

# 10 Hard Questions

*“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”*  
(1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)

*“be ready in season and out of season...”*  
(2 Timothy 4:2 ESV)

## **Why Would A Good God Allow Suffering?**

May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020

1 Peter 3:14-16

Rev. Paul Carter

### **Introduction:**

Well good morning church! It's good to be with you today. I'd love for you to open your Bibles now to 1 Peter 3:14-16. We're starting something new today. As many of you know, slowly but surely our world is coming back to life. Restrictions are being eased, businesses are beginning to open and soon groups will begin to gather again. We are looking forward to that day. We are looking forward to being together as a church, getting together as families and getting together as neighbours. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has been invited to multiple neighbourhood parties once this whole COVID19 thing is over. There is a hunger in our culture right now for social connection – and that's a good thing – and that's a tremendous opportunity for Gospel minded people.

According to the text we're going to look at today, the strategy for evangelism in the early church was pretty straightforward:

1. Live a good and godly life
2. Do your homework
3. Make the most of every opportunity God gives you

It's not rocket science.

Christians were supposed to live VISIBLY and MEASUREABLY better lives over the long haul. We did marriage different. We did sex different. We did race different. We did class different. We did money different. We did family different. We did attitude different. We did government different. We did charity different. We did babies different. We did death different – and over time, people noticed.

And in difficult times – people noticed FASTER.

And then the theory was, that when they noticed our quality, stability and wisdom over time, they would come to us with their questions, their disappointments and their longings.

And we would speak.

Provided of course, that we had done our homework.

And that's what this series is all about. This series has been conceived on the assumption that Christians have gained credibility during this COVID19 pandemic – and I think that is a safe assumption. Christians have been on the frontlines of this pandemic in this community in particular. They have been on the frontlines at the hospital. They have been on the front lines in government. And they have been on the frontlines in our neighbourhoods. We have heard over and over and over again how much people have appreciated this church in particular. We have heard it from the staff at the hospital when they received your gift of fruit baskets. We have heard it from the nursing homes when we drop off gifts for the workers or when we conduct window visits for the seniors. We have heard it from city officials who depend on our link in the social service chain. And I have it from friends, neighbours and strangers all across the city.

Christians – by and large – have conducted themselves VERY WELL over the course of this pandemic.

And that has earned us some space to speak.

Are you ready?

That's what this series is all about. When the street parties begin – and when the coffee shops are humming again - we want you to be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have in Christ. So hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 14 of 1 Peter 3:

**But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,<sup>15</sup> but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,<sup>16</sup> having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)**

Thanks be to God!

It is interesting to note that Peter grounded this counsel in the assumption of periodic suffering. He says:

**But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.**

We shouldn't SEEK suffering and we shouldn't manufacture suffering by acting stupidly or wickedly but when it comes, we should be quick to spot the opportunity that it represents. There is a blessing inside of it – for any with eyes to see – because suffering often DISTINGUISHES people of faith and invites curiosity among people of unfaith.

Why does the loss of a business or even the loss of a loved one seem to AFFECT one person less than another?

That question is going to be asked – and hopefully answered - in many neighbourhoods across this country.

Now, to be clear, Christians are AFFECTED by loss and suffering. Jesus WEPT at the funeral of his friend Lazarus – so Christians MOURN, Christians GRIEVE – but not without hope. It doesn't

UNDO us. Loss and suffering do not strip us down to the BONES – we BLEED and we BRUISE but we do not finally BREAK – why is that?

Peter tells us in verse 15. He says - do not FRET over various troubles, do not FEAR the powers or the agents behind those various troubles, rather:

**“in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy”**

The NIV is probably better here:

**But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. (1 Peter 3:15 NIV11)**

The Greek word there is *hagiasate* which is similar to the word we all know from the Lord’s Prayer translated as “**hallowed be** thy name”. It means to ascribe something as ULTIMATE and MAJESTIC. Peter is telling us to MAKE JESUS the biggest thing in our lives. Make him your PEARL OF GREAT PRICE. ESTEEM him as your highest goal and aspiration. Make him your Lord and your first love – because if you do that, then you will be able to live the rest of your life without fear.

Because nothing in this world can take that precious treasure from you.

The Apostle Paul said the same thing:

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,<sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38–39 ESV)

See, listen friends, if you love Jesus the most; if he is your pearl of great price, then no suffering or loss in this life can ever finally destabilize you. No calamity can completely destroy you. Your most important treasure is beyond the reach of earthly trials.

And that allows you not just to survive significant upheavals but to SEIZE the opportunities that are present within them.

And that's what Peter says next. With your treasure squared away – you can serve in the midst of the storm. So be prepared, he says, to:

“give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15 NIV11)

In a sense this entire series is an application of this verse. We've done our exegesis. Peter has said that every trouble represents a Gospel opportunity. If you come through it well, with your witness intact, you will be invited to speak. Now let's make sure that you have something true and something useful to say to everyone who asks.

In line with that assumption, we have arranged the topics for this series in the order that I imagine they might occur in real life conversations once these COVID19 restrictions are removed. I imagine that the conversation will begin with IMMEDIATE questions before moving on to foundational questions and then hopefully on to ultimate questions. But of course, things don't always go according to script. The goal however is for you to be prepared no matter which way the conversation goes. In each of these messages we will try and anticipate a question that might be asked by a typical Canadian neighbor who has just starting thinking about faith as a result of this pandemic.

I imagine that the first question you will be asked will be some version of this:

### **Why Would A Good God Allow So Much Suffering In This World?**

That is a very common question at the best of times because even in times of general health, peace and prosperity, mothers are still losing babies; other mothers are struggling to get pregnant. There is war, there is disease, there is poverty and systematic injustice. So even on the best day you can remember, many of your friends and neighbours were already asking this question, but as a result of all we've just gone through you can be certain that most of your neighbours are asking it now – and since the suffering we are thinking about is specific then it is probably wise to anticipate a more specific version of the question. Let's assume that in a few weeks' time, many of us listening to this service today are going to have the opportunity to answer the question:

## Why Would A Good God Allow A Global Pandemic Like COVID19?

As mentioned above, this method of evangelism begins with the questions that people are asking, but it does not assume that people are asking the right questions so the first thing you may need to do is redirect and I would suggest doing that in the following way. If someone asks you why a good God would allow a global pandemic like COVID19 I think it would be helpful if you asked them to clarify which good God they are referring to.

You see many people in our culture have a notion of God that is really just a weather worn version of a God they vaguely remember from Sunday School or perhaps one they've seen parodies of on TV. They know the God of "The Simpsons" or "7<sup>th</sup> Heaven" or heaven forbid, "God Befriended Me". They have a SENSE of God or a VISION of God that doesn't have room for a disaster like COVID19 – but their VISION OF GOD has no basis in reality – and so the first step in this conversation needs to be a step toward the GOD OF THE BIBLE.

If the Lord bless you with an opportunity like this, then I think the first thing you want to do is explain to your friend that:

### **1. The God of the Bible made all things very good**

The story of the Bible begins in a garden filled with everything needed for human beings to thrive and flourish. 7 times in Genesis chapter 1 God surveys the garden and declares that it is GOOD. On the 7<sup>th</sup> time he adds an adjective – he says that it is very good. That's a Bible way of saying that God made the world marvelously, gloriously and entirely GOOD.

There was no flaw, no lack and no oversight.

The world as God made it was GOOD.

And we were in charge!!

The Bible says that God made man and woman in his image and likeness and he gave them dominion over all things. So we were Kings and Queens over a good and glorious creation.

That was the design.

That was the intention.

But first we had to pass our probation.

God knew that the world would only work and continue to flourish if we lived and led according to his word. So he made a rule. One tiny, little commandment. And he said if we obeyed it then we would live with him and with one another, in all this beauty and goodness and glory – forevermore.

But as the story goes, we were not content with our original station and calling. We wanted to be LIKE GOD deciding right and wrong for ourselves. So we rebelled against God – and we broke the ONE COMMANDMENT. We severed our relationship with God believing that we could be gods and goddesses on our own.

And so God sent us out of the garden. We left peace, perfect and prosperity behind and we went out into a world that no longer recognized us as the SONS and DAUGHTERS of God that we are.

That is why the world is the way it is!

It has been infected by a virus called sin and it has been robbed of the leadership and governance that we were supposed to provide.

The Apostle Paul says:

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.<sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:22–23 ESV)

The world won't be restarted and renewed until a new group of leaders – a new humanity of loving and obeying sons and daughters has been redeemed and restored.

That's why things are the way they are in this world. That's why there are earthquakes, pandemics, death, disease, and despair.

God made the world very good – but sin brought the world under the curse.

And that is probably the second thing you need to help your friend understand about God.

## **2. The God of the Bible ordains suffering for a variety of purposes**

Suffering in this world is not simply due to the absence of human oversight. It is true that human beings were created and intended to exercise dominion – and it is true that creation groans in the absence of that oversight. But the situation in the world has to do with more than the absence of our leadership, it also has to do with something that the Bible calls “the curse”.

In Genesis 3 God spoke to the man and the woman before sending them out of the garden. In his interview with Adam he said:

“cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17–19 ESV)

Now notice that God did not curse Adam – he cursed the ground, that is he introduced a principle of resistance. Everything that Adam and Eve tried to do as autonomous creatures in rebellion against God **WOULD BE RESISTED** by nature itself.

The animals would fear us and in some cases want to eat us.

The ground would **FIGHT US** and yield its fruit begrudgingly.



Even our bodies would resist us. They would grow old, frail and feeble. Our bodies crumble and return to the dust.

And producing new life would be incredibly hard. God said to Eve:

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” (Genesis 3:16 ESV)

Basically everything we were created to do would become nearly impossible for us to do while we remained in rebellion against God.

Now – why in the world would God do that?

It’s important for us to notice that God did do that. God didn’t just report on that. He didn’t say: “Now look what you’ve done!! Life is going to be harder for you as a result of what you’ve done.”

No. That’s not what he said. He said:

“**I will** surely multiply your pain in childbearing” (Genesis 3:16 ESV)

I will DO IT.

It’s not just going to happen – I’m going to make it happen!

I’m going to frustrate, thwart and oppose every plan and ambition of mankind until they realize the absolute futility of trying to be human beings apart from the WORD and WILL of God.

That’s what the curse is.

A principle of resistance unleashed in the wilderness of our rebellion intended to DRIVE US HOME.

God basically says that he is going to poison every well in the desert of our rebellion.

We try and build a tower that reaches to the heavens – and God knocks it down.

We build a ship that cannot sink. And God sends an iceberg.

We build a civilization that is so safe and so prosperous and so peaceful that PARADISE ITSELF IS ALMOST FORGOTTEN – and God sends a virus called COVID19.

If your neighbor asks the question: How could a good God allow something like COVID19 you need to tell them about the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is a God who is convinced that our lives will never be truly human lives until we willingly love and submit to him. He knows that he IS GOOD – and he is the SOURCE OF GOOD and so he knows that all independent human pursuits of good will inevitably lead to inequality, violence, instability, collapse and despair because WE CANNOT BE GOOD without God.

So to SAVE US and to RESTORE us to that which is TRULY GOOD – God poisons the wells. He knocks down our towers. He shakes our foundations. He sends the winds and the waves. Not ultimately to destroy us – but to redeem us and to bring us home.

That is PRECISELY who God is.

“He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity.” (Job 36:15 ESV)

Thanks be to God!

The third thing your friends need to know is this:

### **3. The God of the Bible experienced suffering in the person of Jesus Christ**

God didn't merely poison the wells, he joined us in the desert. The Bible says that God took on flesh and dwelt among us. He experienced the frustrations and frailty of human life in a fallen

world. He hungered, he thirsted, he lost friends to death and disease, he experienced injustice, inequality, anger, hostility, family division, disappointment, loneliness, pain, humiliation, shame and despair.

He knew it all. Isaiah 53:3-5 says:

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:3–5 ESV)

Jesus joined us in the desert – shared in all our sufferings – and opened for us a way to go home.

That’s the Gospel!

The Gospel is the story about how God became a human being. That’s who Jesus is! Jesus is God in the flesh. He is truly God and truly man. And as truly man he passed the probation that we failed. In his earthly life he loved God perfectly and obeyed God entirely. He passed the test. And in his death on the cross he paid our debt. So with debt paid and probation passed – we can go home.

That’s why the veil in the temple was torn in two the moment that Jesus died on the cross.

There is now no barrier keeping you from the presence and the blessing of God. If you are in Christ then you are already a citizen of the coming Kingdom. You are an adopted child of God. Purchased by the blood of the Lamb.

If you identify with him in his death – then you will rise with him to eternal life. When Jesus returns, you will arise from the dust and be restored to the life and the glory you were created and intended to enjoy - thanks be to God!

And that leads finally to the last thing you need to be sure to explain to your neighbor on the other side of COVID19. You need to make sure that he or she knows that:

#### **4. The God of the Bible will put an end to suffering when he renews and restores all things**

Suffering is hard – and incomprehensible even – when you don’t know how the story ends. In *The Lord of the Rings* at a low point in the story, Sam tries to distract Frodo with suggestions of how future generations might recall their marvelous adventures. Frodo is amused by his efforts for a while but then he stops his friend and says: “We’re going on a bit too fast. You and I, Sam, are still stuck in the worst places of the story, and it is all too likely that some will say at this point, ‘Shut the book now, dad; we don’t want to read any more.’”<sup>1</sup>

Characters in the middle of a story often think their narrative without hope and without meaning. The meaning can only be understood when the story is finished and the entire tale viewed in reverse.

And that is what the Bible promises.

The Apostle Paul says that in Romans 8:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

The Bible says that if you love God and if you love a story that shows God to be good and wise and trustworthy in the end – then you will love this story. When you see it in reverse, from the perspective of eternity, you will love every difficulty, every sickness, every weakness, every loss, every pain, every disappointment, every persecution, every twist, every turn, every trial.

You will love it all.

You will love your story.

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* as cited by Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 204.

You will love what it says about God and you will love what it has done in you to save you and to fit you for eternity.

What the Apostle Paul says in PROSE, the Apostle John says in PICTURE in Revelation 21:1-4.  
He says:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1–4 ESV)

That is the climax of our story – and it will make all the hard parts and all the low parts MEANINGFUL and GLORIOUS in the end.

God knows how to restore what the locust has taken. He knows how to heal that which he has wounded. He is LORD of the OUTCOME and he is WITH US in the process.

Rebecca McLoughlin says fabulously here:

“From a Christian perspective, there is not only hope for a better end; there is intimacy now with the One whose resurrected hands still bear the scars of the nails that pinned him to his cross. Suffering is not an embarrassment to the Christian faith. It is the thread with which Christ’s name is stitched into our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

Thanks be to God!

Let’s pray together.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 205.

**N.B. I intend to have the prayer function almost as an extension of the message – but no part of it is to be displayed on the screen or as a slide. This is just to give Jody a sense of where I am heading. I will likely pray somewhat as follows:**

*“Our heavenly Father, I pray right now for every member of this church who will be serving as an ambassador of Jesus Christ in their neighbourhoods over the next few weeks. Lord you have shaken the foundations and people in this country are trembling. People are asking questions they haven’t asked before and Lord I pray that you would send your Spirit in a fresh and powerful way to anoint our lips and to embolden our steps that we would take the seed of the Gospel deeper and further into the heart of this city than it has ever been taken before. Holy Spirit DIG EARS for our friends and neighbours. Shake them free from the idols of their imagination and help them see and celebrate the GOD WHO IS THERE and who SPEAKS in his Word and through his Son. Help us Jesus to commend you as CHRIST AND LORD to our friends and neighbours. Defeat every argument raised against the knowledge of God in Christ. Train our hands for warfare in the battle for souls. Yet, help us do it in gentleness and with respect – we ask a lot today, Father, but we ask it now in Jesus’s name – amen.”*

Amen. Pastor Jody, will you come and lead us?