

God in the Hurricane

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[0:00] From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen. I should preach a sermon that is short and sweet. I don't know about sweet, but it will be short, so there's a plus.

Now, have any of you been watching the news? Anyone? Now, we've been confronted with a lot of stories that are absolutely ridiculous, but we've also been seeing some real news, thinking about the impact of Hurricane Harvey, the effect it's had on so many people, the devastation that it's left in its wake.

The latest count I saw put the death toll somewhere around 45 people. But I think that the death toll, as awful as it is, doesn't really capture the amount of suffering caused by this storm. Awful suffering. We're talking about displaced people. We're talking about homes destroyed. We're talking about so much lost. As I think about it, I think back to 2005. I'm going to show my age a little bit here. I was a teenager then.

[2:13] And I was a fairly new believer. Remember watching the news, seeing what was happening in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. I watched the account of lives lost, of human suffering, of all of the awful stuff that was happening.

Quite honestly, it affected me so much that I wept to see other people suffering so much. The month after I faced the vision of human suffering from a distance, I encountered suffering up close and personal.

Now, I was a senior in high school at the time, and I couldn't have been prepared for what was about to happen. One morning, I'm getting ready for school, and I get a phone call.

The voice on the line tells me that one of my best friends had committed suicide during the night. He, like me, was just a kid, had his whole life ahead of him, as the saying goes, and he had taken his own life.

So, at 17 years old, I find myself serving as a pallbearer at my friend's funeral. So, as a new believer, I find myself asking, Where is God when these things happen? Where is he?

[3:34] A year and a half later, summer of 2007, I'm in Army basic combat training at Fort Benning, Georgia. I've developed a really strong, good working relationship with one of my drill sergeants, which is something that you really want to have when you're in basic training.

Now, as an enlisted soldier, I was a chaplain assistant, and he knew that, so he took to calling me Chappy. One time, we were going over some material, and he was rather pleased with my performance.

So, he says to me, Well done, Chappy. Did the Lord teach you how to do that? I responded, Drill sergeant, the Lord taught me everything that I know. One day, I'm in the barracks cleaning my assault rifle.

Most of my platoon had gone to exchange their torn uniforms, and all of mine were still in one piece. So, I stayed behind. There were just a few of us around. And all of a sudden, my drill sergeant opens up to me.

He starts talking about all the horrible things that he had seen. And he was an infantryman with extensive combat experience and a confirmed kill count. So, you can probably imagine he had seen some pretty awful things.

[4:48] He wanted to know, If there is a God, why do these things happen? Well, he was asking the questions that I had asked myself not too long before.

And I hoped that by God's grace, that what I had learned had been helpful to him. Sometimes we ask it this way.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Or sometimes we ask, Where is God when I'm hurting? Or when something awful happens? Well, let's look at the first question for a second.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Here's another question in response. Who are these good people who are good enough that they deserve never to have trouble in this life?

Well, one thing I know, I'm not one of them. Now, I had a seminary professor who, when he was asked how he was doing, would always say this, Well, considering the depths of my depravity and the state of the world, I'm doing okay.

[6:02] On most days, that's probably the best any of us could say. Because, guess what? We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I don't think that any of us would want what it is that we really deserve.

And the amazing thing is that in Christ, we don't get what we deserve. Because he took what we deserve. The curse of the law. He took death. So we wouldn't have to. He carried the full burden of our sins so that we wouldn't have to.

But even if that's true, even if we know that we've sinned and that Christ has suffered, even if we know that, we're still tempted to ask, Where is God when I'm hurting?

Where is God in the storm? Where is God when the waves are crashing? And it seems that it's more than I can bear. Where is he then? Where is God when human suffering is at its greatest? Only the Christian can say this. I see my God hanging on a cross, taking my suffering on himself and bearing my burdens.

[7:17] Only the Christian can say that. The Muslim can't say that. The Buddhist can't say that. The neo-pagan can't say that. But the Christian can say it. Can say, My God loved me so much that he chose to become a man and to hang on a cross to save me, to bear my iniquities, to bear my griefs.

And Jesus is teaching his disciples in our gospel text for today that he would do this. We read from that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Now, Peter doesn't like this idea one bit, does he? Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord, he said. This shall never happen to you.

Now, before we think too harshly of Peter, let's be real for a second. Peter is expressing what we all, on some level, think that we want.

We want a God who is like Superman, who swoops in at the first sign of trouble, beats up all the bad guys, and that's that. And that is all fine and good until we stop to consider this.

[8:54] What if I'm the bad guy? What can Superman do to save me from my own self, from my own sin, and my own wickedness?

What can he do? Not a lot. But what can Jesus do? There is a different story. It's a story that I know well because it's my story.

And the story is this. While I was yet a sinner, Jesus died for me. While I was God's enemy, Jesus died for me. While I was blind, Jesus died for me.

And while I was lost, Jesus died for me. We think we want a Superman who conquers by beating up the bad guys and calling it a day.

But what we really need is a Savior who saves the unworthy. Now, don't get me wrong. There is coming a day when God will with a strong arm put an end to evil for good decisively and finally.

[10:07] But to do that, He will have to judge the world. And those who have not received God's forgiveness in Christ will have to answer for the sins they've committed.

So God could swoop in, put an end to sin, to evil, to the pain of living in a fallen world at any moment. But the Bible tells us that He hasn't yet done this because He is patient toward those who haven't come to repentance.

And thank God He is. It's what we need not what we think we want. So, wondering where God is when times are tough, look to the cross for your answer.

that is a comfort as we go through the pains of living in a fallen world, isn't it? Because the reality is that even the Christian life, our lives as Christians where we are privileged above all others because of the benefits of Christ, even that is full of trials, full of challenges, isn't it?

In our Gospel passage, Jesus tells us that as His disciples we're going to have to take up our crosses and follow Him. That means that we're not in charge.

[11:35] That we're not simply out seeking our own desires and sometimes that's going to hurt. Because let's be honest, taking up our crosses and following Jesus is painful.

I mean, some of the painful stuff we go through, of course, is our own fault. Sometimes it's just the consequences of living in a fallen and broken world. But no matter what, no matter where it comes from, even as believers, even as God's beloved children, we have to realize, yeah, sometimes He lets these things come our way.

He lets these things come our way, but let's remember, we are never alone. And everything that comes our way comes our way because God intends for us to become more like Christ.

And that comes through carrying the cross, doesn't it? The great writer George MacDonald once said this, the Son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His.

What are His sufferings like? Death, but death that leads to life, weeping that lasts through the night with the promise of joy that comes in the morning, hope that is stronger than our pain, life that is stronger than death and stands in victory over it, the promise that no matter how bad things seem, God is in control and God is with us and He can bring joy and redemption no matter the circumstances.

[13:34] Now, why do bad things happen to good people? That's probably the wrong question because the more stunning reality is that good things happen to bad people.

My life hasn't all been sunshine, as one hymn would put it, but it has certainly been better than I deserve. Now, I think the better question is this one.

Where is God when we suffer? What hope do we have? And the amazing answer is that if we want to know, we look to the cross. We look to the cross where God's love and God's sorrow meet as we look to our crucified Savior.

We see the sorrow of a God who suffers with us and we see the love of a God who is making all things new as He promised, who will defeat sin and death forever and wipe away our every tear.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit. Amen.