

# TWO QUESTIONS

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

July 26, 2009



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15210  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)



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## TWO QUESTIONS

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there (Psalm 139:7-8).*

When someone dies too young, or some other tragedy happens that seems so unfair, two questions cry out for an answer. The first is “Why? Why did this have to happen?” And the second question, especially for religious people, is “Where was God in all this?”

As for the first question, “Why?” the truth is that most of the time there are no good answers – at least not any that are very helpful. People only make things worse by trying to offer answers where none can be found.

At one level, of course, there are natural explanations. These bodies of ours are complicated, with trillions of cells and hundreds of processes, and for purely physical reasons they just break down. Things go wrong. When you consider the biological world we live in, with viruses and diseases and physical dangers of all kinds, people get sick sometimes, and suffer injuries – not because anyone did anything wrong, but just because nature is like that.

Natural explanations for tragedies may be true as far as they go, but they aren’t very helpful. When we’re grieving and cry out, “Why?” we’re not really looking for information. “Why?” is a cry of the heart, a wail of pain, and a lament about the senselessness of it all. Explanations from biology or medicine are beside the point. They may tell us *how* some awful thing happened; they can’t tell us *why*. They can’t make sense of our suffering.

So religious people are tempted to answer “Why?” with pop-theology explanations to give meaning to our grief. They say things like, “Well, God must have needed her in heaven.” But that just strikes most people as dumb. Why would God need my loved one in heaven more than I need her here? God has plenty of people in heaven, but I only had her! Or people say, “God sends us trials to test us, or to teach us things.” But if any human parent tried to teach his children by making them sick or killing their loved ones, we’d think he was a monster. What kind of heavenly Father does things like that?

Religious people often feel as though they have to defend God, and so they make up answers where they have no knowledge. But the result is to make God look bad, if only by the company he keeps. If that’s the best religious people can do, it’s enough to make a person in pain question whether faith really does have anything to offer.

The Bible says that too, by the way. The Bible has the world’s best story about bad religious advice. In the Old Testament Book of Job, Job is a good man who suffers horrible things. He loses all his possessions, then most of his family dies, and then his body is covered from head to toe with terrible sores. Job’s friends come to visit him, and when they see how awful his suffering is, they sit down beside him, and no one says a word for seven days. They just show up, and showing up is often the best thing we can do for a person in pain. Just be there, so he’s not alone.

In the beginning Job’s friends have the good sense to shut up, but after a while they can’t stand it anymore, and each in turn gives a speech trying to defend God or explain away Job’s predicament. By the time they’re through, it’s not only Job who is exasperated. God is angry too, that self-appointed spokesmen for the Almighty give such awful advice to God’s own people. The point of the story is, in part, that religious folk need to be quiet when we don’t know what to say. Bad advice is worse than no advice at all.

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At the end of Job's story, Job meets God face to face. God appears in a mighty whirlwind. Then Job's questions are not so much answered as dissolved. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you," Job says. In the presence of God, Job finds peace at last.

And that brings us to the second question people ask when awful things happen: "Where is God in all this?" Here, our faith really does have something to say. The answer to the question "Where is God?" is: God is everywhere. God is right here, no matter what, and knowing that makes all the difference.

Christianity's answer to the problem of pain is not that being faithful to God should protect us from suffering. It's understandable that people think that way. Lots of people make a deal with God in their minds, if only subconsciously. They say, "I'll show up in church and worship you, and even teach Sunday school or sing in the choir and serve on some committee. I'll do all that, and in return you'll keep me and the people I care about from suffering, right?" It's easy to see why people think that way, but it isn't true, is it? If you practice religion because you expect it to shield you from suffering, you might as well give it up right now. God offers no guarantees about what we'll experience in this world. If you read the Bible at all, and look at the lives of the faithful through the ages, you'll see that religious people suffer at least as much as everyone else. Sometimes they suffer more, even on account of their religion.

Christianity's answer to the question "Where is God?" is not that God should protect us from all suffering. If suffering causes us to lose faith, then our faith was in something other than the God of Jesus Christ.

What Christianity does say is that God is with us, no matter what. So the psalmist writes:

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If we get to heaven, God will be there, of course. When we experience a bit of heaven on earth, God is there too. But also when we go down to Sheol, to the place where it feels like death, God is there. When darkness falls, not only around us but within, in the dark night of the soul, God is there. "Even the darkness is not dark to you," the psalmist says, "... for darkness is as light to you." God sees, and God knows, and God is there, in the bright noon day and in the dead of night. There is no place we can go where God will not be.

But that's not all. God does not just stand by and sympathize, like a friend who cares but doesn't really know what we're going through. No, God understands our pain because God has suffered too. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the very Word of God, the one who was with God, and was God, and became flesh and blood just like us. Jesus knows what it is to suffer. He's felt abandoned by friends when he needed them most. He knows physical pain and suffering on a cross, an agonizing way to die. He even knows what it feels like when we think we've been abandoned by God. He cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As someone has said, the cross of Christ makes God credible.

So Christianity's answer to the question "Where is God?" is: God is here. God is here, not to prevent all our suffering, which is impossible in this world, but to be with us, and comfort us, and give us strength, as only one can who has gone through suffering himself.

But even that is not all. God not only stands by us in our suffering, God ultimately brings our pain to an end. The Christian message is that suffering, and even death, is not the last word. On the other side of Good Friday, there is Easter. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

So Jesus says to his disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus prepares a place for those who love God, and in that place there is no mourning or crying or pain any more, for all those things have passed away. In that place there is only the presence of God, which is love and joy and peace – and reunion with others who love God.

But of course, to get to the place that Jesus prepares, we have to pass through the door we call death. Everybody wants to get to heaven, but nobody wants to die. That's not how it works. Even for Jesus, the way to Easter passes through Good Friday. But if we really believe in Easter, if we believe in what's on the other side of that door, why should we be afraid to go through it? In the twinkling of an eye, we'll be transformed, the scripture says. Then the trials of this world will be over, and it will seem funny to us that we were ever afraid to come where our deepest desires, the longings of our heart, are satisfied.

There's a hint of all this in the story of Thomas after Easter. People call him "Doubting Thomas," but that's a bum rap. Thomas is the disciple who wasn't there when the risen Lord appeared to the others, and when they told him what happened, he said he would not believe until he could see for himself. That's just common sense. If your friends were telling you they'd seen a dead man walking and talking, you'd be skeptical too. But more than that, Thomas is reluctant to believe precisely because he believed so deeply before. When Jesus said it was time to go to Jerusalem, and all the other disciples tried to tell him that was a bad idea because the authorities were out to get him, it was Thomas who said, "If the master wants to go to Jerusalem, let's all go and die with him there." Like anyone else who's ever trusted and felt betrayed by the way things turned out, Thomas was afraid to trust again.

But see what happens. Jesus comes back again, and this time Thomas is with the others. "Come here, Tom," Jesus says. "Stick your finger in the holes of my hands, and feel the place in my side where the soldier stuck his spear. It's okay. See for yourself." So Thomas does, and then he cries out, "My Lord and my God!" Like Job, Thomas's doubt and fear and pain disappear in the presence of God. In the resurrection, apparently, even the scars we gather in this life turn out to be occasions for joy. "All's well that ends well," Shakespeare says, and Jesus says it too.

"So we do not lose heart," Paul tells the Corinthians. In the midst of his own suffering, Paul writes.

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen in temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

When we're in the midst of suffering, our afflictions feel neither slight nor momentary. They feel so heavy – in fact, the English word "sad" comes from a word meaning heavy – and it feels as though they will last forever.

But the pain will be over soon. In God's good time, we'll join Jesus in that place where all wounds are healed, and scars are only signs of perseverance. Whether the holes were in our hands or in our hearts, all will be healed and all will be well. And then we'll say with the psalmist once again, "I come to the end – I am still with you."

