

God's Presence in Suffering

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Preacher: Emily Hatton

[0 : 00] Good morning. When I was told that I was going to be preaching on God's supernatural presence in suffering, I thought, great, I think I might have some things to share on this this morning.

You see, I've had a fair few diagnoses in my life, both personally and within my close family, that have had huge impacts on my life and grief that's knocked me sideways in a way that I'm sure that so many of us here this morning will have done too. And we'll come back to that later.

But you might imagine my surprise then when this morning's passage that I was given to preach on wasn't one of Jesus healing a blind man or someone else with a critical illness. It wasn't one of Jesus being present at Lazarus's tomb. It wasn't even one of our Easter passages of Jesus' own suffering.

Instead, today's passage, as we've just read, starts with Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. It continues on with Jesus predicting his own death and the suffering that was to follow. And finishes with the call for his disciples through the generations to follow the same road marked with suffering. Now, when I'm preparing a session for the youth or a talk, I find it quite helpful from the outset to have some key word definitions.

[1 : 23] So perhaps here is a good point to define what we mean when we're looking at God's supernatural presence in suffering. When we talk about God's supernatural presence, we're talking about his ability to be beyond and above the natural or existence beyond the visible and observable universe that we exist in.

We're talking here about God's presence in the world through his Holy Spirit. That's the part of God, the part of the Holy Trinity that is in the world, existing and living within us when we give our yes to Jesus.

And when we talk about suffering, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it very simply as pain, distress or hardship. And that can be physical, emotional or spiritual.

When we're talking about any kind of suffering, from a sore back to war, from bereavement to natural disaster, from life-threatening illness to human-inflicted evil such as genocide, FGM, rape, or being forced to flee and seek refuge from your own homeland.

When it comes to suffering, whether it seems big or small, individual and personal or experienced by the masses, size and scale doesn't matter to God because he cares about it all.

[2 : 50] And as we look at God's supernatural presence in suffering this morning, I want to remind us right from the outset of a verse that kept coming into my mind as I was looking at our passage from Mark 8.

And that comes from John chapter 16, verse 33, where Jesus says, In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.

It makes me think of the lion, the witch and the wardrobe. And if you've not seen or read the film or the book, there are no real spoilers here because it's basically the gospel story.

And if you're not familiar with the gospel story, then I'm delighted to hint to you the greatest spoiler of them all. So if you know the story of the Pevensie children and their adventures beyond the wardrobe in the land of Narnia, in the world beyond the spare room, you'll know right from the beginning that there's this battle between good and evil, between Aslan the lion and the snow queen, who's been trying to take power over the land of Narnia.

And the story reaches its climax when the snow queen kills Aslan. Darkness and winter descend over the land, and it seems like the light of summer will never be seen again.

[4 : 07] And it all seems hopeless for the Pevensie children and those who were Aslan's faithful followers. But then Aslan comes back to life. And once he's on the move again, he breathes life

onto all of his faithful followers, like Mr. Tumnus the fawn, rescuing them from the evil grips of the snow queen.

And one by one, he brings back to life his army, who are about to fight this incoming battle with him. Susan, Peter, Esmond and Lucy have confidence that Aslan is the rightful leader of Narnia, that he's strong and he's good, but we see that they're not quite sure how Aslan's army of good is going to triumph over the snow queen's vast, aggressive army.

But to the reader or the viewer, perhaps it's more obvious. Aslan will win. He's already come back to life. He's conquered death. And this last battle is nothing but a victory.

Nothing but a formality. A sure victory, sealing the victory that is already his. And it's just like that with Jesus. Jesus, son of God, king of kings, has already conquered death.

He's bridged the divide that once stood between us and him. And we get to stand in his victory. As he reminds us in John 16, verse 33, we can take heart because he has already overcome the world.

[5 : 41] But as most of us will have already discovered in life, that doesn't mean that we won't have suffering. We live in a broken world and we're still waiting for the victory. We're still waiting for the final battle of which we already know the outcome.

We already know that Jesus has won. But he tells us to take heart because in the conquering, in the overcoming, he's standing with us in our pain, in sickness, in death and grief, in natural disaster, in war and persecution.

You name it, he's standing with us. Our passage today reminds us that when we talk about God's supernatural presence in suffering, we're not just talking about his comforting power or his advocating power, but that as he stands here with us, he knows what we're going through and has already experienced it himself.

In verse 31 of our passage, Jesus says, the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected. And we can follow the story of the cross throughout the Gospels to see for ourselves how that plays out.

The Son of Man did indeed suffer many things in multiple ways. He faced emotional, physical and spiritual suffering. We can read Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14, which show us just how deeply he was troubled by the suffering he was set to endure.

[7 : 12] In verse 14, he says, Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me, but not my will, but yours be done. The other week in youth Bible study, we were looking at this passage as an example of Jesus' own submission and obedience.

And we talked about how when Jesus prayed in the garden before he was betrayed, he suffered anguish to the point of sweating blood. Now, this really intrigued the psychologist in me, so I had a bit of a Google about what it means for someone to sweat blood.

And I found out it's called a condition called haemociderosis, which means that the capillary blood vessels rupture, and that feeds blood into the sweat glands.

And it happens when someone is under extreme physical or emotional distress. And what it tells us is that Jesus, Son of God, fully human yet fully God, experienced a huge amount of emotional suffering.

And all that's only added to the fact that he was betrayed by one of his 12 disciples. Judas, with whom he'd shared his life, he'd taught, he'd given the same authority to go out to feed the multitudes, to heal the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse the leper, to cast out demons, and whose feet he'd washed in an act of humble servitude.

[8 : 41] And after being betrayed by Judas, the crowds demanded the release of a convicted murderer over his sinless self. And then Peter, one of his three best friends, disowned and denied him not once but three times.

If anyone knew emotional suffering, it was Jesus. So when we experience betrayal and disappointment from others, when we experience anxiety, stress, or emotional turmoil, we get to stand in the knowledge that he is with us and he can comfort us from a place of understanding what we're going through.

Once Jesus had come before Pilate, he was subject to the physical humiliation of being beaten and spat on. And then he was flogged.

Flogging was such a brutal punishment, which was when people were whipped with bits of leather, which were encrusted with bits of bone. People tended not to make it as far as the crucifixion

because they'd die first from the brutality of flogging.

But in his love for each of us, knowing that his death would set us free, he determinedly powered through to the top of the hill where he was crucified and died for us.

[10:01] Jesus knew physical suffering. Then whilst he was hanging on the cross, he cried out those famous words, Eli, Eli, Lima, Sabathani.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? This is the only time in the Bible when God calls God, God and not my father.

Because in his darkest, weakest hour, the father turned his face away from the sun because he couldn't look at the weight of the world's sin on Jesus' shoulders.

Jesus knew spiritual suffering too. In the cross, Jesus endured it all. Physical, emotional, spiritual suffering.

And we read in verse 34 to 36 of our passage that Jesus said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their lives will lose it, but whoever loses their lives for me and for the gospel will save it.

[11:07] What good is it for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul? I mentioned at the start that Jesus is present with us by the supernatural power of his Holy Spirit.

And he knows what he's talking about when it comes to suffering. Taking up our crosses and following God isn't just about suffering, but it is our focus today.

And to quote my mum, the cross is symbolic of everything that will come our way. We're not being crucified, but we have to daily take up our cross. We have to choose to daily surrender to the will of God, whatever that means for us in our own personal journeys.

But here comes the good news, because also in the cross, Jesus conquered all that suffering.

And we have this joyful yet slightly complicated theology of the now and the not yet, that he's won the victory, but we're still waiting for the fullness of that. I won't go into it now because that would be a whole different sermon, but it basically is where we find ourselves now, that Jesus has conquered death, but we still live in this broken world where there is suffering, where there's pain and death and hurt and war and sin and all the rest.

[12:30] But because we're in the now and the not yet, because Jesus has come, we have the Holy Spirit too. Jesus says in John chapter 16, verse 7, that he has to go to heaven so that the advocate, the Holy Spirit can come down.

It means that when, like Peter in our reading, when we recognise that Jesus is the Messiah, that he is the son of the living God, when we give our yes to him, the Holy Spirit part of God lives in us.

And that, amongst so many things, means that we are never alone. It means that even in our darkest moments, God is with us.

It means even when we feel lonely, God is with us. Psalm 139 vocalises it so well. You hem me in behind and before, you lay your hand upon me.

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. There is literally nowhere that we can go where God isn't with us.

[13:47] And the reason for that is because he loves us. That's why he endured the suffering and rejection of the cross. That's why, as Hebrews 12, verse 2 reminds us, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross.

Because he loves us. And because he loves us, he will never, ever leave our side. So what about this question that titles our theme today?

How is God with us supernaturally in our suffering? I said at the beginning that I have my own personal story of suffering in my life.

And perhaps here is a good point to share some of my own personal story with you. I did debate what to share with you this morning, so I hope you'll forgive the slight vagueness of this.

But about two and a half years ago, after seven years of waiting lists and slightly traumatising appointments, I was diagnosed with a health condition, which sent me into a little bit of a spin.

[14:51] Day-to-day, it means I can have a lot of pain, it means I can get really exhausted, and sometimes my brain doesn't quite function on top form. But beyond the day-to-day in the wide picture, I don't know what it means, and that can feel like quite a big thing to think about.

And I remember that summer, sitting on the floor of my bedroom at home, saying to God very literally, where on earth are you in this? Because this doesn't feel good, and this doesn't feel full of

your faithfulness.

Faithfulness. But I just remember God saying to me, Emily, I am with you, and that's a sure promise. I know the promises I've made you, and I'm faithful to keep them.

See, whether it's emotional, physical, or spiritual pain, God doesn't leave us, because that's not who he is. He's the God who stays. The Bible tells us over and over again that God is near to people in their suffering.

Psalm 34 verse 18 tells us that he is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. I don't know about for you, but this reminds me that God is a God of proximity, of compassion and care, and who's present in all of our tears.

[16:07] God's supernatural presence is reliable and dependable, because it's always been the way, it always is the way, and it always will be the way. It's his character, it's who he is.

So for me, when I asked God where he was in my pain, in my suffering, I was suddenly reminded of exactly where he was. He was right there next to me, because that's where he's always been, that's where he always will be.

And I take great comfort in knowing that he deeply empathizes with me, because he goes before me, and he's been through it all. I don't want anyone here to think that I've mastered this whole suffering in faith thing, or faith in suffering thing, because there have been so many times in my life when my approach to suffering, or my understanding of God's presence in suffering, wouldn't have made for a good story in today's sermon.

But I share it with you, because in those moments of sitting on the floor, asking God where on earth he was, how this aligned with his faithfulness, he taught me something that I hope that we can all learn from, and take away today.

And that is that there is nothing insurmountable when God is with us. And there is nothing that he hides from.

[17:31] Be it our health or bereavement, be it the war that carries on going in Ukraine, we can turn to God and ask him where he is. And in this stillness, he gently reminds us time and time again, he is right here with us.

If we go back to our passage from Mark 8 this morning, when Jesus told his disciples that he was going to suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and then on the third day he would rise again.

Peter took him aside and rebuked him. He couldn't understand that this man, the Messiah, who was standing in front of him, was going to be killed. But Jesus rebuked Peter in return, and said, you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

I'm not going to stand here and pretend it all makes sense to me, because it absolutely doesn't. But I can stand here and say that we can fully trust God that we'll always find purpose in our suffering. Suffering was never part of God's plan. He doesn't cause it, and he doesn't like it, but we serve a powerful God who will always triumph over suffering. And as Romans 8 verse 28 tells us, We know that in all things he works for good, we know that in all things he works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

[19:09] Whether it seems big or small, personal and individual, or experienced by the masses, when it comes to suffering, size and scale does not matter to God, because he cares about it all.

And he will always work it together for his good, for his glory, and for his purpose. And in our suffering, God is always present right here with us, comforting us, and fighting for us.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are a God who is present with us in our suffering, that you always fight for us, that you always comfort us, and that you don't shy away from the big things, but you also care about the small things.

Would you just help each of us here today to go away from this morning knowing that you are present with us in suffering. In your name we pray.

Amen.