ACTS OF GOD

PROBLEM WITH PAIN
Possible reactions to suffering:

become bitter  withdraw
feel defeated  turn to alcohol or drugs
become defiant  contemplate suicide
trust God  ______________________________
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The problem of suffering has always been a major challenge to belief in God. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why does he allow horrible things to happen to such good people? Cynics conclude either God doesn’t care or he is incapable of intervening.
Leslie Weatherhead once suggested that there are three areas to God’s will: God’s intended will, his permissive will, and his ultimate will. God intended this world to be perfect when he created it, but he permitted men to have freedom of choice, and as a result sin entered into the world. The sin virus knocked the world off-kilter. God has temporarily permitted pain and tragedy as a result.

We are not puppets on a string. We are free human beings created in the image of God and given the privilege of moving about in an exciting but fallen and sometimes dangerous world. Occasionally we’re going to crash and draw blood, but the heavenly Father promises, “I’ll be there. I’ll go through it with you, and if you let me, I’ll see to it that even the most painful experience will mature you, help you appreciate what Jesus went through, and make you hungry for heaven where I’m going to wipe away all tears, and there will be no more pain or sorrow and I will make all things right.”

**DAILY STRIDES FOLLOWING EPISODE 1**

This week’s Daily Strides focus primarily on the intellectual problem of evil and suffering. However, we’re going to avoid looking at the issue in a detached, theoretical way. We’re not going to ask general questions like: Why is there suffering in the world? Why do bad things happen to those people over there? Or how can other people deal with their calamities? Rather, we are going to ask: What do I discover about the suffering that directly affects me? And what is my experience with suffering showing me?

The reason we are framing the question of God and suffering in this personal way is that, in reality, we can only know our own story. We can’t really know the stories of others. As a case in point, you might be acquainted with someone who is facing a situation you consider intolerable: a debilitating injury or a chronic-pain disorder. Yet that person tells you, “This difficult situation is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I have more peace now than ever before.” What she says sounds unbelievable, but that’s because you can’t know what is going on inside other people, what insights they have gained, or what help they have received.
Or maybe you have ventured out on a mission trip to an impoverished country only to find that many of the nationals living in squalor appear happier and more content than your healthy, wealthy, air-conditioned neighbors. How can this be? I can’t imagine having their spirit under these circumstances. Right, because their story is not your story.

On the other hand, perhaps you know someone who has experienced what appeared to be a minor setback such as a job loss or temporary financial blow only to hear later that he collapsed into depression or even took his own life. You wonder how something that appeared so minor could lead to such a tragic reaction.

Others’ stories are always hidden to us. We cannot really get into the head or heart of the African orphan, the aging invalid, or even the wealthy celebrity. We can only truly know our own story and even that in a limited way. So your Daily Strides will focus on your story. This week you will look at how you experience your freewill in relation to suffering.

**DAY 1**

**Morning:** We begin with an uncomfortable question: What suffering have you caused others? Who have you hurt? What have you done that caused pain to your parents, siblings, friends, spouse, children, or church members? You may not have accidentally taken a little girl’s life while driving drunk, but be honest about what evil you have done to others. Did you scar a sibling with your childhood teasing, break the heart of your parents with your drinking, steal the virginity of a naïve date, crush the spirit of your children with your criticism, kill the joy of your spouse with pornography, disillusion fellow believers with your hypocrisy?

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The idea here is not to beat ourselves up with all the bad things we’ve done but to look into one aspect of the reality of evil by more clearly seeing our own evil. Begin your list now. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Then continue to think about the question during your day.

**Evening:** Add anything to your list that came to mind during the day. Write your reactions to this list.

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What do you find yourself saying to Jesus about your list?

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How do you want Jesus to respond to the ways you have hurt others?

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DAY 2

Morning: Look over your list from yesterday. Which offense do you consider the worst or to have the worst consequences on others? Choose one and circle it.

Next, ask yourself, Should God have stopped me from doing this? Again, keep the answer personal. The question is not whether God should have stopped Hitler or the rapist across town or even your dad from hurting you. The question today is: Should God have stopped me from doing this bad thing (or series of things) I did? Journal your response.

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Continue to think about this question during your day. As you are tempted to do something low, selfish, or harmful, ask yourself: Should God directly stop me from doing what I am attracted to doing?
Evening: During your morning exercise, you asked yourself, should God have stopped me from doing this bad thing?

1) If you answered yes, God should have stopped me, describe how you think God should have done it. Avoid the response that says God is God so he should be able to find some way to stop me without violating my freedom to choose. That’s a non-answer, a cop-out, a form of magical thinking. Some things are intrinsically impossible; that is, they carry their impossibility within them. C. S. Lewis put it this way:

You may attribute miracles to [God], but not nonsense. This is no limit to His power. If you choose to say, “God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it,” you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words, “God can.” It remains true that all things are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God (The Problem of Pain, [London: Fontana Books, 1957], 16).

So, practically speaking, how should God have stopped you from doing the hurtful thing you did? Should he have struck you dead? Paralyzed your limbs? Made you sick? Erased the bad thoughts from your brain? Appeared to you in a vision and talked you out of it? Instantaneously healed your soul so you wouldn’t desire this evil thing at all? Prompted someone to catch you doing it early on, before the consequences got too bad? Try to put your answer into words.
2) If this morning you answered no, God should not have stopped me, explain why you think he shouldn’t have in spite of the pain your actions caused yourself and others.

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Now ask God why he didn’t stop you. Take time to consider what the Holy Spirit may be saying here.

Review the life of Jesus in your mind, or flip through the Gospels, and see if you can identify an occasion when Jesus decisively stopped someone from doing evil, when he acted in a way in which another person could not resist his will but had to do what Jesus commanded. Write below what you come up with.

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DAY 3

Morning: Our stride today is to think about the natural consequences of yesterday’s responses.

1) If God had completely stopped you from doing this bad thing so that there was no possible way you could have followed through with the evil deed, what would be the consequences of him stopping you?
• Would you have become ( ) more free or ( ) less free as a person? Explain.

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• Would you have developed ( ) more character or ( ) less character? Explain.

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• Would you have developed ( ) more respect for God or ( ) less? Explain.

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• Would you then have wanted God to control ( ) more of your actions in the same way or ( ) not control more of your actions in the same way? Explain.

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• Would you come to ( ) love God more or ( ) less? Explain.

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2) If you said God shouldn’t have stopped you, what were the consequences of him not doing so? These consequences are less hypothetical because there were observable, concrete consequences to your actions. Name as many consequences as you can think of, for both you and others.

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Evening: We often wish God would stop evil “out there” but may not like it when God interferes with our freedom of choice. We can behave like a child who screams, “Mom! Make my brother share his toys!” but resents it when mom makes her share her toys. We want God to control others but resent it when we feel God is controlling us. When God doesn’t control others, we say he is uncaring, monstrous, or doesn’t exist at all. When we feel God is controlling us, we say he is intrusive, pushy, or domineering.

What is your reaction to the previous paragraph?
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How will you pray concerning God and his degree of control over you?
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DAY 4

**Morning:** So far this week you have looked at how much you think God should control your actions. Now let’s expand the issue from just your actions to your overall character. Garrett Connors, the man in the movie who collided into Sarah’s car, appears to be arrogant, self-centered, manipulative, and condescending. While driving drunk is what Connors did, arrogant is what he is; arrogance is part of his character, his developed being.


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Ask the Holy Spirit for any further insights into your character. How would he describe you? Write what comes to mind below.

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During the day, pay attention to your developed character to see what else you might observe.

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Evening: What else did you notice about your character today?

If Garrett Connors were a real person rather than a movie figure, we might wonder how he came to have this particular character. We might ask if the way he turned out was all his doing. Or was he spoiled as a child? What if he had been told over and over that he was superior and others were here to serve him? Or what if he had been wounded by a busy, disinterested dad or an abusive, narcissistic mom? What if no one has ever really loved him? Or what if a competitive bent runs deep in his DNA? Is Connors’ personality all his doing, or is some of the responsibility to be shared?

When considering questions like these, a helpful concept is “percentage of responsibility.” Is Garrett Connors 100 percent responsible for his character, or do nature and nurture have some part to play? Again, we don’t know another person’s story. We can’t know why they are as they are. But we do know our own story, at least in part.

Think about two aspects of your character, one you consider good and one you consider not so good. Try to name the factors that have led to having each of these character traits. For example, if you have a tender heart, you might say part of the reason is your mom’s genes; she’s tender, too. Or maybe one factor has to do with all the losses you’ve suffered. Or maybe you have intentionally worked hard to empathize with others. Try to list the factors in the good aspect of your character. Then do the same with a negative aspect of your character.
Positive aspect of my character: ________________________________
Reasons I’m like this: _______________________________________
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Negative aspect of my character: ________________________________
Reasons I’m like this: _______________________________________
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Did you include cultural forces like TV, music, or schooling? How about other relational influences such as grandparents, teachers, coaches, and ministers? Would you say spiritual forces like God or Satan have been involved? If so, add these to your list above.

Give each of the factors you listed a percentage according to how much responsibility you think that factor has had in making you the way you are. Jot the number beside the factor.

For example, Elizabeth may believe that “tenderness genes” inherited from her mom account for 25 percent of her tender heart, so she would write 25% beside “mom’s genes.” The hard events in Elizabeth’s life might account for 10 percent, while her own efforts to become empathetic account for 20 percent, and so forth.

Next add up all the percentages you just listed.
What’s the total? __________________________
If your total is more than 100 percent, something is out of balance (since percentage means a proportion stated in hundredths). If you have more than 100 percent in your total, think about what needs to be revised so the total adds up to 100 percent.

Adjust your percentages to add up to 100 percent. You may resist doing so, saying, “I am 100 percent responsible for my choices and therefore for my character.” But is that the true reality of your life? If you hadn’t been born with the “tenderness genes,” would you really be so tender? If you had never had anything bad happen to you, would you be so empathetic? If God wasn’t at work in your spirit, could you have grown as you have? See if you can get your percentages to total 100 percent.

One reason for doing this exercise is to highlight how complex causation is, how many factors come into play in just one facet of life.

What will you pray concerning these two aspects of your character?

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DAYS 5

Morning: As you worked on the percentage-of-responsibility exercise, did you find yourself wishing the world were more simple, clear-cut, and uncomplicated? Or did you find yourself intrigued by the extreme complexity and interrelatedness of the world?

As you go through your day, be aware of your reactions to what happens.
☐ Do you tend to find simple reasons for occurrences?
   “She’s just mean, that’s all there is to it.”  “Satan gave him cancer.”  “It was God’s will; that’s why I got promoted.”
Do you tend to resist simple answers and embrace the unfathomable complexity? “I’m not sure why she acted that way; we’re complicated people.” “I can’t be certain why he has cancer as there are many possible causes.” “I think there are several factors for me being promoted, but I’m grateful to God for his part in it.”

Evening: Think about the typical teaching you have heard in church. In your experience, has the teaching tended to acknowledge the incredible complexity of life or has it tended toward the simplistic? Jot down your thoughts.

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Would you say the Scriptures lend themselves to a simple or complex explanation for things? Again, jot down your thoughts.

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Pray in whatever way you feel led to close out your day.
DAY 6

**Morning:** Read the passages that will be highlighted in the next episode, Genesis 37 and 39:1–6. As you do, write down who says and does what.

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<th>What they say and/or do</th>
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What do you see in this part of Joseph’s story that God definitely caused to happen?

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As you experience your day, ask yourself periodically: What do I see happening around me that I can definitely say God caused to happen?

**Evening:** What did you see today that you feel certain God made happen?

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What did you cause to happen today? Make a quick list.

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What part, if any, do you perceive God played in what you caused to happen?

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How do you find yourself praying in light of today’s exercise?

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