

# 404804-pzp-e37-percolating-on-faith-why-do-bad-things-happen...

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## SPEAKERS

Tony Chvala-Smith, Carla Long, Josh Mangelson, Charmaine Chvala-Smith

### **Josh Mangelson** 00:16

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts the Restoration offers for today's world. We aim to feature a variety of guests with roots in the Restoration tradition from Community of Christ and our friends from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The music has been provided by Ben Howington, You can find his music at [Mormonguitar.com](http://Mormonguitar.com).

### **Carla Long** 01:08

Welcome back everyone to our series Percolating on Faith. Today we have a bit of a special show for you. We had a question from a listener. And it's a really important question. But it's a really hard question, too. So, thank you listener for asking the question. But maybe could you try and make it a little easier next time? Here's the question: Why do bad things happen to good people? And how do we deal with answered and unanswered prayers? How do we reconcile an all-powerful God with the fact that victims of injustice and violence appear to have their prayer unanswered? So again, why do bad things happen to good people? And how do we deal with answered and unanswered prayers? How do we reconcile an all-powerful God with the fact that victims of injustice and violence appear to have their prayers unanswered? And I was thinking about this question a lot for the last week or so. And to be honest, I would imagine everyone probably wonders this at some point in their lives. No one, of course, has a perfect life. And when difficult things happen, sometimes it's hard to stop ourselves from saying, why God, why are you doing this to me? So, I'm sitting here with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith, and we are prepared, I think, to have a discussion about this. But before we get to answering the question, I think that there's some things that we need to do to maybe unpack that question. There's a lot of suppositions in there. There's a lot of smaller things in there that we could probably talk about. And Charmaine, I think you had some thoughts about how to maybe unpack the question into smaller bite sized pieces.

### **Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 03:01

Right. Actually, you know, when you look at it, there's at least three and maybe four questions in this question. And all of them are really worthy of their own podcasts, and probably their own book, or books, because there's a lot going on in each of them. But I want to start with just the first question, why do bad things happen to good people? And one of the things that I think is really important to look at first is that it is a humongous presupposition that is right there in simply how the question is formed. Why do bad things happen to good people? There is an assumption already in the question, that bad things should not happen to good people, and that somehow only good things should happen to good people. And we need to figure out where that's coming from, and kind of get a sense of why that presupposition is there, and why we maybe need to challenge that presupposition. So if we look scripturally in the Bible, in particular, we will see in the Old Testament that this is one of the theologies of suffering. Just one of them, though, that is there. And it's called the theology of retribution. Right, Tony?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 04:27

Yeah. It is found particularly in what are called the wisdom traditions, especially in Proverbs. And it has an analogue in the book of Deuteronomy, in the covenant tradition, where there's a kind of a theology of retribution there. In Deuteronomy, if you live by the covenant, if you follow the rules, God will bless you in the promised land. If you don't, the land will spew you out.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 04:51

So basically, the theology of retribution starts with the idea that if you do good, you will get good. If you do bad, you will get bad. And so if something bad is happening in someone's life, it therefore must mean that they have done something bad that is deserving of that. And this is one way of understanding God's action in the world in the Old Testament, but it's not the only one. And a really great place to see where this is being challenged is in the book of Job. And basically, so anyhow, but that's..., we could get off on that. So one of the realities about dealing with these questions is that they're going to take us down various trails. And these trails may or may not have answers at the end of them, but they will have other questions along the way, and hopefully some information that will help people be able to see what the landscape of these questions is. So that's one piece, is that that is a theology in the Old Testament, but not the only one. And so that is a strain that has come through into Christianity. And in North American, or maybe even more specifically, US culture, there is this cultural theology, that goes along with pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps, that if you work hard, you'll succeed. That is very much tied into this, and is the aspect of this presupposition that is kind of consumeristic. And that if you do all the right things, if you pray enough, if you go to church enough, then God is somehow obligated to make your life smooth and comfortable and easy. And though maybe that doesn't get said from the pulpit, it's still often what we grow up with, even how do we talk to our children about God? Well, if you do the right things, you will be blessed, right? And quite often, when we think about blessing here, we think about having enough or more than enough, being prosperous, and having comfort and security. And so that's a cultural aspect of that, that comes into play. And you can see that it's there, when Christians of whatever type despise the poor, and think they deserve what they're getting, or are okay with discarding people who are in prison, because they made bad choices, and therefore they have got what they deserved.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 07:32

Or when some religious figures say that a particular natural disaster is a divine judgment on that particular city or group of people. A thinking, by the way, which Jesus himself rejects in the gospels.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:45**

Exactly. And so those are some of the ways that this is still manifest in our culture today. And it's kind of integrated into a whole lot of Christian thought, and we sometimes don't know how to disentangle it. But really, probably the best antidote is to go to the New Testament and go to Jesus' own sayings. And if he were living from this theology, he would have not gone to the poorest of the poor, he would not have gone to the prostitutes, he would not have gone to the tax collectors to let them know that they were loved and had worth before God, because they already had their reward, in effect. Bad things were happening to them. Obviously, they had not kept the law properly or done something well. So I think that's probably our best place to keep reminding ourselves that God's promise to us is not that our lives are going to be easy and rich and comfortable and secure. I mean, those may be things that are in our lives, and we can be thankful for them. But to assume that because we know God or love God or go to church, that we should get that, that's when it becomes a problem, because then we start judging others and ourselves according to that theology.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 09:05**

So I guess we're trying to unpack the presuppositions from the question, at least one of the questions, the question about why bad things happen to good people. And that, by the way, is the name of a book by Rabbi Harold Kushner that was popular, I don't know, about 30 years ago. So that's how that title became a sort of commonplace for lots of folks. I'm going to give kind of a longer historical perspective on one of the presuppositions behind this whole issue. And by the way, in theology this is called the question of theodicy. So theodicy is a word that I think was invented by the German philosopher Leibniz, and this was in the 1700s. I'm going to come back to that, that's really important. The word theodicy comes from two Greek words: *theos*, which means God, *dikē*, which means justice or righteousness. So the idea is justifying God or belief in God in light of massive human suffering. In the 1700s, in the midst of a period called the enlightenment, when people began to think that humans could think their way out of everything, there was a massive, massive disaster called the Lisbon earthquake, that shook everybody. Literally. It was a seismic event in more than just the physical way. Catastrophic loss of life, people were trying to make sense of it and all of that. And so, theodicy comes into western languages as this attempt on the part of human beings to justify belief in an all-powerful and all-good and all-loving God in light of the experience of evil. And let me subdivide evil here. Usually, in this question, evil is divided into natural evil, like an earthquake, and moral evil, which is humanly caused suffering. So one of my theological guides, William Placher, in a lovely book called *The Domestication of Transcendence* charts out how in the 17th century, 1600s into the 1700s, right in that period there, there was a significant shift in theological thought in the Western world. Everybody - it didn't matter whether they were Catholic or Protestant - began to just assume that everything could be explained, that everything had a rational explanation, including God's ways of acting in the world. And they began to assume that God was one actor among many, and that therefore you should be able to explain, you should be able to solve a puzzle. If God is all-loving, and God is all-powerful, why do evils happen to people. And somehow this puzzle was humanly soluble. That assumption is really an assumption that the biblical tradition, both Old and New Testament, does not hold. And nor did Christian tradition up until that time assume that. The greatest theologians always started with the assumption, the basic

belief, that the essence of God is unknowable. And so what we can work from is the traces of God's presence in scripture and tradition and experience. But it was never assumed that somehow you should be able to come up with just a rational defense of God in the face of evil. What you lived with was mystery and paradox. And these weren't seen as cop-out words, these were seen as really big words. You lived with realities that you can't put together into any kind of solution. One reality is God's steadfastness, and patience, and love, and forgiveness, and faithfulness, attested in scripture and experienced by Christians throughout the ages. The other is the real experience of horrible things. And the idea that you should somehow be able to figure it out on a spreadsheet, or come up with a theorem that solved it all, was just not part of theology until the modern period. And that assumption then has continued ever since the 1700s. Whenever anybody asks the question: so how do you do this? How do you put these two things together? And often this question is asked by people who've already decided that this is reason enough for there not to be God. And they use it as the sort of gotcha question for those who do want to try and live in the light of belief in God's existence in spite of the reality of evil in the world. So that's another assumption that's built into the question itself, a long-standing three, almost 400-year tradition of people automatically assuming that we should be able to hold these things together. I mean, if you want to see how these things can't be held together, just read Paul's letter to the Romans, where he is aware of persecution and suffering that is unjust and unwarranted. And yet he steadfastly holds to God's faithfulness in spite of that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 14:09

In some ways, that's kind of a response to the third question, at least the first part of the third question, how do we reconcile an all-powerful God with the fact that victims of injustice and violence appear to have their prayers unanswered. It's kind of addressing at least the first part of that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 14:24

Yeah. And also, you know, part of the way it addresses that, if we just go a little step deeper with it, is that ever since the 1700s, people have assumed that they automatically knew what all-powerful means in relation to God, all-loving means in relation to God. We assume that it just means what we think it means and ...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 14:44

what our own experience of it might be.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 14:45

Right, right, when in fact, in the theological tradition before the 1700s it was assumed that we didn't fully understand what those terms meant in relation to God. We used them, we used them as markers, but not because we really understood what they meant.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 14:58

So do you think we should go back to the pre-1700s?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 15:01

Not at all! Because I totally like really good coffee. And I like penicillin, by the way. Electric lights are good too, air conditioning in Missouri is really nice as well.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:11**

And I say that jokingly, but in some ways I think that's where we are in the postmodern period, where we are right now, is letting God be more than what we can, in an empirical way, prove or decide or give an equation for. And I think there's more openness today, to let what it means that God is all-loving or all-powerful, have mystery about it, rather than it being a measurable thing that we can rationalize. So I think maybe we have reclaimed some of those things that were premodern age.

**Carla Long 15:51**

It sounds to me there might be a little bit of a lack of a vulnerability, or a lack of we don't want to say we don't understand it, because we have to understand everything. We have the internet to help us understand whatever question we have. And so not answering a question makes us seem like maybe we're not as smart as we think we are? Or like, how do we answer say, an atheist that has this question. How do we answer it? Saying "I don't know," or "I'm not sure" is no longer good enough. So maybe that's part of the thing, we just don't want to be vulnerable?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:28**

I really appreciate that, because the vulnerability comes on several fronts. And one of them is if we ask ourselves what are some of the greatest human needs or desires? I think we would pretty quickly - among other things - come to security and control. And both of those things mean that we want to believe we have control over our lives. And so this presupposition that if we do everything right, we will get good. Or that if we do things bad, we will get bad - though we usually just use that as a judgment thing of other people - we have the sense that then we can control what will be in our lives and what won't be in our lives. And that is one of the places where this spiritual vulnerability doesn't have any room. Because it's very easy, then, to think that we control God by what we do, what we think, what we say, which, again, is a formula, and doesn't allow for God's grace. It doesn't allow for the kingdom of God in our midst, changing who we are as people, and creating a different kind of environment. Where we aren't so much concerned about our own security, but we're concerned about what God wants for all of creation. And that a sense of control and security in our culture is so highly valued, whether it's in family relationships, whether it's financially, the whole idea of what our future will look like, we spend a lot of time and energy there. And so the fact that we would want to bend our religion, to help create the kind of security that we think we want, is a natural thing. But I think it's also a dangerous thing. Because then God is simply a little puppet, or a skid I remember from a senior high camp many years ago: God is this vending machine in the sky. And if we have enough faith, and we put it in the slot, then God is obligated to give us whatever we want: a KitKat, or a Snickers, or a date with a guy we really like. So there's a lot of things that can make God small. And sometimes even the questions we ask, or the things that we want in our lives, can make God functional in our wish list, rather than shaping us.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 18:58**

I mean, I think that's really, really helpful. Not only do we often assume that everything should be under our rational control. We could come back to something Charmaine said earlier: our economic assumptions get into this whole question, too, right? We, certainly in America, certainly in those countries that are heavily influenced by marketplace ideologies, we start to assume, to Charmaine's vending machine analogy, that God is this other agent that we relate to like we relate to the air

conditioning repairman who came to our house the other day, right? You call, you pay for getting a certain service. And when God does not conform to our economic assumptions that we should get what we paid for, then we're all troubled and bothered when in fact, a God who did act like that would not be the God that either the Bible or the Christian tradition really means by God. So I think it's this whole idea of we have to confess that we are afraid of being vulnerable, finite creatures. And we do everything we can to fight against being vulnerable and finite. And then we drag our theology behind us to try and support that, too.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:13**

I think that really brings us back to the idea of suffering, because I think there is probably for lots of us this little hope that there shouldn't have to be suffering. And yet, it is often in our moments of suffering, that we go the deepest, that we're willing to see the wider ways that God may be at work around us and within us, and the times in which we become more compassionate and connected to those around us, whether it's our suffering, or someone else's suffering. And if you just look at the physical realities in our lives - I always think about this when I think about suffering - that sometimes suffering is what's necessary for growth. And that may sound callous, but it's real. When I was a young adult, I knew a 16-year-old guy who had to be in bed for six months, because he was growing so fast. And his bones were fragile, and he had great pain as he grew. And it was nothing that could be stopped, you wouldn't want it to stop, he was actually growing, but there was inherent pain and suffering in the process. And I think that's kind of symbolic of all of us. I would never want to be a 12- or 13-year-old again. There was a lot of pain and suffering as I was trying to grow into someone with a bigger view of myself and others and the world. And that's often the place where deeper understanding happens. And it's sometimes a necessary thing. That's why I think that using the term in section 165:1d: "Undertake compassionate and just actions to abolish poverty and needless suffering. Pursue peace on and for the earth." I think that's why the needless part is so important there. Because suffering in and of itself, if we are willing to risk being in relationship, if we're willing to risk growing, it will be there, we'll be part of that. If we're willing to look at reality as it is, and not as we wish it was, there will be suffering, because we will open our hearts to those who live in a world where there are unjust systems that hurt people, and our willingness to feel that with them, and to not just feel it, but act on that, will cause some suffering for us, too.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 22:52**

And yet, I don't think I would for myself take what Charmaine is saying as some sort of what's called a meta explanation. That is, somehow the world is designed such that you have to suffer to grow. You have two realities that are side by side. There is human suffering. Sometimes it's little, sometimes it's massive, and it's Holocaust-like. And there's another reality alongside of that, which is that often human beings grow in, through, and in spite of that, and I'm not willing to put those two things together into a kind of calculus to say, well, therefore God made somebody get into a car wreck so that their child or their spouse would grow out of that. That's horrible and it's ridiculous. That growth happens and can happen out of suffering is a sign that there's something else at work here in the world. And I am simply not going to put that together into some sort of final explanation. I'm not willing to pretend that God somehow has a plan that must include that 6 million Jews are exterminated, or that somebody walks into a nightclub and starts shooting and murderers 50 people. That's not part of God's will or intent or plan. It is what it is. And it's evil. That human beings find grace to grow in spite of those things, is itself a



miracle. And without ever trying to bring those two things into some sort of causal relationship, we simply learn to live with trust in a God who is faithful, in spite of the nasty things that happened to us.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:32**

Yeah, I'm glad you took the next step because I wouldn't want to say that I think God makes us suffer in order to grow. But I'm saying that often that's where growth happens. And the other part of it, again back to suffering, is – and I think we forget this too often - is that Jesus never said if you follow me, you're not going to suffer. He never promises that. And all we have to do is look at his first disciples and see how their lives ended. And they did not have that assumption that if they follow Jesus, they were going to have good feelings, and everyone was going to like them, and they were going to be successful, and they were going to have a good retirement. They didn't get that far. They didn't make it that far. And so I think, again, looking to Jesus and his disciples is a good place to look to, as far as suffering goes. And Tony mentioned Paul earlier, where he talks about his weaknesses being the places where God's strength is shown, his prayer to be relieved of the thorn in his side. And God's saying, no, it's okay. It's okay. This is a place where you and I meet. And so I think that's a good counterbalance to the things in our culture, which want us to believe that we deserve only good and progress and comfort and success, because it reminds us that why we follow Jesus is not for those kinds of results. But it's, and this takes us back to the prayer question, why we follow Jesus, why we pray, is because this is what we do to grow in relationship with God. Prayer becomes then less about my wish list, my Amazon wish list. If people really love me, they will buy me these things that I want. If God really loves me, God will do these things that I want. It becomes less that, and more about what does it mean to simply spend time with God, for God's own sake of who God is, and of my desire and need to be reminded of who I am by being in God's presence. Prayer becomes then this time of communication as time of knowing ourselves better. Because we let God lovingly look at us and live from that. And talking mostly about contemplative kinds of prayer, where the goal is not so much to get anything, but simply to spend time with God. And out of that may come blessings. But in those kinds of prayer, that's not why you go there, is to get something, not even to get a good feeling. Because that is probably one of the economies in our culture that we don't really look at very much. And that is that we want good feelings, to be what we get from our religion or from our experience with God. And in reality, in prayer that is meant to be simply time with God, those homely feelings of compassionate hurt, of recognition of our distance from others and from God. Those things often, which we would consider not necessarily good feelings that we want to have, surface, and yet they are the places where self-understanding, and understanding and connectedness to creation and to God, really take place. So that's a whole other thing, and it will probably come up again. Our addiction to good feelings in our culture. And that's sometimes what we really want. But again, it's not what we necessarily will get, if we're following Jesus.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 28:41**

We've come back then to prayer, the prayer question. And it's very interesting if you look at the Lord's Prayer, which is the archetypal prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Nowhere in the Lord's Prayer does it say, and please give us an easy life where we don't suffer. In fact, as the Lord's prayer begins, it's about God, right? Our Abba, our father, the one who dwells in the heavens. And in Jesus' culture the heavens weren't far away. It was right around us. It was near. Let your name be sanctified. So it's first about God and God's nature. Let your reign come, let your reign commence. Let your will be done on

earth, as in heaven. In other words, Jesus was trying to teach his disciples to pray to a God who yearns to transform everything. And only later in the prayer do you get to: give us today our whatever we need for today, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses or our debts, however you want to translate it. And so I remember, about 10 or 12 years ago, there was this very popular book, on “The prayer of Jabez” from an obscure reference in the Hebrew Bible that became a kind of bestseller. And it was a book about capitalist prayer. God giving me more, more, more. I remember reading a commentary in a journal or magazine that we take saying, why has this prayer become more popular than the Lord's Prayer, which doesn't teach us to pray those things. And I thought that was just fantastic. So prayer (I'm just piggybacking on what Charmaine said), prayer is first and foremost about entering into communion with this other, who is not like us, but who became one of us, and who is present, in spite of the very worst things human beings have happened to do to them or do to each other, and teaching us to yearn for, and pray for, and thereby work for something, a different kind of world. So Jesus' prayer is a prayer about the coming of justice to the world. And that's not as glamorous as praying that you get more and more, and that nothing bad ever happened to you.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:58**

And as we're thinking about this, this morning, I remembered something in the gospels, that's kind of dealing with this question. And thankfully Tony is here, my Bible geek. In Luke 13, and I mean, this could take a whole session just to unpack, but it helps us recognize that Jesus is aware of these questions in his time as well, these very similar questions. And he doesn't give a simple answer, either. Not that I'm justifying that we don't have ultimate answers here. But let's see, it says in the beginning of Luke 13: “At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.” So he's kind of hitting them from both sides. He's saying: were they any worse than anybody else, than any of you listening? And he's not saying this, but it's like, well, it's obvious they weren't, you know?

**Carla Long 32:35**

Yes, Jesus is doing his own podcast now. With all of you listeners!

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:41**

Yeah! But unless any here, unless you're willing to turn again to God to repent, that could be the ending of all of us, any of you, It could be as meaningless as an accident happen to you. So he's kind of saying there's these two levels of reality, right? One, the relationship with God supersedes whether or not someone was killed in a tower falling down on people, or that Pilate did this gruesome act, that judging each other is not how we come to know what God is about. But that's a whole other level. I'm not saying it very well, but he's basically saying the repent part is turning back to God. And he's saying, regardless of what happens, how someone dies, or how someone is suffering, what really matters is, are you willing to have a different kind of relationship with God, then just one where you get security or assurance that others think you're spiritual?



**Carla Long** 33:53

And Charmaine, actually you just hit on something that I've been thinking about for a while now, while we've been talking. You know, we've already said that these questions are just enormous suppositions behind them. And I was thinking about the words good and bad, and how those are kind of loaded words. And who, you know, my first question in my mind was, who decides who's good and bad? And not only could this have the ability to separate us from God, but it's very easy to separate from other people, when we decide someone, say, is bad. We get to draw a line and say, if they're bad than I'm good, and I can stay. I can label them and they can be over there, but I can be comfortable in my goodness. So I was thinking, it kind of separates us from God, but these words separate us from other people and stop us from being in community with people.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 34:54

Wow, that's really good.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 34:55

And notice that we often automatically assume we know what those words mean, and that we know what they mean in relation to our relatedness to God. And we have to be careful not to assume that we always know what these concepts mean. Now, sure, the Holocaust, a murder, a mass murder, this is unmistakably evil. But we also have to be careful when we're working on the individual level. You know what, I hate needles. But you know what, shots are good for me. So we have to make some distinctions there. And I think moral evils, many of us can come to a kind of consensus on what massive moral evil looks like. When you start getting this down to the micro level of the individual, it becomes harder and harder. Surgery is painful, and leaves scars, and can be traumatic. And yet, is it evil, therefore? Or is it something that is a necessary prelude to a better, a higher good? So anyway, these terms are tricky to work with, I think.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 36:05

That's really helpful. Because there's what we think is good for us, too. You know, like bacon is obviously good for me, because it makes me smile.

**Carla Long** 36:18

It makes you feel good everywhere. Bacon is delicious!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 36:21

There's no argument from Carla on the bacon.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 36:23

However, bacon in my heart may not always think that that's a good thing. And you know, my heart may not think of bacon as being good. Yeah, there's all kinds of levels. I love that about if things are going good for me, then that must make me better than other people, and probably more complacent about the world and about my own self-awareness and awareness of God. But yeah, you know, you hear people talking about some of the traumatic times in their lives, that with help, sometimes from God, sometimes from others, these become transfiguring moments, when suddenly the value of their life or the value of something or someone takes on whole new dimensions, a whole new perspective.

And it becomes something that was very good, though in the moment it would have been judged as bad or a tragedy. And so it's partly what we let God do with things that makes them good or bad, I think.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 37:29**

In theology, there's a distinction between theoretical theodicy, that is, here's the puzzle, what's the theoretical resolution to it? And usually theoretical resolutions, I mean some of the contemporary ones that have become popular ones, which basically say, well, the only way to solve the puzzle is to say, God must not be all-powerful. Assuming of course, we already know what that means in relation to God, but God must not be able to do everything that we think a good God should do. The problem with the theoretical theodicies is that they don't necessarily help the sufferers all that much. I mean, if I go into a hospital emergency room, and I have before, to be there with a family in the midst of what is going to become a tragedy, the last thing, the very last thing they need, is a theoretical account of how God relates to this evil that has happened to their loved one. What they need, mostly, is me to be with them. They need prayer, they need me to be there, to stand with and by them, and to see them through, right? And so there's another type of theodicy called practical theodicy, and there are different theologians and ethicists who've tried to argue about what these look like. For me personally, my practical theodicy starts with the cross of Christ. This takes us back to, you know, our last podcast where we had done a little bit with atonement. And someone who's been very influential for me here is the German theologian Juergen Moltmann. He's in his 80s now, he's a prolific theological writer, he was a teenager serving in the German army in World War II. Some miserable horrible things. Anyway, his life story is worth reading in and of itself. But you know, from him I have learned the importance of understanding God as the crucified God. That is, Christ's cross is not just something that happened to Jesus, it's something that happens to God, and that God remains faithful in and through the suffering and death of Christ is a sign that God is present and there with us in spite of whatever massive evil or suffering we face. God is there, God is sharing it with us, and has not abandoned us or left us to some kind of simple, blind faith. To me that gives me the theological and practical ability to stand with people. And this whole question of suffering and evil to me is moot if it doesn't end up with the church feeling called to stand with people who are suffering, to be there for them, with them, in the midst of trauma. That's where it really matters the most how we think about these issues. And for me, Christ crucified, who is God, the Son, suffering with us, for us, among us, that to me is the place I go to in order to face the miseries of life and the world. It gives me courage, also, knowing what I know about Jesus, and the kingdom of God that Jesus preached. It also makes me want to create a different kind of world. A world in which there is no needless suffering. That's where I would want any of these discussions to come out.

**Carla Long 40:55**

And that goes right along with the section that Charmaine read, section 165, our newest in the Doctrine and Covenants, 1d: "Undertake compassionate and just actions to abolish poverty and end needless suffering." So it sounds like, Tony, what you're saying is these questions are important if they lead us to a place where we abolish poverty and end suffering in the world. Is that what you're saying?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 41:18**

You know I don't know if you know the name Sir or St. Thomas Moore from the 1500s, a famous Catholic humanist, who was executed by Henry VIII. Thomas Moore is supposed to have said this as a

prayer. It says: “the things we pray for, oh, Lord, give us the grace to labor for.” And so to pray for the Kingdom to come is an invitation to ask God for grace to help make the kingdom come, and to pray for the suffering is an invitation to let God help us be active in ending suffering in whatever sphere of life we live in.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:58**

So these are prayers that change us rather than reward us, maybe.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 42:02**

That's nicely said! Prayers that change us rather than reward us.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:05**

All the issues around prayer, wow! That's a... I was going to say a minefield, but actually, I think it's not dangerous. But it's full of unexpected turns, I think. And I'm not sure if we should even get started on that one today, but I think, again, the idea is, prayer is a place where we let God lead us. I'm not sure how old I was when I started realizing that when I prayed about relationships, it became harder and harder to pray that God will smite somebody who I didn't like, who I felt had hurt me once. Just saying it out loud, was like, Oh wait, no, that doesn't sound right, I don't think that's right somehow. And so even in those ways, honestly praying to God about our feelings and where we are, often (in the praying) teaches us and brings us into a different kind of alignment with God and with ourselves. And so I don't know if there are wrong ways to pray. But I think any time we spend in praying to God is time well spent, because it will be a teaching place, it will be a learning place for us. And it's often in those indescribable exchanges with God, that we, at some more intuitive level, come to know who God is, and how God sees us and others. So I think no prayer is wasted, even the ones that don't seem to have answers to them, or at least the answers we wanted. And that's probably something we need to learn to do, is not only pray to God for the things that we need, and we're encouraged to do that, you know, throughout our history, but also in scripture. But to see what we learned about things as we pray for them or about them. How valuable are they really? And it's often a progression. I remember as a child praying for some things that I got, and that can be a trap too, because then it's like, Oh, alright then, I must have done something right! Because I got what I want now. Let me just figure out if I can do that again and again, and again and again. But I think God meets us where we are, as far as prayer, and about building that relationship. And so sometimes as the spiritual writers from hundreds of years ago say, quite often at the beginning of our relationship with God we are granted those things that we want, or think we want, or need. But then as we mature in our relationship with God, God is not likely to keep doing that. Because then it narrows what this relationship can be. And it will get stuck in that part of the gimme, gimme prayer. Gimme, gimme God! And God wants to expand how we know God and how we interact in the world. And so many of the spiritual writers will say, there will be times when you won't even know if you're being heard, and you're certainly not getting what you think you want. But that this, too, is a place where we are learning how to pray, how to do what we do, for love of God, not for love of self and what I can get from it. And that's a really crucial place to get to, if we want to keep growing in our relationship with God, where it's not about what I get, but it's about who God is.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 46:15**

That kind of takes me back to Paul, once again, as many things do.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 46:21

You can make anything remind you of Paul!

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 46:24

Yeah, you know, I'm sort of that way. But you know, in Romans 8, Paul says, "we do not know how to pray as we ought to pray, but the Spirit helps us in our weakness." And there have been times in my life, when in prayer I basically said, God, I have no idea what I'm about to ask you for, or what guidance I may need here, so may the Spirit interpret to you and to me what I really need in spite of what I'm about to pray? And as I look back on times in my life, when there were long periods of unanswered prayer, the seeming lack of an answer at the time was paving the way for a different kind of answer that I couldn't have expected later. Who's that spiritual director, Charmaine? Margaret Gunther! Somewhere she says something like "the silence of God demands our discipline," right? In other words, that in those periods of time when we seem to have no answers, and prayer seems to be just this talking to yourself, essentially it can become a time in which we learn to practice discipline, listening. And that God is really kind of coaxing us to a deeper relationship with God. I both like that, and don't like that at the same time. But anyway, I found that a helpful way to look at the issue of unanswered prayer.

**Carla Long** 47:48

Well, we're coming to the end and close of our time together. And I'm not sure if we've answered these questions, but I don't know if there is an answer to these questions. Perhaps, all we've done for you, dear listeners, is given you a different way to think about it. I certainly have been given a different way to think about questions like this. Tony, Charmaine, are there any closing thoughts that you have, and that you want to say about this question?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 48:17

I mean, we've been pretty wide-ranging here. And there have been several times, as each of us has been talking, that it's like, Oh, and there's another question that needs to be asked! Which I haven't verbalized, because it's like, oh, no, not more to throw into the mix. But I think I would see this as an invitation to articulate some of the other questions that are related to all of this. So to our listeners, to some extent, feel free to do that! Either for yourself, or for us, to keep articulating the questions that keep revolving in this whole arena of who is God, and how does God act and respond to our needs and our perceived wants, and our suffering? So I think there's a whole bunch of relevant questions that could come out of these questions and the different places we've explored.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 49:23

Yeah, I like that. I mean, theology is faith asking questions. So keep asking questions. I guess the only thing I would add to that is, don't let the questions keep one from praying, from being in community, from seeking God even when God seems absent, or even when it hurts really bad.

**Carla Long** 49:44

Well, there you go. Thank you. Thank you, Tony and Charmaine, for even having the vulnerability to discuss these things. This is not an easy question, even for brilliant people like you two, so thank you for discussing with us. And for thinking about what suffering means in the world. What good and bad

means. And why in the world do bad things happen to good people. Thank you so much for joining us, and we'll be talking to you soon!

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 50:15

Always good to be with you.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 50:17

Thanks bye-bye.

**Josh Mangelson** 50:44

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**Carla Long** 51:31

Hi, Josh, thank you so much for taking that first part out.