

## Transcript 142

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Christians podcast. On this episode we are going to be answering a question that seems, every single time I shared Got Questions with someone, whether it's a group of people like at a church or a conference, or someone individually, they always ask this one question. And what's the question? The question is, what is the most difficult question to answer? So that's what we're going to be covering today. I've got Jeff, the administrator of [bibleref.com](http://bibleref.com), and Kevin, the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries.

Shea Houdmann

So we're going to tackle this question of what is the most difficult question that people ask, and the answer to that question is any question that starts out with why does God allow. And then after allow is typically some tragedy whether it's a natural disaster, whether it's a personal tragedy, whether it's a loved one who has died, whether it's just difficulties or suffering in life, the question of why does God allow suffering? Why does God allow, if you wanna go the theological or philosophical, which we're not really gonna do today. But why does God allow evil? That's a different episode. But for now we're going to be discussing why does, what are some principles we can take from God's word to help us to understand why God allows some of the things he does, how we can still trust him in the midst of not understanding, surely why he's allowing something, how even we can minister to others who are going through a difficult time. So Kevin, why don't you start us off? Maybe you could surprise me and answer the question of why does God allow suffering?

Kevin Stone

Well, that's a tall order Shea. They like you say this is a very difficult question. And because we all experience trials, we all experience trouble, and we we see things that happen and we just, I mean, that question just comes, why? Why would God allow this? Does he love us? I mean if he loves us, then why are we going through this thing? Is he powerful enough to stop this? Is he sovereign? And if so, then you know again, why doesn't he stop this? So these are very difficult questions as we face some very difficult situations sometimes, and there are no easy answers or no pat answers to this question. And sometimes we just have to, we just need to to mourn with those who mourn scripture says.

Kevin Stone

But there are some principles in scripture that we can look to and we can hang on to during these times of great difficulty. And they provide a measure of comfort and serve to remind us that God does care, that he is in control, He has a plan, and we can trust him in that. One of the principles that we see in Scripture is that God has bigger things that he's doing than just what we see in the troublesome situation. I think of the life of Joseph. He was hated by his brothers. You know, really, undeservedly and his brothers ended up conspiring to murder him. That was through a series of events softened into just selling him into slavery, but that's bad enough. And so he ends up in Egypt. Why does God allow that? Why does God allow Joseph to be mistreated like that and sold into slavery? And then once he's in Egypt, he is falsely accused of a crime and he is unjustly imprisoned. And so I mean he's just going down and down and down.

Kevin Stone

Why does God allow that? And there are some reasons that become apparent later. We find out later that God needed to have Joseph in Egypt because there was a bigger plan. God was doing something bigger than just what was happening in Joseph's life. And then Joseph needed to be in prison because he had to make contact with the King's cup bearer. All these things are working together for the good of God's people eventually. And eventually, then, against all odds, Joseph is lifted from prison to become the Prime Minister of Egypt. And all the pieces start falling into place as Joseph is in a position now, as the second in command in Egypt, to be preserving people from starvation during a very severe famine. Not only Egypt but the surrounding countries as well, including the people of Israel, his own family that came in and got food there in Egypt from Joseph. And everything fell into place eventually. The answers were a long time coming. For a long time it just looked like God was picking on Joseph, you know. Why me?

Kevin Stone

But Joseph understood when we get to Genesis Chapter 50 and his brothers were there and they came and they they bow down before him as the as the one who's in charge. And they they say we are your slaves. We we repent of all that we've done. But Joseph says to them, they're fearing retribution. Joseph says to them, don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, this saving of many lives. So then don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children. He reassured them and spoke kindly to them. So in Joseph's case, the answers were a long time in coming. He experienced great difficulty, but the answers were there. Eventually God revealed to Joseph some of the why of what had happened. And God had a bigger plan in store for Joseph. And it was a good plan in the end.

Jeff Laird

It's nice that when you get an answer, you feel like you have an answer, and one of the things we struggle with when tragedy happens is the idea that sometimes there just isn't going to be an answer that we're going to fully understand in this life. And honestly, even when we have those answers, it doesn't necessarily make things better. There's a lot of contemporary Christian music that has lyrics that expressed this. There's a song by Hillary Scott, Thy Will Be Done, that says I don't want to think I may never understand how this works, but I have to remember that you're God, I'm not. Jason Gray has a song where he says Reasons Don't Wipe Away Tears. You know, explaining why something is happening. You explained to Joseph, even if he was in the middle of his time in prison and you explained to Joseph why it was happening. He's still in prison. It doesn't take away the pain that people are experiencing. Mercy Me's Homesick says even if you showed me the reasons, I'd still be hurting the same because I'm here. I'm on earth, I'm not in eternity.

Jeff Laird

So part of what makes a question like this so difficult to answer is recognizing that one of the reasons people are asking is we're trying to get control and understanding over tragic circumstances. We're we're trying to come to grips with why something is happening. And and to some extent that's an effort to make it less painful. Make it less scary. Like you said, Kevin the Bible talks about the idea that sometimes we just need to weep with those who weep. Rejoice with the people who are rejoicing.

Jeff Laird

First off, we just have to acknowledge that we can't claim that we can just snap our fingers and give an immediate answer to why these things happen. Conspiracy theories are popular because people like to take complicated issues and try to boil them all down to just one thing. Here's the one single answer that completely explains everything about this. And real life isn't exactly like that. And a lot of tragedies that can happen that God allows can happen in that circumstance, but at the end of the day, you find yourself in a position of going where else do I go? What else am I supposed to do? Jesus preached a message where a lot of people left because they didn't like what he had to say. Jesus looks at his disciples and says, are you going to leave too? And Peter says where else are we going to go? You have the words of life. If I don't have a perspective that there is a God who is allowing things in this tiny little slice of my existence compared to my eternal existence for which he has purposes who promises he's going to make all things right and make all things good.

Jeff Laird

The alternative to that is that all these things really are utterly and totally meaningless, so we need to acknowledge that there is legitimate pain. The Bible we see this all the time with authors more or less accusing God of being insensitive. Psalm 44 has psalmist saying God wake up. What's the matter with you? Don't you care? We have Habakkuk saying, how many times do I have to pray about these things? And you're not going to do anything about it? Psalm 73, says I look around and I see wealthy, rich, evil people. Why do you let that happen?

Jeff Laird

And the result always comes back down to that idea that God is God, and we are not, and it's not satisfying. That's not meant to be an answer that people are supposed to go, oh, ok. Well, God is God. Now I feel better. That is not how this is meant to work. But we do have to understand that there are things that we're not always going to grasp, that we're not always going to fully understand.

Jeff Laird

And I want to insert a bit of a personal perspective into the conversation, because I know exactly how these conversations go. There's a tendency to think that what we are trying to do is to dismiss. That we're saying yes, your pain is just part of God's plan. Don't worry about it, it's your pain. It's it's part of God's plan. My mother died of brain cancer. She went from essentially completely healthy to gone in two months. And that's a recent experience for me and my family. So I can say as I'm discussing this that even if I haven't experienced the exact same thing that other people do, we get it. We understand that when tragedy happens and bad things go on, it is not something that you can just give a quick answer and it suddenly makes everything seem OK and seem good. There is real honest pain there. We can see from scripture that God can make good, that he can have reasons, but it helps in a sense to acknowledge that we can not, do not understand those things right here and right now.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, that's an excellent point. I really like the personal aspect of this. I mean, between the three of us, we've all experienced suffering, tragedy in life, different from each other, but we've all experienced it. We've all wondered OK, God, why have you allowed this particular thing? If for me, probably the biggest

one in my life was my father passing away from stomach cancer when I was 16 years old and I'd literally just become a Christian before it happened. And it resulted in some serious of me questioning the goodness of God. Now looking back here like wow, 30 years later, I mean, I have some speculations of why God allowed that to happen. And some of them make more sense than others. But ultimately I even now 30 years later, I don't know specifically why God allowed that, but what God eventually taught me through that, thankfully my youth pastor at the time, really became a father figure and walked me through it and helped me to understand that trusting God when you don't understand what he's doing or why he's allowing something is so important. Because there's so many things in this life that it seems like the more you walk with Christ, the more you grow as a Christian, the more you realize that you don't actually fully understand. So accepting the point that I'm not always gonna be able to understand God's will, God's plan, why he allows what He does, it's not just something we deal with when we're dealing with suffering or tragedy. It's something you have to deal with all the time. So learning to trust God when you don't understand in the sense it's even more important than trusting out when you do understand.

Shea Houdmann

God is infinite. God is eternal. God has a plan that goes far beyond what we can grasp. God has a plan that involves more than just us. That's another thing we need to remember is that similar to what Kevin was talking about with Joseph, Joseph was obviously as I would and sitting there in prison and wondering I'm sure he had some woe is me type of moments, but he's looking at it only from his perspective, not understanding that eventually who knows how many 10s of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people were saved by what God was orchestrating. But we tend to be so self focused that everything is about my suffering, not recognizing that God has other people he's working with too. And perhaps what I'm going with is going to eventually benefit far more people than it at this time harm.

Shea Houdmann

So, I hope for our audience, I hope you hear that look we're not approaching this from an academic level. We're not going to be able to give you an answer for what the reason you you may be going through what you're going through. But we're with you. We've all experienced suffering. We're all still wondering at some of them why God allowed it, but what we want to point you to is trusting God, trusting that God is good, that God is in control despite not understanding or even not agreeing with this plan. It's so important because it affects so much more in the Christian life than just tragedy and suffering.

Kevin Stone

So the answer to why is God allowing this bad thing to happen? The answers are not easy. We can't see God's end game in this, but there are some biblical principles and if I could share another biblical story that has really helped me through some things because it, John Chapter 11 we see that Jesus, Jesus cares. The questions come to him. You know why did, why did this happen? Why did Lazarus die? And it's not even just you know why did Lazarus die? But Lord, you weren't even here. We read in the first part of John chapter 11, that the sisters Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus. And then after he got word that Lazarus was sick, he waited two days before he even left. And in the meantime, Lazarus had died. So however long it took the message to get to Jesus and then he waits two days by the time he gets there, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days.

Kevin Stone

And there are questions waiting for him. Martha comes out and asks the question or or she makes the statement. I think there's a question implied, but the statement is Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And so of course, you know, we've seen we've seen Jesus heal all kinds of other people. But here was one that was your friend. Here was one that is described as somebody that you loved. And yet you didn't show. You missed the illness. You missed the the bedside meeting where he died. You missed the funeral. You missed the burial. But now you're here, so I guess that's good. But do you really care? If you did, how come you didn't come earlier? And then Mary comes out and asks the very same question which I find so interesting you or she says the very same thing as Martha did. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Kevin Stone

In Jesus response is in part to point to faith. He says to them, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes, though he die, yet shall he live. And then he asks the question to them, do you believe this? So he's pointing them to faith. He's pointing them to trust in Him. And then he shows that he cares. There are two places in this same chapter where it alludes to Jesus love for Lazarus. So that really wasn't in doubt. Jesus did love his friend Lazarus. And then we also read that he was deeply distressed in his spirit. And in that shortest verse of the Bible in verse 35, Jesus wept. He cared. That was not the reason why he delayed in his coming. That's not the reason why he did not heal Lazarus. There was a bigger plan. There was something else going on. And I think Jesus is pointing to faith. And of course we know the end of the story that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

Kevin Stone

And all through this we have the the encouragement to just trust in him. We know that he cares. We know that he has the power to heal and the power even to raise the dead. But seven times in that Chapter, 7 times the word believe or a related word believing is used. So over and over that's what we see in John Chapter 11, believe, believe, believe. Just trust him, even when you've got the questions, even when the pain is present, and the pain is unbearable and so real, and you're you're being uh, you're you're you're being put through the ringer, just keep on trusting. God is good. Jesus knows. Jesus cares and he has a plan that is going to be evident some time, maybe not even in this life. But someday and we we walk by faith, not by sight.

Jeff Laird

It's very difficult for us when we hear phrases like trust to to explain that in the context of the Bible we're not telling people you need to just set aside all of your doubts, and worries, and questions, and ignore them, and simply just blindly hope that everything's going to be OK. Scripture provides us with evidence that says that look here are all these times where people were asked to trust God and what he was doing. And here are the outcomes of what happened as a result of that trust. So we need to remember that the idea is not that God is just sitting up there doing nothing. And in a sense that's a little bit where Mary and Martha were coming from with Lazarus is why didn't you do anything? Why aren't you doing something? Some of the complaints that we talked about in the Old Testament? Why do I pray and you don't do anything? Why do I see these people who get away with this. Aren't you? Are you asleep? Are you even paying attention? It's natural for us to think that because we're not seeing the

outcome that we would expect that God is doing nothing. But we have to remember that even in these tragic circumstances, the Bible does explain to us that God is doing something for what goes on.

Jeff Laird

There's a passage in the New Testament, Second Thessalonians 2:6 and seven. That makes a reference to God restraining evil in a sense. We know that he only allowed Satan to do certain things to Job. We know Romans 13 talks about God establishing human government in part, or maybe only, to restrain evil. The point is that God does put limits on these things, so when when bad things happen and once again, nobody ever likes to be told it could be worse. That doesn't do anything to make anybody feel better. It doesn't solve anything. It doesn't fix anything. But we do have to remember that because we experience something doesn't mean that God's doing nothing.

Jeff Laird

I, I've used an analogy before about a box of sticks. If I was to have a group of people. I put a box in the middle of the table with sticks in it and say these are the sticks that I'm going to allow you guys to hit each other with. And somebody looks in and says ohh look and they pull out one and they say why would you do nothing to limit the damage we can do to each other. Look at this stick that's in this box. You've done nothing. This is the worst possible thing that can happen. And then I point off to the side, and I say yeah, but look at all the two by fours with nails in them that I didn't put in the box. You're right, the worst that can happen will always exist. But we shouldn't assume that the worst that God allows is the worst that God could have allowed. Scripture actually tells us the opposite, so we do need to remember that even in the middle of hard times, tragic circumstances, that God is restraining. And most importantly is that there is an eternal perspective to what we go through.

Jeff Laird

My mother was a Christian believer. She, as far as I can tell, didn't do nothing wrong to nobody. I, neither did anybody else in my family. We struggle with understanding what is the purpose? What is the meaning of this person at a relatively young age just suddenly going pow and being gone. Not having answers to those questions does not mean there is no answer. Not having full understanding to that doesn't mean that there's no hope. The pain is real, the the lack of understanding is hard. But it's like Peter said to Jesus, where else are we going to go? The the faith that I have in tragic circumstances is not saying ohh I know exactly what God's doing. It's to say I have seen enough of God's goodness in his word, in history, and in my life to know that even when I cannot fully understand, I have good reasons to trust. And I know, I know that in the end all of these things are going to be taken care of. All of these things are going to be made right. And when I look back a billion years into eternity, I'll have a much better understanding than I do now. So I'm not thinking to myself, I will never understand at all. I'm telling myself right now it's going to be difficult. So it's hard to answer the question of why tragedy happens, because a lot of times we just don't know yet. And we have to trust that God is going to reveal what His reasons are for allowing it in due time.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, I really like how you shared both the sticks illustration and also the fact that saying Oh, it could be worse. It's not comforting. I mean, it's a true statement in the vast majority, but it's not all that comforting. And maybe maybe to close, if each of the three of us could share something like some

practical advice for those who are seeking to comfort someone who is going through a difficult time because I've made mistakes in this area. I've made mistakes in person. I've made mistakes in answering questions for Got Questions and not being as compassionate as I should have or going too quickly to the theological answer instead of weeping with those who weep as we've mentioned several times.

Shea Houdmann

So since I have the mic, I'll go first here. One of the most common mistakes I see is attempting to figure it out for someone. And one of the ways is often done when someone is suffering you automatically assume this person must have done something evil. This person must have done something bad. Is this kind of what Job's three friends over and over and over again said, well clearly, God only punishes those who are suffering. You're suffering, therefore God must be punishing you. The we have the background so we know that's not the case. They didn't. So I can empathize with them going in that direction, but that was not what happening.

Shea Houdmann

Similarly, I can't remember the year, but a decade or so ago when there was a huge earthquake in Haiti, several prominent Christian teachers went the direction well, God is punishing Haiti for all the voodoo and witchcraft that takes place and the people of Haiti. It's like, well, that is something that God could punish a nation for but who are you to say that's the reason? What about these other earthquakes or tsunamis, or floods or whatever that happened in other areas where there's none of that? So we shouldn't always assume or we should never assume to know a specific reason for why God is allowing suffering when we don't actually have that information.

Shea Houdmann

And maybe, biblically speaking, example that comes to mind is in Luke chapter 13. So long story short, the tower of Siloam had actually fallen and when it fell it fell on some people killed numerous people. And so people are making the assumption while all these people who died must be being punished by God. Well Jesus response is, do you think that these Galileans were even worse sinners than the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no. But unless you repent you to all will perish. So here Jesus is pointing people to no, dislike the man who was born blind. This is not a punishment from God. These people were not, were sinners and the other people who were saying that were not hit by the tower, but I allow suffering. One of the reasons I allow it is to point people back to me. To help people take their eyes off the things of this world.

Shea Houdmann

And so for us to do exactly what the people in Jesus they were doing and assuming the people who died, they must have been evil. They must have done something wrong. That is a mistake that nowhere in Scripture is anyone, well now never wanna say nowhere because as soon as I do we'll get a response from saying no, what about this about this? But an example of Job and the example of this and numerous other examples, people go the route of this person suffering because they did something wrong and very often that is not the case that God has a greater and higher purpose for what he's allowing than simply punishing someone for sin. So when we're comforting, someone going that route, I don't know that I would ever advise it. Maybe it's something they can come up later in the conversation, but when a person suffering, when a person is wondering, when a person is having trust in God, you're

suffering because of something evil you've done. One, it's assuming, and two it very well could not be the case, so let's not go there.

Kevin Stone

I would say that if somebody's going through a difficult time to weep with those who weep, mourn with those who mourn as Scripture says. Validate their pain. It's real and allow them to grieve and grieve with them. And then just practically speaking, I would say try to ease some of their burden. Usually when people are going through a tragedy and working through the process of of grief, they feel overwhelmed sometimes by just simple mundane tasks, and try to find ways to to lift that burden. You know, bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the Law of Christ.

Jeff Laird

In my experience, I think that it's it's important to remind people that it's OK to not be OK, especially in the short term. And sometimes I'll I'll express that to people. They're surprised. I'm I'm the kind of person people typically think of as a stoic. Somebody who doesn't get overly dramatically emotional in the moment, but pain is real and experiences are real, and God's intent for us is not to say you need to process all these things instantly and immediately and have a perfect mature response and understanding to this right now right in this moment. Sometimes the only thing you can do in response to tragedy is just break down and and that's what's going to happen. Sometimes you're not going to react, especially rationally. Sometimes you're not going to say, and do, and think, every little thing just the right way. And God understands, and he knows. And he gets that. So I think it's important for us to express to people that God understands you better than you understand yourself. And when you are faced with tragedy and hard time and difficult circumstances and you don't react perfectly, it's going to be OK. That he understands where you're coming from and he understands why you're responding the way you are.

Jeff Laird

But I think it's important like both of you were saying to validate the experience that people have. Jason Grey's lyric and his song reasons don't wipe away tears. We we don't ever want to pretend that giving an explanation for why something might have happened is ever going to make it better. Acknowledge it, you're right. It hurts, it's terrible. That's why we long to be with the Lord. Better to be absent in the body and present with the Lord. That is part of what we're supposed to take away from these things. So it's OK to let people have the space to grieve, to make mistakes, to be human, to be weak, to be frail, and just support them. We don't need to be worrying about critiquing somebody or telling them don't worry about it or anything else like that in the short term, they just need a shoulder. They just need somebody to do exactly what Jesus did before he raised Lazarus, which was to weep. The creator of the universe is standing there about to resurrect somebody, and one of his first responses when he comes there is to express his emotions over what people are going through. And I think that's important for us to do as well.

Kevin Stone

Amen.

Shea Houdmann



Excellent points both of you. Kevin, I like your practical insights. Here are some things, little things you do for someone can make a big difference when they're dealing with a difficult time. And Jeff, just the reminder of God's weeps with us. It was never God's intent when he created the universe, it was never his desire for sin and evil to wreak the havoc that it has. God weeps at the suffering that we experience as well in the example of Jesus. So both very powerful reminders.

Shea Houdmann

If I were to give one more, just brief one, there's Romans 8:28 which says, for God works all things according to his purpose, for good according to those who are called according to his purpose. I know it's a terrible quote, probably a mishmash of multiple different translations, but people often use this verse like way too early in the grieving process. And that the person is just heard some terrible news, going through and then suffering. And oh God works all things together for good. It's a very true statement. And that should be something that eventually enters the conversation and eventually enters our thought process and helping us to trust God that realizing God will bring about good from this because his word promises that he will do so. But throwing that verse out right in the midst of suffering, especially early on, I would wait with that one as well, just as we've been talking about allowing people to mourn, allowing people to grieve, and letting them know that that is OK rather than OK you need to get over this and just trust that God's going to bring about good. Use Romans 8:28 a little later in the process. Don't need to drop that in your first, so to speak counseling session with someone who's going through tremendous grief.

Shea Houdmann

So this has been the Got Questions podcast on what is the most difficult question to answer? And 21 years, hundreds of thousands of questions, the most difficult question to answer is always why does God allow and then insert some sort of terrible event, terrible tragedy, terrible suffering, that this person is experiencing. We can't answer the question. God's word doesn't give us enough specificity to be able to answer the questions for individual people what they're dealing with in their lives. That we can give principles as we've tried to do of how you can continue to trust God, how you can mourn with those who mourn, weep with those who weep, and how you can encourage people in multiple ways and point them towards God and allow God to bring about the work in that person's heart and mind in his timing.

Shea Houdmann

Hope our conversation has been encouraging to you. This has been the Got Questions podcast on what is the most difficult question that we answer? Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.