

In God's Good World, Why Is There So Much Suffering?  
September 10, 2006

Romans 8:18-23; 35-39

*"Looking back, I realize it was the beautiful day that killed us."* These are the words of Richard Picciotto, a grizzled and grieving New York City fire battalion commander. His book, Last Man Down, tells the story of Picciotto's four hours trapped in the rubble of the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

Picciotto believes that if it had been gray or foggy or overcast on September 11, there's no way the terrorists could have flown those planes. Not on that day, anyway. But all up and down the East Coast it was the same: still winds, blue skies, not a cloud in sight. Boston, New York and Washington, D.C. ... all enjoying an absolutely gorgeous, late-summer day.

Today is September 10, 2006. Five years ago tomorrow, terrorists attacked our nation on our own soil, inflicting more damage and loss of life than we've experienced since Pearl Harbor. I don't know if any of us can fully describe how we felt when we heard the news of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But I'm fairly sure that most of us here this morning can remember where we were, and what we were doing when we heard that awful news.

I remember that as I watched the pictures on television and heard the story unfold, I got sick to my stomach. Almost 3000 people lost their lives in the collapse of the Twin Towers and the explosion at the Pentagon, and additionally, 40 passengers and crew died on the hijacked airliner that crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Very likely the memories of that horrible morning have faded somewhat, and we have gotten on with our lives. But we stop and think about it on occasions like this anniversary. Much has changed in these past five years. We don't look at life the same anymore. We

don't look at people the same way. We know that ordinary people going to work at ordinary jobs can become victims of terror. We know that ordinary people taking routine trips can have their airplanes turned into guided missiles. We know that the survivors, the rescuers, the wounded, the bereaved, and all of the children who watched this unbelievable violence unfold will never be the same.

We are now a nation at war, with nearly 200,000 of our troops deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. We have seen the tightened security at airports. There have been frequent warnings that additional acts of terrorism are not only possible, but probable.

And yet we know even these constant worries are less to bear than the pain of those who have lost loved ones: parents, spouses, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters and friends in the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and the war against terrorism since that day.

Five years ago, we woke up to a beautiful day, and it nearly killed us. With the help of the Lord, I pray that the beautiful days to come will be full of life, and not death.

That being said, there is an underlying theological question that has been asked by so many. I saw the basic question painted on the roof of a partially submerged house in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. As helicopters hovered over the area, a cameraman focused on a roof top upon which was painted, *"Where is God!"* I believe the most difficult, frustrating, and challenging question to confront our faith in a good and loving God are questions like, *"Why is there so much pain in the world? Why do tragedies happen? Why doesn't God do something to intervene?"*

We talk about the goodness of God – a God who is all-powerful, a God who loves his children – and it SEEMS that with a God like that, the world should be a living paradise. But there is a problem. All around us, we see agony and suffering. There are earthquakes,

tornadoes, hurricanes and floods. A child in Los Angeles is killed by a stray bullet when gunfire erupts over a drug deal gone bad. A telephone call from the police informs you that your teenager has been involved in an automobile accident. Or seated in the doctor's office, you hear the news you dreaded to hear: the tumor is malignant.

The question screams inside of us: *"Why? Why, God, do you permit such things to happen? Why do you let good people suffer? Why me? God, don't you care? It's just not fair."* We cry out with Jesus from the cross, *"God, why have you forsaken me?"*

I certainly don't presume to know the full answer to the problem of human suffering. Someone asked Billy Graham after the 9/11 Memorial Service, *"Why?"* And he admitted that he too had wrestled with that question throughout his ministry. It is, without a doubt, one of life's great mysteries. There are no neat, simple explanations. Even the wisest among us cannot answer the question completely. But out of my struggle with this perplexing question, let me share some ideas I have found helpful.

The first is, WE SUFFER BECAUSE WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT HAS DEPENDABLE NATURAL LAWS. *"The rain falls on the just and the unjust,"* is the way Jesus put it. The natural laws of the universe are dependable. They operate the same for all people. Take the law of gravity, for example. Wouldn't it be terrible if you had to wake up every morning and wonder if the law of gravity was going to work today, whether you were going to float off the face of the earth or not? But that same, dependable law of gravity that is such a help to us, can also hurt us.

Father Mychal Judge, was a New York Fire Department Chaplain. He died when debris from the World Trade Center fell on him while he was administering last rites to a dying man. His death certificate bears the number 00001, the first official casualty of the terrorist attack. The fact that he was a Catholic priest and had done so much good in his life,

and was ministering to the dying at that very moment did not save him. When those Towers collapsed, God's dependable law of Gravity was at work. We live in a cause-and-effect world with these natural laws, and the same laws that give order to creation; the same laws that make possible medicine, engineering, farming, scientific advances, weather prediction, can also bring terrible suffering.

AND WE ALSO SUFFER BECAUSE WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT IS RACKED WITH GROWING PAINS. Our world is in the process of becoming; it is still developing, still unfolding. Paul says in Romans 8:22 that *"creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."* To put it another way, WE DON'T KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS WORLD OF OURS; AND WHAT WE DON'T KNOW CAN HURT US! We are still learning by trial and error, and sometimes our errors come back to haunt us. The truth of the matter is that we are doing things right now that are harmful to us, harmful to our environment, that are or will cause suffering, and we don't even know it.

There was a time in medical history when we didn't even know about germs. Because of this lack of medical knowledge, surgeons didn't scrub up as carefully as they do today. They had no idea that this neglect had anything to do with the fact that so many people were dying.

Just think of the thousands of people who have cancer, because we didn't know asbestos, or some herbicides and pesticides, or tobacco, or a myriad of other things, would cause cancer. And how many prescription drugs and herbal remedies are we putting in our bodies every day and ten years from now, we may learn that they were doing us more harm than good. Vioxx is a good example of that. What helped your arthritis, hurt your heart. Many have said that global warming is the cause of the increase in hurricane activity and intensity. Whether it is or not, I don't know. But I do know that millions of people will suffer,

and many will lose their lives through ignorance, through what we have not yet learned about this world. We are supposed to be living in the Age of Knowledge, but don't you wonder what future generations will say about us and the things we are doing, that are unwittingly bringing about our own suffering?

God created a perfect world, but it was corrupted by sin. When Adam sinned, he caused the entire world to come under the effects of sin. We now live in an imperfect world, everywhere infected by wrong attitudes, wrong thoughts and wrong deeds. And so today we live in a world full surprises, and not all of them good surprises. Some of our suffering comes from the fact that we live in a sinful world, a world racked with growing pains.

WE SUFFER BECAUSE WE LIVE IN A WORLD OF RISKY RELATIONSHIPS. We are relational people. God made us that way. From the very beginning, God looked at Adam and said, *"It is not good that the man should be alone, and God created Eve."* God made us so that we are not merely isolated individuals, but are woven together by loyalty, love, mutual need, and interdependence, into homes, friendships, communities, businesses, churches, and nations. RELATIONSHIPS ARE A SOURCE OF GREAT JOY, BUT ALSO DEEP HURT.

We know that almost every joy in life involves the element of risk. If I choose to love you, I am running the risk that you may one-day reject me, or that death may take you from me, but love is worth the risk. If you have a friendship, you run the risk that your friend may betray you; but friendship is worth the risk. If you have children, you run the risk that they may cause you heartache and sleepless nights; but children are worth the risk.

Risky relationships are woven into the very fabric of life. The more deeply we love, the more deeply we can be hurt. Much of the suffering in our world comes from these risky relationships, and yet no emotionally healthy person would want to miss out on the joys of love because we are afraid of being hurt. It's worth the risk.

And finally, WE SUFFER BECAUSE WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT GIVES US FREEDOM OF CHOICE. God did not make us helpless puppets on a string, or machine-like robots. God gave us the greatest gift of all, but it is a gift fraught with danger. God gave us free will – the freedom to choose our own way. He could have created us without that freedom of choice. BUT THEN, WOULD LIFE BE WORTH LIVING? You can go to the store and buy a baby doll that she says, “*I love you,*” when you squeeze her. Does that mean anything to you? Is that really love? Certainly not! Love is a choice. We want to hear those words when someone has chosen to say them to us. Only then do they have real meaning. God creates us with the freedom to chose. And the choices we make now impact our lives both today and for the future.

Unfortunately, we sometimes make wrong choices, bringing suffering on ourselves and others. A head-on collision occurs because a man decides that he can pass another car on a double yellow line, and doesn't see the car in the opposite lane. A teenager accepts a dare to try drugs and gets hooked. A boy takes his inheritance and runs away from home to the far country, and a father's heart is broken. A teenage girl with a bright mind and a brilliant future drops out of high school because she is pregnant. A madman decides he will do all he can to destroy our American way of life, and we find ourselves at war. A group of men, jealous and resentful of a teacher from Nazareth, decide that he is a threat to their way of life, and nail him to a cross.

OUR GREATEST GIFT IN LIFE IS THE GIFT OF FREEDOM, but with that gift comes the ability to misuse that gift! So much of the suffering in the world comes from the ignorant or confused or selfish or wicked misuse of our free will.

Harry Emerson Fosdick said: *“All the way from intimate personal hurts and tragedies to the vast catastrophe of war, how much of human agony springs from the personal choice*

*of evil instead of good.”* Much of our suffering comes from choosing poorly – choosing to hurt rather than help, choosing to hate rather than love, choosing to punish rather than forgive, choosing sin rather than Christ.

Yes, we suffer because we live in a world of dependable natural laws; we live in a world that’s racked with growing pains; we live in a world of risky relationships; and we live in a world that gives us freedom of choice. There is, however ONE MORE THING to be said about suffering in our world, and that is that WE ARE NOT ALONE. God is with us, enabling us to grow stronger, even in our suffering, enabling us to turn our defeats into victories and our sorrows into triumphs.

The good news is that suffering is NOT the intentional will of God. Sometimes we choose to suffer and SOMETIMES IT IS THRUST UPON US, BUT WE CAN TRUST GOD TO BE WITH US, EVEN IN THE MIDST OF OUR SUFFERING. *“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

Even though our whole world got turned upside down five years ago on September 11, even though the Hurricane Katrinas have made an impact on lives and landscape that will forever be remembered, God is with us, and nothing, not Osama Bin Laden, not hurricanes, or anything else, can separate us from God and God’s love.

God speaks to us this morning, not from an easy chair, but from a cross. Your suffering is not God’s punishment. God has, in fact, provided a Savior for us. GOD SENT HIS ONLY SON JESUS TO SUFFER ALONG WITH US. Jesus endured the worst suffering this world can dish out and Jesus was victorious! Remember how Leslie Weatherhead put it: *“The cross looked like defeat to the disciples. It felt like defeat to Jesus. It was called defeat by the world. But God made of it . . . His greatest victory.”*

This is the good news of our Christian faith. No matter how many painful, life wounding events may come our way, God is with us. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.