

Is God really 'Almighty'?

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[0 : 00] Suffering. Is God really almighty? It was January 2006. I was 18 and had been selected as the New South Wales Youth Ambassador for World Vision Australia.

Now, as part of this year of volunteering, I took up, during my undergraduate degree, I travelled to the very newly independent nation of Timor-Leste.

Now, prior to going, I really knew nothing about Timor-Leste. I mean, what would an 18-year-old boy really think about? He'd never heard of the term.

I recall I had to look it up, this country, on a map, just to confirm where in the world was it. And to my surprise, it was only a very short distance from Australia's northernmost city, Darwin.

Now, the reason for myself and five others going was to reveal the story of Timor and its current suffering to a nation of teenagers and children more interested in the next PlayStation.

[1 : 14] Timor's history is one of profound suffering. Hundreds of years of colonial rule by the Portuguese, World War II invasion by the Japanese, and 24 years of brutal Indonesian occupation.

During the Indonesian occupation that started nine days after the Portuguese rolled out in 1975, as many as a quarter of the population, or 250,000 people, had died from violence, famine, or diseases over the next two and a half decades.

After a famous UN administered successful independence vote in September 1999, the country was torched to the ground. Some of you may remember this, by pro-Indonesian militia.

Some 1,400 people died in a few weeks, and 80% of the country's infrastructure was destroyed.

When we arrived just over five years later, the then youngest nation in the world was in the midst of a severe hunger crisis.

The rate of malnutrition was the highest in Southeast Asia. The maternal mortality rate was the highest in the world. And here was a now free nation, covered in a cloak of silent suffering, every hungry season, where people would have literally nothing to eat for months and months.

[2 : 55] And all of this, just one hour flight from Darwin. This photo will stay with me for a very long time. It was taken in the district of Aliu, just about an hour south of Dili, the capital.

We had just met a mother named Isabel, and met some of her children. They were a poor family that lived on maize and cassava.

There was no electricity in their community. And she told us the story of how three of her own children had died because of hunger. One was just eight months and had not died long ago.

This was the grave site behind their house and their three children under a small set of stones.

This was me at that moment, hit by the silence of suffering. We learned that the village was unusual in that it had a Protestant church.

[4 : 13] The majority of Timor is Catholic. And the mother, Isabel, said, and I remember her saying this, that life is short and that the children who had died were happy with their Father in heaven.

This morning, I want us to come before the Lord in the recognition that things in our world are not right. They're not just. And yet, the Lord is here with us in it.

He knows Isabel's suffering. He knows our suffering. And He is inviting our community in Chatswood to resist what suffering and evil does and to remind ourselves that God stands in solidarity with us.

Not only that, but He takes responsibility for the evil and suffering in the world as creation awaits its complete transformation and redemption.

As we open ourselves up this morning, our hearts and the word today, I want us, I want to remind us that in the context of suffering and the sovereignty of God, there are these great words from Paul.

[5 : 38] For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror. Then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known from 1 Corinthians 13.

So can we just take this moment to pray as we explore God's Word, which is our only source of light and truth. Heavenly Father, King of Kings, we thank you, Lord, that you are present this morning with us in all of our griefs, in all of our heartbreaks, in all of our sufferings.

Lord, help us to see your light, your truth in the darkness, and may we bring you unending glory.

In Jesus' name, Amen. So, as you know, we're going through the Apostles' Creed, and particularly the first sentence, which talks about Father Almighty creator of heaven and earth.

So firstly, who is Father Almighty? These two powerful words together, words to describe God, that He is both our heavenly Father, the one we refer, that Jesus refers to as Abba, Abba Father, reflecting that sense of being known personally by your Father, as well as, on the other hand, Almighty.

[7 : 29] Almighty, something you would normally attribute to a king. Often, perhaps in Australia, a sporting icon is the closest reference to Almighty.

In Melbourne, where Kate and I spent six years, there is only one person in sporting terms, at least, who meets the criteria of the Almighty, Almighty.

And his name is Sir Gary Ablett. Now, I may imagine that you're not all AFL aficionados, but this man was known and referred to widely as God.

He was called God, because he could do all things. Apparently, things that no other person could do, like mark a ball on top of the shoulders of someone else.

I mean, who can do that? But apart from Gary, I would suspect very few people get such a title in Australia. In Australia, at least, they would be humiliated pretty quickly by those around them, like brought down to size.

[8 : 33] You are not Almighty. Let's remind ourselves of that. So, what are we to make of God's Almighty character?

In what way does this go together with him as our Heavenly Father who loves his children? And to help us consider this, we're looking at Psalm 33. So, please, I encourage you, take your sheets out or find a Bible and open Psalm 33.

The first thing to notice about this psalm is that it celebrates the Lord as Redeemer, Creator, Judge, and Savior, all in one psalm.

It is a song that is a reflection of the whole history of God's people, in particular, his sovereignty in and through history in delivering on his promises. It looks back into the covenantal history, the agreement or the covenant between God and his people, Israel, and declares in verse 4, for the word of the Lord is right and true.

He is faithful in all he does. The psalm reveals these three key things that illuminate him as Father Almighty.

[9 : 49] The first, the unmatched power of his word. Verse 6, by the word of the Lord, by the breath of his mouth.

He need only speak and it is. This echoes for us, surely, Jesus, who in the gospel of Luke, chapter 8, speaks and calms the storm in the presence of his terrified disciples.

All he has to do is speak. There is such power. number 2.2, he sees and knows all people. He has formed the hearts of all on the earth.

Verse 13 to 15, from heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind. From his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth. He forms the hearts of all who considers everything they do.

There is no one in the world the Lord does not know. In the whole world, in whole of human history, in that sense, we see another reflection of his mighty power.

[11 : 02] No one falls out of his understanding. And point 3, finally, no king, not even the greatest powers or armies on earth, is outside the reach or power of the Lord.

Verse 16, no king is saved by the size of his army, no warrior escapes by his great strength. In the context of when this was written, a king had all power, you could imagine.

And the psalmist is saying, even God has greater power. power. No world superpower in all human history matches the strength of God.

He is the king of kings. And so, we hold in one hand that he is father almighty, and when we learn he is also creator of all. He is the creator of the heavens and the earth, of galaxies, of the hundreds of billions of galaxies, and also of nanoparticles.

verse 6 and 7. By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. He gathers the waters of the seas into jars.

[12:24] He puts the deep into storehouses. To him, all of the waters of the sea are as if they would fall into a simple jar, or the deep of the ocean into a simple garage.

a storehouse. The psalmist is declaring the divine ownership of the whole earth, the whole universe, to God. But God did not just create the heavens and the earth and then stand to one side and say, okay, done.

He sustains it. Every moment of every day, as we gather at this very time, the Lord is sustaining creation. Christopher Wright helpfully puts it like this.

He says, creation then is distinct from God its creator, but it also is totally dependent upon God. Creation is not independent or co-eternal, rather, God is actively and unceasingly sustaining its existence and its functions at macro and micro levels.

It's just the sheer power and might of God as creator. So this is the sovereign Lord of the universe. This is what we mean when we understand his sovereignty, creator of galaxies, who knows the hearts of everyone who walked on the earth.

[13:52] And what's most profound to me is that this creator of galaxies, he loves you. You know, let's just sit on that.

The creator of the universe loves you. He loves you. I want everyone to say that. He loves me. Amen. It's no small thing.

It is a gift of love revealed most perfectly in the person of Jesus. And all we have to do is accept his love. And what you find, and what you will find, is that when you accept that love, your love for him will be greater than you can possibly imagine.

So let's turn now to suffering, which we've been talking about a little bit already. The question I want us to consider is, how do we live in the reality of an almighty God in the midst of suffering and a broken world?

You see, when we truly face the tragic reality of suffering and evil in our world, our answer for everything culture that we live in and inhabit screams the question, why?

[15:05] Why does God allow this? This suffering? This evil? Something that really hit me this week, and in fact it was as we were sitting here last Sunday, and I was preparing, the Lord was preparing this word, this sermon for this Sunday, I was reflecting, and I'm sure many of you have, on the terrible deaths of four children by a drunk 29-year-old driver in Western Sydney.

This is truly a weighty matter. I was grieving this all last week. I lamented. I said, how Lord, these children, I saw my children in these children, I saw myself in the father, I saw Kate in the mother. Can I encourage you, if you haven't had a chance to watch the video of Leela, the mother, speaking after the incident, inspired by her Lebanese Orthodox faith in Jesus, she speaks as a mother who knows the resurrection of Jesus is her only hope in the face of profound suffering and grief. Some of you may be aware that I serve at International Justice Mission Australia. IJM is an organization that considers itself first and before anything a community of Christian spiritual formation.

That is the primary thing that we are as a body. But we are also the largest anti-slavery organization in the world. And it's founder Gary Haugen writes on the subject an extremely helpful book and I encourage you if you would like to read, I've got one, I'm happy to share it, good news about injustice.

[16:54] He writes about being the lead UN investigator to the Rwandan genocide in 1994 that saw almost 1 million people killed in 100 days in state sponsored genocide and crimes against humanity.

Gary himself waded through thousands of bodies to identify how they were killed so that someday their families might receive justice.

And he reflects on the typical question, quote, why does God allow so much injustice in the world as it was many times put to him?

He responds, I believe I've heard most of the neat answers to these questions, a set of answers which in Christian circles often explode in a discussion like an emergency ejection seat, rescuing relieved passengers from a crush from a crash and burn confrontation with unpleasant mysteries.

Frankly, the pat answers don't work and the insensitivity that I have seen in myself and in others as we have addressed others' pain has bordered at times on cruelty.

[18:08] Let's be honest, this is hard. As Irving Greenberg, a writer of the Holocaust, has said, no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.

That is very heavy. And maybe for you, you've had your own personal experience of this, this level of suffering and not being able to know what to say, how to explain what is happening.

I have my own personal experience, family memory, where sometimes no simple statement will suffice.

For me, I bring forward my grandfather I never met. Here's a photo of me and my father from November last year, standing at his grave site.

He was a judge in the highest court in Ghana, my father's homeland, and on June 30, 1982, in the context of political corruption and a coup, my father witnessed his own father's, my grandfather's abduction out the front of his house.

[19:19] The next day he found out that his father had been shot, he had been assassinated alongside two other judges and a retired army general, all in the pursuit of power.

Last November, my father and all my aunts and uncles, we visited his grave site and it was the first time the family had gone and returned to that place of grief and suffering in 37 years.

I realised even for myself, having never met him, I carried this weight of his suffering my whole lifetime and I had not given it over to the Lord.

And I want to invite us this moment just now, here and now, to bring to mind perhaps your own weighty suffering in your family, in your history.

And I want to ask you the question, will you do that? Will you take that moment just now, in your heart, bring it to mind?

[20:28] moment. The Psalms reveal a pattern of believers, a pattern for believers of not hiding this suffering that is heavy on your heart now, not hiding that suffering away, but bringing it forward, open-handed and saying, Lord, here I am.

I place this at the foot of the cross before you. And friends, I want us to hear this, this, this, that we are bringing forward, is God's weight.

I had to pray, Lord, I am handing this suffering of my grandfather and putting it at the foot of the cross.

because it is too much for me to carry. So let him take it. He has let us share a little bit of his heart, his own pain.

He knows it, but he also has a passion for healing and for justice. And God carries the weight of the world suffering more than we could ever understand.

[21:49] And so the next question sometimes goes is, are we asking the right question? What does God do in response to evil? You see, so often I see, I would like us to think about whether we can put down the why question and consider this from a different angle.

The why question does not take the view of the many specific actions in history of God in response to evil, particularly the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You see, we are completely at risk of ignoring the all powerful actions of God throughout his word when we ask, why does God allow evil and suffering rather than what does God do in response to evil?

evil? The question we need to consider is what does suffering or further evil, what does it do to you? What does it do to us? And what it almost instantly does is that it causes us to lose our hope in the true, living, and active God.

For this message, I spent some time reading this terrific book, Raging with Compassion, pastoral responses to the problem of evil by a man named John Swinton.

[23:15] I found it to be extremely helpful. And he says, quote, above all else, what evil does is to separate human beings from their primary source of hope, God.

The problem of evil is its propensity to tear human beings asunder from their identity and purpose as creatures made in the image of God and loved by God beyond all things.

beyond all things. Remember, friends, that it is, as we say in our series title, We Believe, the Apostles' Creed reminds us that we are not alone.

Yes, we live in the presence of evil and suffering, but this place belongs to God. God. This creation is sustained by him and will ultimately be redeemed by him.

A man who experienced severe suffering once said, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us, for the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

[24 : 30] For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

The Apostle Paul wrote this. You see, Paul reminds us that through Christ the creation is being redeemed. John Swinton adds, all suffering and death has been atoned for and indeed conquered in the sacrifice of Christ in spite of the continuing presence of evil and suffering.

So, my brothers and sisters, we can be assured that God sits in solidarity with us and his presence is with us in the midst of suffering.

We have this living and real hope of what is to come because of the risen Jesus. Jesus. And not only do we now have the joy of receiving the free gift of Jesus in the midst of our and our neighbours' suffering, but we can be assured that the Lord is at work making the world right.

He is at work today making the world right. Turning to perhaps one of the boldest statements in the Old Testament falls within Psalm 33, this morning's reading.

[26 : 02] Did you see it? In verse 5? The Lord loves righteousness and justice. The earth is full of his unfailing love. In the original context, the people hearing this knew all too well injustice and suffering.

It was their daily experience. And yet, this is a declaration that in a world where the Lord is almighty, all-powerful, he actively loves pursuing making things right.

You see, in the context of brokenness and evil actions of men and women in the world, we see God working today to bring all things in alignment with his perfect will.

And we also learn something about God's heart. We actually discover something about God's heart. Christopher Wright says again about Psalm 33 verse 5 revealing, The justice of God is the justice of the God who sees and hears the cry of the weak and oppressed, cares about them, and takes action on their behalf.

At IJM, over the last 22 years, we have seen God doing this. 50,000 people rescued from violence and slavery, millions more protected by strengthened justice systems, all through the power of God revealed in his children who see another kingdom, a kingdom of light, truth, and justice.

[27 : 46] But brothers and sisters, can I stress again this point? Answering the question, is God really almighty, is not an intellectual exercise.

the challenge is, how can we, as the community here, live faithfully despite the presence of evil?

How can we, as a community of believers from all nations, who gather in this place now called Chatswood, create a community within which the impacts of evil and suffering can be absorbed, resisted, and transformed as we await for Christ's return?

So, we could spend months in this topic, but we have a short time, and I don't want to, I don't, I don't want to, I don't want to, I suppose, go too quickly, too fast.

What we've explored today is a heavy subject, a heavy and weighty matter, but the following suggestions come from a place that I pray will build and restore and strengthen our hope, and most importantly, our love for the Lord.

[29 : 16] And I say the love, your love for the Lord, because in the last few years, in the joy of the ministry that I've been able to serve in at IJM, I can absolutely say that my love for the Lord has skyrocketed in the midst of daily readings of people being trafficked, forced labour, online sexual exploitation of children, and yet my love for the Lord and what he is doing, and what he has done, and what he will do, has grown, and grown, and grown.

But always in the community of spiritual formation. So in the midst of resisting evil, our ability to love God and continue finding ways to love God will be our primary mode of resistance.

In growing in love for God, we can move to the following Christian practices, and there's just a couple of suggestions that I've got here, and what I mean is how are our hearts being formed?

How are your hearts being transformed, modelled, and shaped by the Holy Spirit in the midst of this suffering? So again, borrowing from Swinton, he has a couple of practices which I think have been particularly helpful, and I've got a small table on the screen.

You may be able to read it, it's a bit small, hopefully you can see some of it. The first one is listening to silence. Have you ever been in the presence of someone suffering?

[30 : 45] And can you, you sit and listen? Can you be with them in the silence? Something that often goes unnoticed is the silence of Jesus, his experience on and leading up to the cross.

Have you noticed that in Mark's gospel? Go home today and read the last few chapters, because you see Jesus' ordeal lasted roughly six hours, and yet in that whole time, we only have seven sentences that we hear from him.

When he speaks, though, his words are powerful and compassionate. There's something in that silence, the weight of the suffering, and friends, we must learn the practice of listening to silences. Jesus. As we listen to the silence of Jesus, we recognize that the sufferer's experience of distance from God is not necessarily a mark of faithlessness.

Rather, it is an experience closely identified with the experience of Christ on the cross. And that's okay, to be in that place, to pray in that place.

[32 : 08] Speaking of prayer, the next point, lament. Not often practiced in the modern church, but throughout the Psalms, lament has a purpose and an end point beyond the simple expression of pain to God and saying, God is so painful, it's more than that.

It's actually an act of reconciliation with and a deeper love of God. As Christians, when we lament, we locate and interpret our sufferings within the narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Lament gives voice to suffering and provides a faithful language through which we can bring our pain before God. Look at Psalm 75, look at Psalm 79, look at Psalm 88, Psalm 13, it's all there, allowing us to speak to God out of our pain.

Point three, forgiveness. The German pastor Bonhoeffer explains that suffering is a mode of sharing in, that forgiveness is a mode of sharing in the suffering of Christ.

Forgiving sins is the Christian, is the Christ suffering required of his disciples. It is required of all Christians. All Christians are to forgive.

[33 : 29] And forgiveness is perhaps one of the most radical gifts God calls us to as we struggle to resist the evil and suffering around us. And I've seen this in the cases of IJM where a perpetrator of sexual violence to a child, where that person has been somehow miraculously transformed in the process of the trial and has sought forgiveness.

They're about to be sent to jail for 20 years. How do I even deal with that? It's too heavy, it's too hard. But yet, God works even in those most despised sometimes.

Point for number four, thoughtfulness. Friends, often reflect, let us pray, as Paul says in Romans 12, that we be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

In a world where thoughtlessness allows for so much evil and suffering, to carry on just unhindered, without thinking, no one even thinking, how can we allow the Holy Spirit to form and transform our values and our thoughts?

The phone is a classic experience of this. It just leads to thoughtlessness. forgiveness. The Word of God inspires the renewing of our minds. Point number five, the church is called to share everything we have with the stranger, because everything that we have is not our own.

[35 : 13] Hospitality. One of the greatest gifts, if you ever experience someone's hospitality and they give you hospitality, it is a gift from God. It's so amazing to experience that. And it's because it's not theirs, it's God's.

Everything is a gift. Life, creation, children, it's all a gift. And when we think of hospitality, we think of friendship. And you see, suffering, and particularly suffering that is evil, that is inspired by evil, separates us not only from God, but also from one another.

It creates distance from each other. So let us not allow evil to present us loving the stranger in our midst in the church, in Chatswood, and in the wider world.

So let me close this with a prayer, Psalm 33 and Psalm 10. And then I want us to move into a time of stillness as we approach God and think of what He has called us to do today together.

So would you pray with me? And then we're going to have a time of just some solitude for you to consider this, to bring it before the Lord, and then Nick's going to lead us.

[36 : 42] You, Lord, Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted. You encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror.

We wait in hope for the Lord. He is our help and our shield. in Him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in His holy name.

May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.