‘Why God?’ It is just about the oldest question in the book. Why all the diseases? Why all the poverty and suffering? Why all the family and interpersonal dysfunction? Why all the natural disasters with the fall-out that often effects tens of thousands, if not millions, as in the case of last year’s devastating tsunami in Japan, or the horrific earthquake in Haiti the year before. Or what about the tornados in Joplin, MO and Tuscaloosa, AL of last year and the forest-fires in Colorado, but a month ago? Not to mention Friday morning’s senseless tragedy in Aurora, CO.

Last Friday, just before driving down to CHIC early the following morning, I did a graveside memorial service for a young woman that I had never known. But through a connection with our Muskegon Forest Park Covenant Church, I was asked to do the service, it being on this side of the state. The woman who passed away was only 35 yrs old, leaving behind a husband and three sons. She had been diagnosed at age 6 with a very rare disease called Recurrent Respiratory Papilloma, which in the course of her remaining 30 years resulted in roughly 150 operations or surgical procedures.

It was in response to situations like these—and so many others— that the video curriculum was prepared, the teaser of which we just saw. “WHY GOD? When Personal Tragedy Doesn’t Make Sense.”

Obviously, the volume and intensity of the question is ratcheted up several notches when the Trouble Comes Knocking at our own door, or for those we love. And usually we don’t have to go very far to hear that unwanted “knock, knock, knock.” It was exactly five years ago now, shortly after arriving here in Michigan that I received the late night phone call from my brother that got me out of bed telling me that the son of my closest friend growing up in my church back home in CA had been killed in an auto accident. Why God? For 20 years now my nephew has suffered the debilitating effects of Muscular Dystrophy. Why God? Mary Lynn just came back last week from helping her aging and ailing parents—godly, godly people who served the Lord faithfully as missionaries out in Congo for 40 years! But the effects of advancing Parkinson’s Disease are taking its toll on Gordon, as well as Geneva, his principle care-giver wife, whose energies are waning. Why God? And I highly suspect that practically to a person, we each one would have our own stories to share, our own basic question to ask—WHY GOD? And that is why inevitably, this topic of Trials & Tribulations comes up virtually every year when we do a “You Asked For It” sermon series such as we are in the midst of this summer.

A couple of brief disclaimers as we begin-- Anything we say in 20 or 25 minutes today is only going to be touching the tip of the iceberg. We are NOT claiming to be comprehensive in any way—to do so would be preposterous. And secondly, while we will be addressing solidly biblical principles, we can never go a full 360 scriptural degrees on an issue. We will indeed look from many angles on God’s plans and purposes for us amidst our sufferings, but to be thorough
with high definition, it just might take a 360 point sermon, which I don’t think any of us are quite ready for this morning! ["Amen?"]

As each person encounters suffering, trials & tribulations in their own unique set of circumstances, it is like the story of the four blind men who were each asked to describe what an elephant was like. The first grabbing on to the tail, said, “An elephant is very much like a rope.” As the second stroked his hand across the massive side of the beast, he said, “an elephant is very much like a wall.” Trying to hang on to the wiggling trunk, the third replied that it was kind of like a snake. The fourth with his arms fully embracing one of the sturdy legs of the animal was sure an elephant could best be described as being like a tree trunk. Had there been a fifth man on the tusk, an elephant would have been very smooth and polished, finished and refined for some noble purpose, no doubt. Such are our experiences with pain, suffering and trials. While there are tendencies and general patterns, it is rarely the same for any two people. But hopefully—and PRAYERFULLY—ALL of these thoughts taken together will shed some light on our path and help us to get a better handle on God’s perspective on our human sufferings.

A Short Biblical History of Trials & Tribulations
You do not have to go very far into the biblical story before we begin to see a recurrent pattern in Scripture of people suffering trials, pain and tribulations. Ask some our kids and adults who were at CHIC about the “Creation Experience” that they attended one morning in Knoxville and their white wrist band with the Hebrew word TOV meaning GOOD. But into God’s good and indeed, perfect creation enters SIN with the Fall in Genesis 3. Already in chapter 4 then, we find Cain luring his brother Abel out into the field, only to attack and kill him! At the end of Genesis, there is a much longer narrative on the life of Joseph who suffers jealousy on the part of his 11 other older brothers, prompting him to be sold into slavery and carried away to a far foreign land. And if that weren’t enough, he is there falsely accused and thrown into prison to languish. Now there are certainly some lessons to be learned that we will come back to shortly, as we see God classically turning something that looked so bad into something of ultimate good!

There is probably no name more synonymously associated with suffering than that of Job, whose beginning story of woe and anguish we heard read earlier. Many biblical scholars believe that the actual story of Job predates the writing of the five books of Moses, which is to say, since the dawn of time and the biblical era, people have been wrestling with this dilemma and the question as to “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People,” as Rabbi Kushner has pondered with his well-known book in our own generation. And even our Lord, for all the miracles and good he did, was supremely known in prophetic word as “The Suffering Servant.” If you haven’t read Isaiah 53 before, or if it has been a while, go back and read what the prophet clearly saw hundreds of years before Jesus was even born, that the Christ would be “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief… despised and rejected.” All four Gospels go on to explain in far greater detail than ANY other account the passion of our Lord in his journey to the cross.
Our New Testament reading this morning was from 1 Peter. Peter, as the leader of the Twelve Apostles, was speaking for the entire Early Church when he wrote, “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to SUFFER grief in all kinds of TRIALS.” In fact, in the book of 1 Peter, only five chapters long, the word suffer in its various forms is used 18 times, so is clearly a dominate theme of his whole epistle. Earlier this month many of us finished reading through the entire New Testament in the course of the last five months with the final book of the Bible, Revelation. Amidst the glorious images of heaven therein contained, I was again struck by how much suffering God’s people invariably had to go through to get there. Chapter 7 is just one of many examples where the white-robed saints had to pass through “the great tribulation.” The point of this very quick race through the Bible and its various main sections is that the theme of suffering or Trials & Tribulations is one that runs through the ENTIRE Bible! It is the proverbial ELEPHANT in the Scriptures, each one of God’s people touching it in their own way. But again, this is OUR OWN personal story with pain and suffering, as well. So not surprisingly-- but thankfully-- God speaks generously to this topic that touches us so acutely.

I think it is helpful for us to consider even briefly The Origins of Our Trials & Tribulations as we see reflected in Scripture, for these various sources go a long way to answering the WHY question.

1-Probably the first and broadest cause for our Trials & Tribulations is simply that we live in a fallen world, the result of sin having entered the world. Paul in Romans 8 says, “that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” So the Fall has effected the entire created order. As you look at the calamities of Job that we read about in chapter one of the epic narrative, two of the four tragedies that befall him come from the natural order. The first is called the fire of God—probably, lightning—and the second, a mighty wind, quite likely a tornado. Even with our modern science, knowing far more then Job about when and where and why these natural disasters strike, human beings still build cities along the flood plain of great rivers like the Mississippi, we still construct expensive homes up the mountain canyons of Colorado or on the San Andreas fault in California. People still want to live on beach front property in Florida, hurricane threat or not, and we will still build nuclear reactors in precarious seismic zones. Regrettably, many diseases we would also say are a result of the Fall.

2-Others of our Trials & Tribulations are simply caused by evil people. That would be the case in the other two scenarios we read about in Job. In verse 15, The Sabeans attacked and carried off Job’s livestock, putting to death his servants. A few verses later, it is the ancient Chaldeans who are the raiding party. Man’s inhumanity to man being the source of so much suffering. And since we have many contemporary Chaldeans in our communities today, let the record be clear, that my Scandinavian Viking forebears probably set the bar as high—or as low—as it can go when it comes to marauding and pillaging! Both violent crime and injury and death by way of the evil of driving drunk would fit here, as well. Is the ‘blame’ then to be put on God, or is that on us as human beings?
3-There are also Spiritual Battles that are going on, of which we may have just a vague notion. Paul in his longer treatise in Ephesians 6 on Spiritual Warfare and the Armor of God, says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 6:12) I am not one who is quick to identify a demon hiding in every corner of the house. But neither am I naïve enough in my modern intellectual brilliance to dismiss the reality of the cosmic battle that is being played out around us, of which Scripture clearly teaches. In fact, the last night of CHIC there was a very clear manifestation of this spiritual battle that several of us on the Prayer Team witnessed, Christ emerging victorious in one young man’s life.

4-Some of our suffering actually comes about BECAUSE we are followers of Christ. Especially as his earthly ministry draws to an end, Jesus often taught his disciples that they would be persecuted and even put to death BECAUSE they are his disciples. (Matt. 24:9) The imprisonment of house church members in China, the death of missionary Jim Elliot and his colleagues in Ecuador, the persecution of Christians under oppressive regimes in the Middle East, worshippers in churches in Nigeria and Pakistan where terrorist bombers detonate themselves are all part of the Trials & Tribulations in our own day that come BECAUSE we are followers of Christ.

5-And finally—though again, this list is clearly NOT exhaustive—some of our Trials & Tribulations are certainly partially self-inflicted-- by things we knowingly put in our bodies that are NOT good for us, by things we do in youthful or macho moments of grandeur and seeming invincibility or other vanities that are no respecter of gender that put our bodies at risk.

We may or may not be able to identify the particular source of our Trials & Tribulations. For some, it is helpful to try and understand the WHY question. But the more important question with which we want to finish this morning is then, How Should We Face Our Trials & Tribulations? And certainly, God has not left us without a witness in the midst of our sufferings. Here are a few ways we can face such hardships, and there are, again, more that can be added from Scripture’s storehouse.

1) Consider them normal, to be expected! Ours is perhaps the first generation and / or culture that has seen comfort and prosperity as our birthright. And certainly the Health & Wealth Gospel that has been propagated in some Christian circles has not at all helped the matter. Without a doubt, God promises BLESSING. He promises His presence, his grace, his love, his care, but it is a mis-reading of Scripture, or a choosing not to read all of the verses, to then translate that into a life free from pain or sorrow or hardship. Other generations have known full-well that life is hard—for Christians and non-Christians alike. And even today, brothers and sisters in Christ in places like Congo RARELY become disillusioned or question God in the midst of sufferings.

To the CONTRARY, that is where they find solace and strength in the Lord. That is where they find God to be loving and merciful, in stark contrast to this broken world. Paul writes in 1
Corinthians that there is “No temptation…except what is common to man.” (10:13) Put another way, trials and tribulations are common to ALL of our human experience. So REJOICE in God’s blessings in the good times! THANK him from a deep heart of gratitude. But do NOT be surprise when struggles come, or consider it something out of the ordinary.

2) **Root yourself in God’s Word!** And this is something that we need to be doing PRO-ACTIVELY, ahead of time, not just when we hear the knock on the door, or when the phone rings. You don’t say, “Oh, I have a final exam tomorrow. I think I will study for it,” when you haven’t cracked a book all semester. You don’t say, “Oh, I have a dental appt. tomorrow. I better floss my teeth,” when you haven’t had a tooth brush in your mouth since you last six-month check up. Likewise, facing our trials & tribulations means that we are already ‘studied up’ when the time comes. When temptation came to Jesus after 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, he was ready for Satan’s attacks and each time when confronted with evil, responded with the Truth of Holy Scriptures, written on the white board of his heart.

When troubles come, know that there are places like Psalm 34 to go to, where with David, we can say, “The righteous cry out and the Lord hears them; he DELIVERS them from all their TROUBLES. The lord is close to the BROKENHEARTED and saves those who are CRUSHED in spirit. A righteous man may have many TROUBLES, but the Lord DELIVERS him from them all.” (Psalm 34: 17-19)

3) **Fix your eyes on Jesus!** The writer of the book of Hebrews, after considering the great heroes of FAITH in chapter 11, some who “were tortured..some [who] faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison…” (Hebrews 11:35, 36), gives us this summary advice. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the JOY set before him endured the CROSS, scorning its SHAME…so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Heb.12:2,3) Last month NIK WALLENDA accomplished an amazing feat in walking across a cable, only three pennies wide, suspended above Niagara Falls. While I would NOT recommend our kids trying this at home, the death-defying feat was full of lessons and metaphors for our on walk of faith. In the middle of his walk, he was battered by the churning mist of the roaring falls; sight and sound were all but drowned out--An apt comparison to Jesus as he endured the jeers of the mocking crowd as he ascended Golgotha’s mountain, as the spikes were pounded into his hands. Maybe for you, too, in the midst of your tribulations, it is as if all sight and sound are blocked out.

But Wallenda was wired for sound for his historic walk, so he could hear the re-assuring words of his father calmly saying, “You’re doing great,” and “Keep a steady pace.” Can you hear your heavenly Father’s voice speaking words of hope and encouragement in your own trials? Wallenda was NOT focused on the perils of the waters below, but on what awaited him on the other side. And the further he progressed beyond the midpoint, the more he could hear the affirming cheers of his supporters on the other side. We can focus on the problems to the point that all else is drowned out. Or we can focus on Jesus—fixing our eyes on him—knowing there is JOY in him, and with him, on the other side.
4) And finally, Consider God’s Purposes and Plans in your own trials. Coming back to Joseph, sold into slavery and unjustly imprisoned, after he ascended to national leadership, he was used to develop a food-storage program in the midst of famine that eventually saved his entire family, and consequently the people of Israel. To his scheming brothers he said, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good…the saving of many lives.” (Genesis 50: 20). God often has greater purposes that we can only see after the fact.

For the man born blind in John 9, the infirmity was NOT due to sin on anyone’s part, as the disciples presumed, but that the works of God might be manifest, in his life, which they indeed were done. For Paul’s own “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12), he came to see this affliction as having the twin purposes of a needed humbling of himself AND seeing Christ’s power being made evident amidst his own human weakness. Could it be that in your own struggles the Lord might be both shaping your own life more into Christ-likeness, as well as showing his strength amidst your own weakness or feet of clay? And likewise, God uses the struggles of our past—and how we see God show up in them—in order to help and encourage others going through similar challenging situations. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

Last week one of our German friends who was with us here in Michigan at Faith just a year ago, posted a comment on Facebook. My German is a little rusty, but fortunately, there is a translation button you can just click on. The English read, “Problems are like washing machines. They twist us, they twirl and push us around, but at the end, we come out cleaner, brighter and better than before.” For a Facebook post, that’s pretty good. 😊 By God’s grace, and the power of His Spirit at work in you, may it be true in your own life and in those that you love. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.