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Alice: Karen, in our first session together, we talked about the dimensions of pain, and we explored a lot of the things that people deal with who are going through pain. But then when we came to our second session, we had to back off and look at what it means to minister, and so we spent some time on that, but today we have to head right into what I think is one of the most difficult questions that we face, and that is the question of how we as Christians deal with the pain that we experience in the face of the fact that we believe that God has all power and that God is love and yet people suffer.

Karen: So for instance when a family loses a child, that is just a devastating experience; and on top of the pain, people might be really wondering how God can be loving and also how He did not, in fact, prevent this child's death.

And there are many people in the world who—I've spoken with many people who have walked away from Christianity because of this issue.

Alice: That's true. And I remember well, when our son was killed, receiving letters and cards from a great many friends who wrote with great sympathy for our loss; and still there were a few letters that we received that I have to admit I still have not read all the way to the end because my sense was that people were pasting a few Bible verses on our pain and expecting that those Bible verses would just take all of the pain away, and that just didn't happen.

Karen: So when we minister to people in pain, we actually have to have thought through this issue of theodicy ourselves, and theodicy is that struggle that we all have to go through to make sense out of pain in the world. [The term *theodicy* means a vindication of God's goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil.] How are we going to explain a loving, all-powerful God allowing pain in our lives and in the lives of the

people that we come into contact with? And what you're saying is that we as ministers have to struggle through this issue so that when we minister to people in pain, we're not just pasting Bible verses onto our ministry to people in pain.

Alice: We really have to understand the issues ourselves, and I'm thinking of the times in which pain has challenged people's faith and an incident that touched me very deeply, because we had some contact with the family over the years, happened a few years back. Kayleen Slater had grown up in Africa as a missionary kid. Her father and her uncle were both medical doctors working in a hospital in West Africa, and after she had grown, she returned to the states for her college education, met Steve Merry, who was a premed student, and eventually they fell in love. They married. He completed his medical training and then they went back to Africa as medical missionaries. God gave Kayleen and Steve five children, and then Kayleen received a sentence of death. Kayleen had a virulent untreatable cancer, and as she struggled and moved toward her own death, her 9-year-old son would say to his dad: "Dad, why doesn't God just heal Mom? God could do that. All God would have to do is just speak the word, and she'd be healed." God wouldn't even have to speak the word; God could just think the thought, and she'd be healed. But she wasn't, and she died. And after her death, Steve had to deal with his son's questions. Why did God not heal Mom? Why? Why? Why? And pain at that level can challenge people's faith.

Karen: I think the issue that we as ministers to people in pain have to think through—and there are several thoughts about how to explain this issue of pain, how to understand this problem of pain in the world, and I don't think any one answer satisfies everybody.

Alice: That is true.

Karen: I think there are many ways of looking at this particular issue, and there are many historical thoughts about how to make sense of the problem of pain.

Alice: And I think that some people have gone back to AD 325 to the council of Nicaea and captured in the statement that came out of that council, in what we call the Nicene Creed, a reality that I have found very helpful to me as I have dealt as a Christian with this issue of pain. And it has to do with the fact that Jesus was fully human, but at the same time Jesus was fully divine. The

creed says He was God from God; He was light from light; He was very God or true God from true God. And as we go back into John's gospel and we read the opening words of his gospel, we discover there that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men." [John 1:1-3 NIV] But just a few verses later in that gospel, we find that this One who was from the beginning came to His own and His own did not receive Him, and ultimately He ended on a cross.

Karen: So we have a clear teaching that Jesus was God. We also have a clear teaching, and as you've said the clear knowledge is by looking at His life, that He was also fully human. But we do read in Hebrews 4:15: "For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One [Jesus the Son of God] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin." [NIV] And the clear teaching in the Bible is that Jesus was not only fully God, but He was also fully human. He experienced pain just as we experience pain.

Alice: And as I look at this in the Gospels, I see this again and again. Remember the time when He had been teaching the multitudes of people who had come around Him and He was at the end of the day, fatigued, and there was a boat. They were by the Sea of Galilee, and He climbed into the boat and He went to the back of the boat and before long he was sound asleep as His followers started rowing out across the Sea of Galilee. And He was fully human in His fatigue. He was exhausted and He was asleep, but there was a terrible storm and His disciples called to Him. They woke Him up. They were so afraid that they were going to perish there in the mist of this storm on the sea. And Jesus stood and He rebuked the wind; He rebuked the waves. He said, "Peace, be still!" And His followers looked at one another and said, "Who is this man? Even the wind and the waves obey Him!" [Mark 4:41 NIV] He was fully human in His fatigue, but He was fully God.

Karen: We see Jesus' humanity as He stood by Lazarus' grave and cried. He was sad. He was grieved by the death of one of His just great friends, and in that humanity at the same time we see Jesus' divinity when He calls Lazarus from the grave and Lazarus is resurrected to life. And in that instance we see again Jesus' divinity at the same time. [See John 11.]

Alice: And I'm thinking of Jesus too in the Garden of Gethsemane, the agony that He experienced. The Scriptures tells us that in those hours, as He wrestled with the will of God that He go to death on the cross, that He was sweating great drops of blood. And yet when the soldiers came to arrest Him and Peter impetuously pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, Jesus reached out and restored his ear. He was fully human in His agony in the garden, but He was fully God as He restored the ear of that servant of His enemy. [See Luke 22:51.]

Karen: We see, as the story goes on, that Jesus died. He literally died on the cross, and yet before He died He spoke to the thief on the cross next to Him and said, "You will be with Me in paradise." And again we see that juxtaposition of Jesus' humanity and His divinity. But how is this helping us understand this problem of theodicy, of understanding how a good and powerful God allows pain to happen? [See Luke 23:43.]

Alice: And that's the question we have to wrestle with, Karen. We have to make the link between Jesus' humanity and divinity and the pain we experience. And I think back to Jesus' death, and I ask, "Okay, does that mean that God—God the one who had only to speak and worlds came into existence—that God was willing to go to death to become a human being and to live on this earth and to die in order to give us eternal life. What did He see in us? What infinite value did He place on us that would cause God to do that for us?" So the question isn't why does God allow suffering? The question is why would God suffer for us? And having done that, would He allow any of our suffering to be meaningless, to be without significance? Whatever we know about the God who suffered for us, we know that suffering is never, never meaningless. It is never insignificant. And because Jesus is fully human, He knows what we're going through. He has been there. He has experienced all of the kinds of suffering that we might experience; and because He understands and He is with us in that suffering, this makes a difference in how we view our suffering. It is never without meaning.

Karen: That's an issue of faith, isn't it? That we have to trust that because Jesus' suffering meant something, because Jesus' suffering meant how much God loved us in order to enter into a relationship with us, that somehow our suffering means something as well.

Alice: That's right. And I think it helps me to go back and to look at Jesus' life and, so okay, how did He suffer? Well, He suffered rejection. Remember, Karen? He was in Nazareth where He had grown up, and the people chased Him out. He was rejected by His own people. He was rejected at the time of just before His crucifixion when the crowds yelled, "Crucify Him! Away with Him!" He experienced rejection. He experienced desertion. He had followers, and John's gospel tells us that after a certain time some of His disciples turned away, and they didn't follow Him anymore. Jesus not only experienced rejection and desertion, He experienced homelessness and hunger. He said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." [Matthew 8:20 NIV] So we look at Jesus and we see the example of someone who experienced all of the kinds of things that cause people pain in today's world, and we know that the incarnate God has been there. He knows what we're going through, and it is never without meaning.

Karen: And we are called to have faith that our suffering somehow has meaning. I'm thinking, Mom, about an illustration that I've heard you talk about many, many times, and that's the illustration of making a rug; and on the front side, on the topside, the pattern looks very beautiful. On the back side, where we're working, it looks like a jumble.

Alice: Yes, it does.

Karen: And I think that's what it is like in the midst of pain many times. That we're looking at the back side of the rug, and it looks all jumbled. It does not make sense, and we have to have faith that there's a sense of being created on the front side of the rug.

Alice: That's exactly what it is because we see in part, we know in part. We don't know the whole. We can't know the end from the beginning, but we can know the God who knows the end from the beginning. We can know Jesus who knows the end from the beginning for us, and we can know one more thing. We can know that He is with us in the midst of our pain. We can assure others that He is with them in the midst of their pain. He said, just before He left this world and returned to the Father in Matthew 28, He said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." [NKJV] He is with us and we can count on that.

You and I live in a Good Friday world. A world shot through with sin and pain and suffering. A world shot through with injustice,

Friday world, and that world touches our lives with pain. But we are not Good Friday people. We're Easter people. And as Easter people we know that there is resurrection that follows death. We know that there is meaning in the face of what may seem meaningless because God became a human being, experienced pain as we experience pain, and He walks with us as we go through the painful experiences of life. We can count on that.