

Why is life so hard? – Women's lunch

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Preacher: Tricia Marnham

[0 : 00] The story is told of a woman who rang the local diet clinic. This lady went to rang up her local diet clinic and she was in despair. She said, I can't get into the birthday present my husband gave me.

And the receptionist said, don't worry, madam. She said, come along to us and we'll have you in that dress in no time. Dress, she said. It's not a dress. It's a Porsche. Now, that lady was having a tough time and laughing apart.

We probably all know people who've been infected and affected in some way by eating disorders, which really can be a big issue. And I've been asked to address the question today, why is life so hard?

And I think there are different kinds of hard, aren't there? You know, builders not doing what they're supposed to do. Like a friend of mine who had a new shower put in in their holiday cottage. And she got down there and they'd ordered the size of shower, one size too small.

So there's kind of a 10 millimeter space where they could have had a bigger shower had she been there. You know, kind of frustrating thing or having to chase people who don't reply to messages. A car backing into yours as you drive through Dulwich Village.

[1 : 11] I mean, that's the kind of thing that's annoying and frustrating. But I think hard is probably something different. The really tough stuff like perhaps we've been talking at the table, being the parent of teenagers when your husband is traveling a lot and it just feels like you're a single parent.

Redundancy. I guess all of us know people have been affected by that. Debt, maybe having to take their children away from school because they can't afford the fees. I've touched on it already.

But the loss of somebody that you dearly loved. For me, that was when my mother died. And I remember afterwards the feeling of being numb, really. And the sense of what I used to say to people, even the most gorgeous day, I would say nothing tastes.

You know, nothing could change my mood because I was going through grief, which is a very normal reaction. Then there's the kind of tough stuff that we may really have to keep to ourselves, a marriage that's just a shell.

Or as I heard just the other day, your husband going off with your best friend. You know, terrible double betrayal. Or, and I guess all of us will have been affected by this, The shocking what looked like slow motion pictures of that tsunami sweeping in over Japan, sweeping everything ahead of it.

[2 : 28] Thousands killed, millions displaced. Life can be frustrating, but that is tough. That is really tough and hard. But I want to tell you something curious.

When life is going really well, you can also have that feeling as if something is missing. Many years ago, Helen Mirren, that most distinguished actress, gave an interview. And she'd just been awarded an Emmy in Hollywood.

And she said the most amazing thing. She said, do you know what it felt like when I was standing there? I remember she'd reached the pinnacle of her career at that time. Everything she'd always aimed for, she'd just got there.

And she said, do you know what I was thinking as I stood there with the Emmy in my hands? She said, I was thinking to myself, is this it then? Is this as good as it gets? And she was saying something very, very moving.

That restless, grass always greener, never satisfied, guilt-making, if you're successful, feeling that there must be more to life than this. Now, it was never meant to be like that.

[3 : 34] Life was never meant to be hard. And in the next few minutes, I'd like to explain why. We'll be looking for answers in a book that has everything in it. All human life is there. I think the News of the World used to say that.

Dysfunctional families. The answers to looking at the big questions like suffering, meaning and purpose. Parenting, time management, depression.

And that's only the Old Testament. I'm talking, of course, about the Bible. People have such a wrong view of the Bible again. And if you look at the book of Genesis, it tells you what life was meant to be like.

We read there of man and woman in perfect harmony with one another, with the world around them and with God. It speaks of their freedom to enjoy all of creation except one thing.

And God said they were not to eat from one particular tree, for that would bring death into the world. You know what happened. Imagine everybody here knows what happened. They did precisely that, believing the lies of the snake, that if they did eat of that one tree.

[4 : 35] And, of course, he also said to them, did God tell you not to eat of any tree? He sowed a doubt. Satan said, you will not die, which is a direct lie, because they did.

And from that moment, they directly disobeyed God. And cosmic upheaval was the result. Man's relationship with God was broken. The harmony between human beings was fractured.

And death and disease, yes, and earthquakes came into the world. All the things that stopped the earth from being perfect. That is why life is so hard.

Now, the thing to note about that original state of Eden is that we were all meant to live on three planes. The physical, the emotional and the spiritual. Most people live life on two planes.

We all have physical appetites. We get hungry. We get thirsty. So we eat and we drink. We have emotional hunger. We all need relationship, whether it's with family, with friends or whatever.

[5 : 33] But there is also spiritual hunger. We were made to run on God. And to quote C.S. Lewis, that great English writer, a car was made to run on petrol.

And if you try to run it on lemonade, it won't work because it wasn't made that way. And Lewis went on to say, if we try to live our lives without God, it won't work because we weren't made that way.

The other thing we learn in Genesis is that we were made to be eternal. Death was never meant to be. It was not there in the beginning. And you know, every human being has within them that desire for eternity.

They may express it in different ways. They may want to build great monuments to themselves or leave a legacy behind them. Or simply sense the pain of a world where change and decay is all around.

However beautiful a sunset, you know it's not going to last. However wonderful a friendship, you know one or other of you will die sooner or later. And in Ecclesiastes, that amazing book that talks about there's a time to die, a time to live and so on.

[6 : 39] There's a wonderful phrase. God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men. We have that longing to be eternal because God put it there.

And please don't think of eternity as boring. You know, twanging harps on clouds and how very boring. I like to think of it this way. And again, I expect everyone here can think of a moment in their lives.

Or, you know, if we're fortunate, quite a few moments. When it was so amazing that we just said, please, please let time stand still. I don't want this ever to stop.

Well, you know, that is what eternity is going to be like. So amazing. So happy that we will not want time to stop. And in Jesus, we have the answer to those longings.

Turn with me to that little booklet. Turn to page 22. And here we're going to find the answer to three questions.

[7 : 42] Who is Jesus? Why did he come to the earth? And how does that affect you and me? Let me read a few verses. I'm at verse 27 on page 22.

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way, he asked them, who do people say I am? They replied, some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.

But what about you? He asked. Who do you say I am? Peter answered, you are the Christ. Jesus is asking his disciples who people say he is.

And as we've seen, they give a variety of answers. Some John the Baptist. Some, the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament. But then Jesus turns to them and says, but what about you?

Who do you think? And Peter blurts out, you are the Christ. In Peter's eyes, Jesus was none other than the Messiah, the anointed one, long foretold in Jewish scriptures.

[8 : 40] The one God would send to save the world. And how had Peter come to that conclusion? Well, if you look earlier on in this little booklet, and I hope you will, you'll find something very fascinating.

I'm a lawyer, a solicitor by profession. So evidence is very important to me. And if you look at the evidence for who Jesus was, it's very compelling. First of all, they heard him give amazingly authoritative teaching.

Somewhere else it says he speaks like no one else does, one of the people who heard him. They'd seen him calm a storm, heal all kinds of diseases, cast out evil spirits, and even raise a 12-year-old girl back from the dead.

In other words, he had power over nature, over disease, over evil, and over death itself. And only God has that kind of power and authority. God, the creator of the universe, had come into the world. He didn't stand aloof from his suffering like other religions teach. But he came into it. And Jesus knows what it's like to be bereaved, to be betrayed, to be misunderstood, to be hungry and tired.

[9 : 47] He was at once both fully human and fully divine. Now we come to our second question. Why did Jesus come to the earth? Well, look again at the little booklet, verse 31.

Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. Get behind me, Satan, he said.

You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. Jesus speaks very plainly here. He would have to suffer and be killed, and then he would rise again.

And this, in fact, is nothing more than was prophesied in the Old Testament hundreds of years before. And most of the disciples would have been well-versed in the Old Testament scriptures. But it never entered their head that the Messiah would actually be killed, nor did it enter their head that he would rise.

[10 : 52] So when he did rise from the dead, they were very surprised. The Old Testament puts it very clearly. And if you know Handel's Messiah, these words will be familiar to you.

You and I were made to be complete only when living in a relationship with God.

And because of that rebellion at the beginning of time that we looked at, human beings have from that time been cut off from God, the one who alone can meet our spiritual longings, who alone can give us eternal life.

I guess most of us know the feeling of trying to pray, and our prayers we feel as if they're hitting the ceiling and falling back at us. And the prophet Isaiah says elsewhere, it's not that God is deaf and he can't hear us, but there's a barrier between us and him caused by our sin, our iniquities.

And because we're all human, we're all sinners, some people say, oh, people don't understand today what sin is. I think everybody understands what sin is. A two-year-old understands. You just watch a two-year-old trying to tempt you.

[12 : 12] You know, you say you can do anything you like, but just do not go into the kitchen. What do they do? Straight into the kitchen. A two-year-old knows what sin is. But we are all sinners.

We all fall short of our own standards for ourselves. How much more we must fall short of God's standards for us. And just as at the beginning, when there was that rebellion, something of cosmic significance happened.

So when Jesus died on the cross, something cosmic in its significance happened all over again. Jesus took all the sin of the world on himself, all the sin that had ever been committed and would ever be committed.

He paid the penalty of our sin, which is death. There's a fixed penalty for sin, which is death. And he made it possible for us to be reconciled to God and to receive eternal life, life that starts now and goes on beyond the grave.

Let me show you an illustration that has really helped me. If you just take you and me like this and we want to pray and we're trying to get through to God and we feel there's a great barrier there.

[13 : 20] Now, what we've just looked at, Isaiah says that barrier is my wrongdoing. And here's Jesus. And anything you know about him, you'll know if you read Mark, had the most unbroken relationship with the father.

Total freedom, total togetherness and total intimacy. And Isaiah says those little verses that I've just read out to you. All we like sheep have gone astray. We've gone our own way like this. And on the cross, the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. How do we know that happened? Again, you'll probably all know those words on the cross. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

In that moment, Jesus was cut off from God and he knew what it was like to be God forsaken. And it was not his sin because he was perfect. It was your sin and mine. And so the way is made open for us to have that kind of relationship with God that we were meant to have.

It's truly amazing. But there's more because not just are we reconciled to God, not just has that been made possible, but with other people. I was brought up in Northern Ireland and the most amazing stories of former IRA terrorists and UDA terrorists becoming Christians and working together in the church for Christ.

[14 : 34] And it also covers our fractured world. We're told at the end of the Bible that one day there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

No more will life be hard. It will be unalloyed joy. And we come now to our third question. How does this affect you and me?

We'll just again look at verse 34 in that little passage. Then Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul?

Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? It sounds like a paradox, doesn't it? Saving your life by losing it, gaining the whole world yet losing your soul.

[15 : 41] What Jesus is saying is something we can all observe. And it takes us back to the beginning of the talk. You can spend your whole life working and achieving all your ambitions.

And yet when you achieve them, it's not enough. Just like Helen Mirren found. Because none of these things will satisfy your soul, your inner hunger. And the terrible tragedy is that we are surrounded by people every day trying to gain the whole world without any reference to God. Spending hours on doing up their houses. Trying the latest designer clothes. Making sure their children get into the right schools. And they may not feel great underneath so they go to yoga or therapy.

But it's never enough. Because they're acting like someone trying to run their car on lemonade. And if they carry on like that, they'll end up when they die forfeiting their soul without God forever.

God's desire is that that should happen to no one. But receiving eternal life is not automatic. You're not a Christian because you're English. You have to make a personal response to the risen Christ.

[16 : 50] And marriage is like that, isn't it? You meet someone. You talk to their friends. You get to know them a bit. And on a particular day, you stand up in front of all your nearest and dearest. And commit the whole of your life to that other person.

That, in my mind, is a huge step of faith. Because this person, you haven't seen them act in every circumstance. You don't know what they're like. It's a huge step of faith. Yet we do it. We think it's a reasonable way to act.

It's just the same with Jesus. Except he is perfect. He will never let you down or disappoint you. And of course, things will have to change. Of course, it won't be easy.

But the prize, having given your life to Christ, the prize is to save your life and receive eternal life. That prize will be 10,000 times worth it.

Earlier in Mark's Gospel, and time is rushing on. I've got to finish. We read a story about a farmer sowing some seed. And it's very interesting. There are a number of different responses to that seed.

[17 : 50] And Jesus used it as an illustration of what happens when people are considering what we've been talking about this morning. Some people show absolutely no interest and forget all about it, like seed that's snatched away by birds.

Others are, first of all, thrilled. But because their faith has no root, it's blown away at the first hint of trouble. They've been told that somehow become a Christian and all will be well, which is rubbish. It's the most amazing prize at the end of it.

But it's not like that. Still others hear it. They really, really mean to do something about it. But what they hear is choked by what Jesus describes, and this is his words, the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things.

They mean to do something about it, but somehow all these other issues crowd in. I would urge you not to let that happen to you. At the very least, if all this is quite new to you, or you've been thinking about it for some time, make an honest examination of what we've been talking about.

Explore some of these issues. Because you see, the enormity of what is involved is huge. It actually involves your eternal destiny.

[19 : 06] And there's nothing more important you could ever do. Let me finish with a true story. Jim Elliot was one of five American missionaries who went to the jungle of Ecuador to bring this good news that we've been talking about today to a very remote tribe there.

And on 8th of January 1956, he and all the other four missionaries were murdered by those very people. Later, the following words were found inscribed in his Bible.

He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, which is life on this earth, in order to gain what he cannot lose, eternal life with God forever.

There couldn't be a better commentary on the words of Mark 8 that we've just been looking at. Life is hard because we live in a fallen world. But God has a plan that one day all this will be redeemed. And anyone, anyone who turns to him through Christ will share in that amazing plan too. Well, thank you very much for listening.

[20 : 11] I'd like to just give you one question to think about and perhaps discuss overpudding. And it's this. What in the talk has most struck you about Jesus? Please don't talk about my dress or my top, whether you like the colour or not.

It may not be your colour. I'm winter. I'm not spring. But think about that question. What in the talk has most struck you about Jesus? And thank you for being such good listeners. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.