

Suffering Transformed

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- [0 : 0 0] Who has believed what he has heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, like a root out of dry ground.
- He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 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. All we, like lost sheep, have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
- [1 : 1 3] This ends the reading of God's word. Thanks be to God. We're here tonight to consider the cross. Not only what happened, we heard John's account read a moment ago, but we're here to consider what it means.
- What it means for us. And the passage that I just read comes from what is called the fourth song in Isaiah. These poems, these songs in Isaiah about someone known only as the servant of the Lord.
- This servant is a mysterious figure who's one day going to come and bring salvation and healing to the world. And centuries after this was written, Jesus' followers considered him being crucified on the cross.
- And they realized that this song was ultimately about him. It's about the cross. In other words, this is the most detailed account in all of scripture of the cross and what it means.
- There's a lot that we could say about it. I didn't read the whole thing because for the sake of time, we're only going to focus on the first three stanzas of this song.
- [2 : 3 3] But this shows us something quite profound. This is what we're going to meditate on this evening. That the cross is a place where God not only defeats evil and suffering, but he transforms evil and suffering.
- He transforms what it means in the world. And he transforms the relationship that we have with the evil and the suffering and our own lives.
- And each stanza shows us something about how that happens. And so I invite you as we consider the cross to call to mind your own experience of suffering.
- There's a lot that we might bring into this moment. For me, I think about the periodic struggle that I have with depression. It's not the kind of depression that comes from things being hard or stressful.
- It's clinical depression. Runs in my family. Something that from time to time comes upon me like a dark, thick cloud descending over your life.
- [3 : 4 3] It makes everything extremely difficult. And when it sets in, there are times when I have... It takes all that I have to get out of bed in the morning.

And in times like that, I think about the cross. And I think about what it means. And so I encourage you to take a moment to think about what is this for you right now in your life.

And then invite Jesus to speak to us from the cross. Let's pray and then we'll look at these stanzas together. Lord, we ask that as we consider your cross and we consider your word, we pray that you would speak to us.

Lord, that you would speak from this place of your own suffering into our suffering. Lord, that in hearing your voice and in seeing you there, we might be healed.

And that our hearts, that our souls might be lifted. Lord, encouraged. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.

[4 : 54] So the first stanza I read is from chapter 52, verses 13 through 15. And what we see here is pretty profound. We see the servant is lifted up.

He's exalted. He's victorious. He's achieved this great victory. We're not yet sure what it is, but something profound has happened. And in verse 15, we see that it has worldwide implications.

Kings are considering what has happened. The implications of this are sprinkled over the nations. And yet, this victory has come through unimaginable suffering.

This servant is horribly disfigured. People see him and they're dumbstruck. They're speechless. It implies that when they look upon this scene, it makes them want to vomit.

His appearance has been so marred by violence and pain that he is no longer recognizably human. It says his form beyond that of the children of mankind.

[6 : 04] There's a paradox at the very heart of the mystery of redemption. And here's the paradox. That the suffering of Jesus on the cross is the greatest evil ever committed.

It is the greatest evil that ever will be committed. And yet, at the same time, God transformed it into the greatest good.

The greatest possible victory. The achievement of eternal salvation for all of humanity. And so what we see here is that the cross goes, in the words of Pope John Paul II, the cross goes to the very root of evil and transforms it.

Victory comes out of defeat. Right? It is a root that should only produce defeat. And yet, somehow, this nature of the root of evil has been transformed.

And a victory springs up out of it. Fruit that should never come from this kind of root, nevertheless, springs forth. And so the first point is this.

[7 : 12] Through the cross, God is able to repurpose evil for good. And God can do the same with all evil.

You know, the best example of this in the story, or in the Bible, is the story of Joseph in Genesis. He's betrayed by his brothers. He's sold into slavery in Egypt because of their jealousy.

That is evil. And yet, God allows Joseph to climb the ranks until he is in a position of great power in the administration. And when famine strikes and Joseph's family comes to Egypt, starving and looking for aid, he recognizes them.

And they draw back in fear because they think that this is the time for Joseph's vengeance. And yet, Joseph has mercy. And he says, you planned evil against me.

But God used those same plans for my good. And he shows mercy on them. You know, I once heard a Colorado pastor preach in the weeks following the Columbine massacre.

[8 : 24] And I can't imagine having to do that. And he put it this way. There are always two sets of plans.

Satan's plan and God's plan. And he said, Satan had a plan for Columbine. But God has a better plan.

Satan has a plan for all of the evil in our lives. And Satan's desire, make no mistake, is to rob us of hope, to corrode our faith, to cut us off from God, to divide us from one another, and ultimately to destroy us.

And all of the powers of hell are aimed at that purpose in your life. But God has a better plan.

If you've ever played chess against a master, you know that you can freely make whatever moves you choose to make.

[9 : 31] And yet, no matter what you do, your moves somehow against every intention become part of a sequence of events that lead to checkmate.

And you can think that you are winning and you can think that you are winning, but at some point you realize that you all along have played into your opponent's hand. And like it or not, checkmate.

God is the great master chess player of history. No matter how much evil and suffering you can throw at God, it all gets folded into a sequence of events that will one day lead to the new creation.

And there is no stopping it. A renewed world to a moment when God wipes away every tear and says, finally, there will be no more suffering.

We will not always know how God's plan works out. It took Joseph most of his life before he saw it. We may not see how the evil in our lives works out in our lifetime.

[10 : 38] We may never see it. But God will repurpose the evil in your life for good. And you say, well, how can we possibly know the cross? So that's the first point, the first stanza.

That leads to the second stanza. Chapter 53, verses 1 through 3. Isaiah, looking at the servant, this suffering servant, he recognizes this servant as more than just a man.

This is the embodiment of God's power. That's what the phrase, the arm of the Lord, means. This is the embodiment of God's power. And yet, this embodiment of God's power is a man of sorrows.

His life is full of grief. He faces all kinds of suffering all throughout his life. He's the kind of person that you look at and think, well, it could be worse. At least I'm not that guy.

And Isaiah says in verse 1 of chapter 53, who would ever believe that someone like this could be the arm of the Lord? That a man of sorrows who grieves like this person is God's power incarnate?

[11 : 52] And you know, that's a fair question. For those of us living in 21st century Western culture, it's a particularly apropos question. We enjoy historically unprecedented wealth and prosperity.

We naturally assume that normal daily life should be happy, should be fulfilling. And we see any form of suffering as a kind of aberration from the norm.

And this has seeped into the Christian church. Right? It's seeped into how we think about our faith and the expectations that we have for our lives.

There is, of course, the prosperity gospel, the idea that faith in God leads to health and wealth. Now, I'm assuming most people in this room would not believe that that is a biblical idea, because it's not.

But even for those of us who reject the prosperity gospel, there can still be a way of thinking that we might call the emotional prosperity gospel. If I give my life to Jesus and if I trust in him, I will be fulfilled.

[13 : 01] I will be satisfied in him. My life will hopefully be relatively free from suffering. But if that's the case, then how do we make sense of Jesus?

The Son of God is a man of sorrows. And how do we make sense of the fact that Jesus directly tells his disciples, if you follow me, you will have to take up your own cross.

You will most certainly suffer. You will likely suffer more than anyone else. So know the cost and count it before you commit to me.

Now, here we tread upon a mystery that is so profound that I hesitate to articulate it for fear of doing it a disservice.

Because if I say it incorrectly, I risk minimizing your suffering and mine. But I also risk minimizing the glory of the cross.

[14 : 11] And here's the mystery. That although God hates suffering, and although suffering is a part of the curse of the fall, nevertheless, he uses suffering to sanctify those whom he loves.

The second point is this. Through the cross, God transforms suffering from a curse into a crucible.

Before precious metals can be used, metals like gold or silver, they have to be refined.

They have to be put in a crucible and refined. And in the same way, God uses suffering to refine his people. The apostle Paul, if you read the scriptures, was able to heal the sick.

He was able to cast out demons. He was even able to raise the dead. And yet, Paul suffered in almost every way imaginable. He was mocked.

[15 : 23] He was imprisoned. He was beaten. He was stoned. He was shipwrecked. Shipwrecked. And Paul faced chronic suffering, known only as the thorn in his flesh.

And yet, no matter how much Paul prayed to God, God would not heal him. Paul was able to raise the dead. And yet, God would not heal the thorn in his flesh.

Instead, God says this. My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness.

God wanted to use Paul's suffering to refine him. And we see in Romans chapter 5 the effect that suffering had in Paul's life over time as he continued to trust in and follow Jesus no matter what.

It says that Paul learns to rejoice in his suffering because through it he became more resilient. His character was forged. He began to cultivate a hope that was not dependent on circumstances.

[16 : 41] And he experienced the love of God being poured into his heart. He said that came through suffering. Some of my deepest experiences of the love of God being poured into my heart came in the midst of my worst experiences of suffering.

Many of the greatest virtues that you desire for yourself when you think, I want to be the kind of person who I want to have the kind of faith that those are virtues that can only be found on the far side of suffering.

When Stephen Colbert was 10 years old, his father and brothers died in a plane crash. And about 10 years ago, an interviewer asked him about this loss at such a young age and how he coped.

And here's what Colbert says. He says, I'm not bitter about what happened to me as a child. And my mother was instrumental in keeping me from being so. What she taught me was directly related to the image of Christ on the cross and the example of sacrifice that he gave us.

And that, listen to this. Here's what he learned. The deliverance God offers you from pain is not no pain.

[18 : 07] It is that the pain is actually a gift. If you pray for spiritual growth, just know God will most likely use suffering and weakness to answer that prayer.

It's not the exception. It's the norm. So the first two stanzas show us these truths that through the cross, God repurposes evil for good.

And that through the cross, God transforms suffering from a curse into a crucible. But all of this raises a question. If God is the kind of God who uses suffering, then how can he possibly be a good God?

He sounds like a masochistic or sadistic God. And in the third stanza, we see the answer to that question because Isaiah has a shocking realization in verses 4 through 6.

In verse 4, Isaiah looks at this suffering servant and he says, we thought that the suffering in this man's life was because of something he did wrong.

[19 : 30] Right? Which is a natural assumption that human beings make when somebody is facing extraordinary suffering. We think, what did they do to deserve that? There are several points in the Gospels when the disciples actually ask that question to Jesus.

They say, what did that person or what did those people do to deserve that? But then Isaiah realizes something as he looks on this suffering servant.

He says, we thought it was something that he did wrong, but it's our pain he feels. It is our sorrows. It's our sins.

And he begins to realize he took it all on himself. And as you see what he writes, he says, you know, we're the ones who abandoned God.

We're the lost sheep who have gone our own way. So the suffering in the world, the reason that they're suffering, it's our fault. And then he says, he was innocent.

[20 : 30] All of this is on us. He was innocent. But then God laid on him the iniquity of us all. So we ask the question, how do we know that God is good?

And this is the third and final thing that we will see tonight, that through the cross, God suffers to end our suffering. That through the cross, God suffers to end our suffering.

We all want an answer to the question of suffering. No honest human being who lives in this world doesn't want an answer to the question of suffering. Every major religion and philosophy endeavors to give us that answer.

But quite frankly, all of the explanations fall short. They all do. We all want God to give us an explanation. And quite frankly, even the explanation within Christianity, in my opinion, somewhat falls short.

But the reason is because God's answer to the question and the problem of suffering is not an explanation.

[21 : 36] It's the incarnation. It's the incarnation. We want an abstract philosophical set of reasoning.

God gives us the word become flesh. He takes up our suffering. Which means he speaks into our pain from his own pain.

He comforts us in our grief with his own tears. He weeps alongside us. What this means is that God offers a depth of comfort that we will never find anywhere else.

It means, number one, that we will never suffer alone. We will never suffer alone. The apostles, like Paul and Peter, faced tremendous suffering.

But in their suffering, they saw an opportunity to have fellowship with Christ. They saw their suffering as a participation in the suffering of Christ.

[22 : 46] This became one of the main ways for them to experience intimacy with Christ. They saw themselves as Christ's body. And as he suffered, so they suffered with him.

And so you hear Christians talk about offering up their suffering. And being partakers of and having fellowship with Christ in his suffering. Remember when Paul is still Saul and he's persecuting the church.

And he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus. What does Jesus say? Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting my people? That's not what he says. He says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

What you do to his people, you do to him. Why? Because he has taken our pain upon himself.

He bears our sorrows even still. The pain that you feel in your life at this moment, Jesus bears with you. He feels it. It also means this.

[23 : 53] Not only will we never suffer alone. It means that we will not suffer forever. By his wounds, we are healed. By his wounds, the world is healed.

By his wounds, we will one day suffer no more. We will be restored. There will be no more suffering or tears. And as the Apostle Paul says, all of the suffering in our lives will one day seem like a light, momentary affliction compared to the glory that awaits.

And you say, well, how do we know? The cross. The cross. The cross. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for the unimaginable brutality and the glorious beauty of the cross.

We thank you for this paradox at the heart of our faith. And we thank you for the otherworldly hope that it offers.

[25 : 08] And ask that you would take what is in our minds and press it into our hearts. Press this truth into the deepest places of pain and hopelessness.

We pray this for your glory and for our good. And ask it in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.