John 1:14 then says, "The word became flesh and lived among us..."

Now in John 11 Jesus arrives at the grave of Lazarus and...He cries. Not only that, we are

told that He was “deeply moved in spirit” and that He was “troubled” by the death of His friend. The Greek words behind the English we read are stronger: He was angry at death, the death of His friend.

Now if He was God, and God runs everything, then how on earth can He be angry at death? Isn't it kind of like being angry at a painting you painted because you're not as talented as you thought you are?

This is sort of like the objection of **Voltaire** to the goodness of God and human suffering. Voltaire lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During his lifetime, a massive earthquake hit Lisbon, Portugal on a Sunday morning, killing thousands of people while at church. Musing on the reality of this awful death and suffering, Voltaire made this famous statement:

- *If God is good, then He is not all-powerful, and...*
- *If God all-powerful, then He is not all-good.*

*If God is good*, says Voltaire, then He had **no power** to stop the earthquake and spare those people from their suffering, and *if God is all-powerful*, and He allowed the earthquake, well, **He can't be all good!** If Voltaire were here today, he would apply that to Hurricane Katrina.

What Christians have said—what the Bible affirms again and again is that God is all good, and all-powerful. But—is there any evidence for a God of love in a world like this: a world of hurricanes, earthquakes, terrorists, and AIDS?

**The #1 question** people would ask God (according to a Barna Poll): “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?”

This is a true challenge, a complex case. We have not one or two but many leads to follow. And we have many clues to investigate. One or two clues alone would not be conclusive. We need many clues that we can check out before we can conclude whether there is any evidence of a God of love in a world of suffering. I want to give you ten clues and a challenge.

**CLUE #1:** Maybe we aren't as smart as we think!

Many times people object to the idea of a God of love in a world of suffering by saying, "I can't imagine of a God that just stands by and lets such suffering happen." Maybe the clue is in those words, *I can't imagine*. Maybe we're not as smart as we think we are.

- ❑ A story: a park ranger is making his way through the forest when he comes on a bear caught in a trap. The poor creature is writhing in pain, and the ranger wants to set him free. He approaches carefully and examines the trap. Unfortunately, to set him free, he will have to put more pressure on the bear's leg before the mechanism will open. He does that and the bear, knowing no better, thinks the ranger just wants to hurt him more. He lashes out, and the ranger ducks just in time.
- ❑ So the ranger gets out a dart gun to knock out the bear to set him free. He shoots, the painful dart hits, and if bears can think, he'd think this as he passed out: "Not only does he want to make me suffer, now he's killing me!"
- ❑ Now would you agree with me, that the ranger had nothing but the bear's interest in mind? Maybe the bear isn't as smart as he thinks he is. And maybe we aren't as smart as we think we are either.
- ❑ Isaiah 55:8-9 says:

*8"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,"  
declares the LORD.*

*9"As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

**CLUE #2:** The fact that we object to suffering/evil in the world points to objective right and wrong—evidence of God’s reality

- “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe” is the title of chapter one of *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. He points out that *everybody* believes in right and wrong—*everybody*. Nobody ever justifies something because it’s *evil*, but because they say it’s *good*. Even Nazis (Lewis wrote during World War II) say that it’s *good* to conquer so-called inferior races.
- Lewis asks, where did we get the notion of good and evil? Wherever it came from, it’s universal. Basic morality seems written into our soul’s code. Who wrote that code? The very fact that we object to suffering and evil in the world points to the reality objective right and wrong, which itself is evidence of God’s reality—and His goodness and love. But we need more clues.

**CLUE #3:** Sometimes present evil/suffering leads to long-term good

- Homework is suffering. Taking the time to read, study, write, memorize, is much harder than watching reruns of “Family Guy” and surfing the net. But taking the time to do the homework leads to not only better grades, but also a better, more informed and rounded person.
- Our experience tells us that many times, present suffering leads to long-term good. Athletes tell us, “No pain, no gain.” Four

and half-years ago, when I first got on an elliptaziod (that's the exercise machine that mimics the motion of cross-country skiing), I thought I was going to *die* after five minutes. Today I can do thirty minutes, no problem. My blood pressure is down and my tone is way up. Present suffering can often lead to long-term good—if we are willing to wait long enough

- And note this: the cross of Jesus is the #1 of example of this. His suffering, the Bible says, led to spiritual rescue of all that believe. No suffering, no salvation!

**CLUE #4:** Wisdom often comes from suffering

- Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft describes watching his seven-year-old daughter trying to thread a needle. Several times she stabbed her thumb as she tried again and again. He was sorely tempted (no pun intended) to intervene and help her—especially when she drew blood—but he held back. Finally she threaded it and turned to see her father. “Look what I did, daddy!” She was thrilled.
- The point is: her sense of understanding and even joy would have been lost if her father had intervened to relieve of her pain. Now could that be true on a worldwide scale as well?
- This was true even for Jesus! It says in Hebrews 5:8: “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered...” Even Jesus grew (in His humanity) through the means of suffering. Suffering can be a great teacher, one of the best teachers of all.
- The ultimate example of suffering is Job (Job 42:1-6). Job never tries to tie up the issue of why we suffer in a neat package, but does emphasize that suffering causes us to grow. Listen to Job's words near the end of the book, in Job 46:1-6:

**42**<sup>1</sup> Then Job replied to the LORD:

*2*"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

*3*You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?'

*Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.*

*4*"You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.'

*5*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

*6*Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Job didn't get all the answers he'd hoped for, but he did come into a place of greater peace and understanding than he'd ever known before.

God's willingness to permit suffering, it seems to me, at least in part, has to do with His desire that we learn and grow—and the reality is that pain is a great teacher.

**CLUE #5:** Sometimes good is brought forth from the presence of evil.

- In the 70s and 80s, one of the highest rated TV shows was *Dallas*. It told the story of the Ewing family. At the center was J.R. Ewing, a charming snake—the man America loved to hate.
- In the very last episode of the show, J.R. sees what his family and friends would have been like if he'd never lived—kind of an "It's A Wonderful Life" moment. To his astonishment, he discovered that most of them would have been *worse* people if he'd never lived. Standing up to *him* had given them character.

- Could it be that God allows a degree of evil in the world so as to draw out good in others to confront that evil? To put it another way, how could anyone be a saint if there's no sin to fight—in yourself and in the world? Sometimes great good is brought forth from the resisting the presence of evil. Suffering, evil and pain come in a bundle—a package deal.

**CLUE #6:** Sometimes pain, suffering and evil become the only ways we listen to needs of others and to things that really matter

- One of my favorite C.S. Lewis quotes is on "God's megaphone":

*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*

A painless world would be a dull and stupefying world. It would also be a world in which we have little need to heed things of the greatest importance—like God's reality and claim on our lives. I imagine that if I asked for a show of hands, many people here would say that God got their attention through suffering—more immediately than any other way.

**CLUE #7:** A world with immediate reward and punishment would be a world without faith or freedom

Many complain about this world. Like Voltaire, they find fault with God or they reject God's existence based on the reality of suffering and evil in this world.

But let's imagine that God made a very different world. In this world, doing good is immediately rewarded and doing evil is immediately punished. So if you walk a LOL

(little old lady) across the street, you immediately find a dollar bill on the ground. If you kick your dog, you immediately get a cold. And so on and so on. The bigger the good thing you do, the better the reward. Cure cancer, you win the lottery. Kill your neighbor, fire and brimstone fall from the sky on your house.

God *could have* created a world like this. But he didn't. Instead He created a world in which the connection between the good (and evil) that we do and the reward (or punishment) have the *appearance* of randomness. Sometimes we are rewarded immediately. Sometimes years later. Sometimes the reward is on the other side of death. The same goes for evil. For years, Dr. Josef Mengele, a Nazi concentration camp doctor, who performed hideous experiments on camp internees, was sought by the authorities. Then it was discovered that he'd died peacefully in Bolivia. Many felt that justice hadn't been served. They didn't count of what happens *after* death!

A world with immediate rewards and punishments may reduce to near zero the degree of suffering, but it would be at the price of the end of human freedom, and the end of real faith. No faith is involved if there is an immediate positive and negative effect for every action we take. Again, God uses the consequences of our actions, even the ones that cause suffering to give us both freedom and to allow us to have real faith, not just fearful submission.

**CLUE #8:** The cross is the proof that God cares about suffering

□ Hebrews 2:14-15 says this:

*14Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his*

*death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- 15and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

When we lived in New Hampshire, a UNH student asked to interview me for a paper she was doing on the holocaust. She asked me, what impact the holocaust had on my faith? I answered her that the holocaust demonstrates to me that I could not believe in God except for the cross of Jesus.

How could we believe in a God of justice and love who was content to standby and allow human suffering to go on forever unabated and just watch? But in the cross, God enters the arena of human suffering at its worst: a good man put do death in a horrible way by crooked leaders.

How many times have I stood by the beds of dying saints, often in agonizing pain, who have taken comfort in the fact that Jesus also died in pain?

Hebrews 2 says that Jesus got inside the pain-prison of this life as well and took the best shots suffering and evil could dish out. God did not—does not—stand by and watch suffering from the comfort of heaven. He got dirty—and bloody—in human suffering.

**CLUE #9:** Eternity puts all things into perspective

- “Wait till you get to heaven” as the only answer the problem of suffering strikes me as a cop-out. Yet you can scarcely turn page in the Bible without reference to the life to come. One thing we learn about suffering in life is that time often gives us a better perspective on suffering. So much more eternity. St. Teresa of Avila had this

to say on suffering: "In the light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth will seem no more serious than one night in a inconvenient hotel."

- I thought of this one day when I was home from college. My parents had taken all the things from my childhood—toys and such—and put them in a closet. When I saw them, they were like from another life. They had seemed so precious to me—but now they were so childish!

From eternity's perspective, not only will the things precious to us now seem silly, but also the things so terrible to us will seem trivial. As passing as one night in a bad motel.

**CLUE #10:** The real mystery of suffering is why *we* don't do something about it

- I saw a cartoon once. Two frogs are sitting on a lily pad. One frog says, "I'd like to ask God a question. When is he going to do something about all the suffering in the world?" The other frog says, "I'm just afraid God's going to ask me the same question!"

Every act of kindness, every act of heroism, in the face of tragedies like 911 or Katrina, is an answer to God about the stewardship of our lives. In John 15:13, Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, that He lays down His life for His friends."

Jesus set the standard of sacrificial care. In other places, in other ages, a disaster like Katrina was looked on as a judgment of the gods. There was no massive rescue. It was just a case of tough luck. The Christian ethic of the value of life, each life, is so much a part of our culture that we respond as a nation in a way that's been shaped and formed by the Jesus way without even realizing it.

Historians tell us that when plagues broke out in the Roman Empire, plagues that killed each time nearly a third of the population, it was the Christians who stepped up to take care of the ill. The Romans would sometimes cast the still living in the gutters, but the Christians would take them in, and many times die themselves for their acts of love. A Roman official said of those believers, "Not only do they take care of *their* poor, they take care of *our* poor as well!"

Now today, as at 911, we can rise up, or shrug it off as someone else's problem. In Matthew 25:44-45, Jesus says that the real test of a believer is their entering into the relief of the pain and suffering of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the poorly clothed, the sick and the imprisoned. He says,

*44"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'*

*45"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'*

So let us remember the death, and mourn them. Let us honor the rescuers, and stand with them. Let us comfort the bereaved, and pray for them. Let us give blood, and let us give dollars. If there was ever a time to act, it is now. Now is the time to be the loving hands of Jesus in our world—Amen?

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PRAYER