I was watching BBC news the first time I saw the images of children convulsing, shaking and dying from Syrian chemical weapons. Since then, I have tried to look away from the images because they are just too painful.

Overwhelmingly, the question you would like to ask God is, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” A number of you raised that question in reference to children’s suffering.

In Egypt’s latest unrest, an Associated Press story read: “After torching a Franciscan school, Islamists paraded three nuns on the streets like prisoners of war. Two other women working at the school were sexually harassed and abused as they fought their way through a mob . . . nearly forty churches were looted and torched and twenty-three other churches were attacked and damaged.”

When I was nine, I came home one Friday night from the Wilson County Fair and answered the phone. It was the aunt of my best friend, Ben. She asked to speak to my parents and said “They will tell you about Ben Jr.” Ben had been riding his bike, hit by a car and killed.

My father died of a heart attack when I was a senior in high school. He was a good man and a great dad.

My life, like all of yours, has experienced bad things happening to good people. It is an age old question born out of our human experience. At its core for us, it is a theological question.

Anytime a preacher attempts to make sense of these kinds of sweeping questions, it seems audacious. “Who are you to think you can answer one of life’s most puzzling questions?” Now I knew that you would not throw any softballs up to the plate with your questions for God. And I have tried to honor your boldness by not ducking the hard ones. Maybe you won’t agree with all the places I come out….but then again, you don’t have to! What I have to do is to treat these subjects with humility and tell you: “This is my best shot… and I may be wrong.”

So fools rush in where angels fear to tread! And though I don’t pretend to have the answer concerning this question before us, I have put together a theological framework that helps me. It relies on the insights of Reformed Neo-orthodox theologians and by an out-of-the-box old
British preacher named Leslie Weatherhead. In fact, Weatherhead told this story that illustrates his thinking and mine:

Weatherhead was in India sitting on a veranda talking to a father who was grieving the death of his young son from a disease that swept through the country. The father looked at Weatherhead and said, “Well, Padre, it is the will of God. That’s all there is to it. It is the will of God.” The man also had a young daughter so Weatherhead responded: “Supposing someone crept up the steps tonight and… deliberately infected your child with the disease. “My God,” the father snapped back. “If… I caught him, I would kill him with as little compunction as I would a snake...”

“But…” Weatherhead continued, “Isn’t that just what you have accused God of doing when you said it was his will? Surely we cannot identify as the will of God something for which a man would be locked up in jail….”

You have always been good listeners and today you will have to be because this sermon has five pieces of a framework that enables me to place the big picture of this question. The framework pieces are: our concept of God, our understanding of the universe, the nature of humanity, the power and purpose of God and the sufficiency of grace.

I

What is your concept of God? When we talk about evil and suffering we have to begin with a just concept of God. Too often people’s concept of God borders on the demonic. God is depicted as vengeful, jealous, and manipulative, willing to do anything to get our attention even things that if done by others would be morally questionable. This kind of God sends suffering, pain, cancer, heart attacks, tornadoes, disease, car crashes, AIDS and babies born with deformed hearts. This is a God to be feared. As Weatherhead said: “We’d put a person in jail for the kind of things people attribute to God, when saying after a tragedy or loss, ‘It must be the will of God.’”

Does your God deliberately send suffering and pain upon the world? When we picture God in this way, I believe we have a distorted and unjust concept of God’s nature. Can we proclaim that “God is good and God is great” if we believe that God willfully sends evil, calamity, and suffering upon us?

Maybe some can. I cannot.

And when people say that life’s calamities are God’s way of getting our attention….I say: “Calamities may indeed turn our attention to God. But what a manipulating God who would get our attention by causing us or others hurt, pain or suffering.” Truth is, life is full of hurt and suffering….most of it caused by us and other human beings . . . or by natural causes.

But from God? Not in my mind.
What is your concept of God?
Paul says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” I believe we use Jesus Christ to form our concept of God and we see God though Jesus Christ. I mean, as Christians, we do believe that God was in Christ, that Jesus was not just a man, but was God incarnate.

So, in Christ, we surely don’t see a God who is vengeful, demonic, hateful or manipulative. Rather, God reveals himself in Christ as a God of love, of grace, whose nature is compassion, forgiving, redeeming.

From Jesus we see that God is like a parent who cares for his or her children. It is a parental model where love is the bottom line. The cross on Good Friday is the evidence of God’s heart. God’s love is so enormous that sacrifice describes his love.

Where do we receive a just picture of God? By looking into the eyes and heart of Jesus Christ.

II

Second, we need an accurate concept of the universe.

One of God’s great gifts to us is a universe where natural laws can be observed and therefore predicted. Some in quantum physics challenge or theorize about a chaos theory that makes the world less predictable. However, part of God’s goodness is seen in God’s creating a world where predictable cause and effect rules play out – and as one scientist says: “The natural laws of the universe are so precise that we don’t have any difficulty building a space ship, sending a person to the moon and we can time the landing with the precision of a fraction of a second.”

And when we jump off a building, one-hundred percent of the time we will go down, not up. At thirty two degrees, water will freeze; you can bet on it.

So you and I learn to live in cooperation with these laws of our universe. We teach our children not to place their hands on a hot stove, that knives will cut, that running into the street can get you killed. In essence, we are teaching our children to cooperate with the predictable laws of the universe.

In God’s world, natural laws are impartial. “God sends the rain on the just and the unjust,” says Jesus. When the natural laws are operating, devastation may occur to a city or people who are in the path of a tornado, or hurricane, or raging river or wildfire.

Natural laws are impartial. A tsunami does not play favorites with Hindus or Christians, Japanese or Americans.
But how we use our understanding of natural laws is a value judgment...such as using nuclear energy to light up Greensboro or build a bomb that will destroy it.
Which leads us into a third piece of the framework: We need an honest assessment of the nature of human beings.

Truth is we are flawed, sinful and selfish; we hurt others, we hurt ourselves, and we make poor choices. And other people hurt us, and make choices that often negatively affect us. Most of the evil in the world is caused by people; and most of the evil we experience could be prevented by human choices and different priorities. John Calvin our theological father had a dim view of human goodness….and unfortunately, he was right.

Do you think it is God’s will and hope that we love and take care of each other? But our choices often reflect a fallen and flawed price tag.

For instance the price tag of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars will cost somewhere between two and six trillion dollars, depending on whose estimates we believe.. In addition to what we have spent, there are all the health care cost and benefits that will accrue in coming years. Do you know how much it would cost us to defeat world hunger? About thirty billion dollars a year for ten years…or three hundred billion dollars. That is about one-sixth of the most conservative estimate cost of the Iraq Afghanistan wars. And we have this terrific war plane called the F35 that is in production and will cost one hundred sixty-one million dollars a plane. We have ordered two thousand, two hundred forty which comes out to three hundred sixty three billion dollars or more than it would cost to end hunger in the world over ten years.

In the United States we spend about one hundred fifty billion dollars annually on medical research. Over ten years that is still half of the most conservative effort of our cost for the Iraq Afghanistan wars.

My point? Most of the suffering in the world is caused by human beings…and we could eliminate a great deal of it if only we would make choices and decisions that reflect God’s kingdom rather than our flawed humanity.

A fourth element in this discussion is the purpose and power of God. The question behind “Why bad things happen to good people,” is often, “If God is good, and if God is all powerful, why then does God not prevent evil?”

It seems to me that God has set some limits upon God’s powers . . . and did so because God sees the world (apparently) as a school of human and spiritual learning, rather than a place of comfort. But these limits I believe are somehow connected to God’s purpose and God’s purpose it seems is that you and I would learn and choose to love: to love God, to love each other.
God created a world, it seems, where there is no possibility of good without the possibility of evil.

Maybe God has created this kind of world because without freedom and human choices there is no potential for human growth and love.

I guess God could have created a perfect world, with perfect people, with no illness, evil or flaws. But apparently God is not a perfectionist! God seems more interested in love than perfection. Robots cannot love. So it seems that God, in creating this place and us, ran the risk of a world’s pain and suffering…but with hopes that we would learn to love.

V

Lastly, God grace is sufficient. No one avoids suffering, not God’s most faithful, not the most innocent, not even good people with the purest of hearts and motives. But the power of faith is when we experience God’s assurance that even in the midst of our sufferings and affliction, God is with us. You remember Paul once asked God to remove his “thorn in his flesh” that was causing him to suffer. And God’s reply to God, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

That is the power of God and the power of faith.

Often God’s grace is manifested in and through people. So the doctors break the news that it’s malignant and there nothing anyone can do. But that is not true. There is something we can do. We can show up. We can be there. We can love. We can be Christ to those who need us. And when you and I are in that low place of struggle and pain, Christ shows up for us as well.

For me at least, when I put together these pieces:

- A just picture of God
- An accurate understanding of the universe
- An honest assessment of the nature of human beings
- God’s power and purpose
- See the sufficiency of grace available to us

Then I have a framework to confront the question….Why do bad things happen to good people? “God is great and God is good.”

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1 Sources:
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