

Saved for Service

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn your Bibles back to Acts 21 and 22 as we continue our series through the book of Acts. Well, a few years ago when I was working as a teacher at a high school, a fellow teacher who was sitting next to me at the office asked me out of the blue, Brother, why do you think God allows his people to suffer?

Now, there's a number of ways to answer this question. In a purely intellectual context, like in a debate, for example, we could talk about the place of God's all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good character in suffering and whether or not the suffering contradicts God's goodness.

But if we know that the question comes from a personal loss or grief, then instead of trying to rationalize suffering, we could try to sympathize. Instead, you know, we could listen to them or cry with them or both.

I'm going to tell you what I said a bit later. But for now, our text today could be Luke's way of answering the question.

Luke is the author of the book of Acts, and his answer is through a story. He continues the story. Last week, we read about Paul being captured by the Jews in the temple, and then he got beaten up, and then after that, he got captured again by the Roman soldiers.

[1 : 4 1] And the text says that that experience was ordained by God. Why would God ordain the suffering of Paul?

It's quite a scary experience, and it's an experience that many Christians in many countries have as well, being captured and being tortured because of their faith.

And if reading that makes us wonder why God allows his people to suffer, why doesn't he save them? Then what happens in our text today could be an answer, one answer.

So in verse 37 to 38, As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, May I say something to you?

Oh, do you speak Greek? He replied. Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led 4,000 terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago? So Paul was seized and was on the way to the barracks.

[2 : 4 9] Remember from Peter's sermon last week, the barracks were up from the temple, up the stairs. And he was probably carried to the barracks, probably to be tortured and interrogated.

And on the way there, he politely asked to be allowed to say something. Now, the commander was surprised that Paul spoke Greek. He probably thought that Paul was a native Jerusalem Jew who only spoke Hebrew and Aramaic.

But Paul's ability to speak Greek made the commander a bit suspicious about who he was. You see, Greek was spoken widely in Egypt.

And apparently there was an Egyptian rebel who had started a revolt to overtake Jerusalem. So the commander thought, oh, maybe this is him. Maybe he's back now.

And maybe that's why the Jews were beating him up. But now in verse 39, Paul answered, So Paul was born in Tarsus, which was a prominent city in the Roman Empire back then because of its political, economic and intellectual life.

[4 : 13] And so saying that he was from Tarsus is probably like saying that someone is from London today, you know, cultured and educated. And suddenly Paul became a respected man in the eyes of the commander.

And so in verse 40, the commander allowed Paul to speak to the crowd. Now, remember, this was a huge crowd, right?

Early, earlier in the story from last week, the whole city was aroused. The whole of Jerusalem was aroused. And people came into the temple from all over Jerusalem to seize Paul and to beat him up.

And now Paul could speak to the entire crowd being guarded by hundreds of Roman soldiers. like a royalty. The crowds that were beating him up are now suddenly listening to him.

So one event after another unfolds and then suddenly Paul is in the position to actually evangelize to the Jews. So if last week we were left wondering why God allows his people to suffer, here we might be able to see a hint.

[5 : 42] Paul, Luke gives us a hint of God's sovereignty in Paul's suffering. Paul being, Paul's being in custody doesn't hinder God's mission.

It actually offers a new opportunity for evangelism to continue towards a different audience. God can use dire circumstances for his kingdom.

He is sovereign. And so that's basically what I said to the fellow teacher of mine who asked me a few years ago. I told him a story. I said, let me tell you about my late auntie, my mom's sister.

my mom and all her sisters have been Christians since they were very young. But their parents, my grandparents, were not.

They were very devoted animistic Buddhists. Now this auntie that I'm telling you about was the youngest daughter. And when she was 17, she was involved in a traffic accident that threw him into a coma.

[6 : 56] Now after several days, she gained consciousness. And so her parents, expecting that she might not have long to leave, asked her whether she had any last request.

Her one request was, Mom, Dad, please consider following Jesus. And because it was her last request, my grandparents could not say no.

And so after her death, they fulfilled their promise. They went to church and after a while, they both became Christians. They got baptized and became very much involved in various ministries and fellowships until their death.

After I told this fellow teacher of mine about this story, I said, ultimately, I don't know why God allows his people to endure specific sufferings, but I know that he is sovereign over all sufferings and we can trust him.

He used the suffering of my late auntie to save two other people for which her sisters, my mom included, have always been thankful. They're not thankful that their sister died, but they're thankful that her death converted my grandparents.

[8 : 22] And God's been using her suffering to encourage her family members. I've never met my auntie, but this story has been told over and over again in my family that it has a legacy.

And I said to this fellow teacher of mine, if you're encouraged by this story now, that means God is still using her suffering to advance his kingdom and encourage his people.

How have you seen God's sovereignty in your experience of hardships? Perhaps he has used your suffering to grow you to be more like Christ?

Perhaps he has used it to bring others to Jesus? Perhaps like my late auntie's suffering, he has used it to encourage his people?

Just like Paul's suffering. We're still encouraged by it every time we read it thousands of years after. In any case, we can trust God in our suffering because he is sovereign over it and he can use it to advance his kingdom just like what he did with Paul's suffering here.

[9 : 45] It doesn't make it any easier to endure suffering, but it enables us to trust him. And so, Paul was given an opportunity to speak to the crowd.

And so he did. He started by giving his testimony about his past life as a hardcore Jew, an extremist, perhaps, in chapter 22, verses 1 to 5.

He says, Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. And Paul said, I am a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia but brought up in this city, Jerusalem.

I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this way, the way of Christ, the Christian way, to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison and throwing them into prison as the high priest and all the council can themselves testify.

I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

[11 : 15] Now here, Paul recounted his past life before he had become a Christian. So he grew up in Jerusalem and was educated under Gamaliel who is often called the most influential and significant Pharisaic educator in the first century.

So Paul was educated as a Pharisee, grew up as a Pharisee and so Paul was zealous for the law and he participated in persecuting Christians.

By introducing himself in this way, he found a common ground with his audience. They were able to relate to him. Paul was formerly an enemy of Christians just like them.

So what changed him? An encounter with the reason, sovereign, Lord Jesus. In verse 6-9 About noon, as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me.

I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord? I asked. I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting, he replied.

[12 : 36] My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. me. And so, what happened?

At about noon, meaning when the sun was at its brightest, Paul saw a light that was brighter even than the sun. It was the reason, Jesus, who revealed himself to him.

Paul was very much affected by the experience that he fell to the ground. And then in verse 10 to 11, what shall I do, Lord?

I asked. Get up, the Lord said, and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do. My companions led me by the hand into Damascus because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

This is the turning point, isn't it? The enemy of Christ finally started calling him Lord.

[13 : 40] Lord, what shall I do? Here, Paul is giving his defense in front of the Jewish crowd for two things, the resurrection of Christ and the legitimacy of Christianity.

Christ has indeed reasoned from the dead and Paul has seen him and it changed his life significantly. Someone used to say to me, one of the strongest evidence for Christianity is the fact that Jesus' brothers and enemy both believed in him.

Paul believed in him and if Jesus was indeed reasoned from the dead then he's truly the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for in the Old Testament for thousands of years and the Christians then were not against Judaism but were actually the true fulfillment of the messianic promise of the Old Testament.

That's the implication of Paul's speech. And here we see that Paul's turning point was enabled by again the sovereignty of God in this case shown through the sovereignty of Jesus.

Jesus was so sovereign that just one encounter with him could turn his enemy's life upside down. Even the command in verse 10 there get up and go into Damascus and wait for further command.

[15 : 19] it echoes God's call to Abraham in Genesis get up and go to Canaan and it sounds like a military commander's command to his soldier go there and wait for a further command.

Jesus was able to sovereignly turn his enemy into his soldier only through one single encounter. Paul went to Damascus to capture Christians but instead he's captured by Jesus and then he was sent to Damascus not as someone who would imprison Christians but as the agent of Jesus.

Jesus did not just show his sovereignty in converting Paul but also in healing him in verse 12 to 13 in Damascus a man named Ananias came to see me he was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there he stood beside me and said brother Saul receive your sight and at that very moment I was able to see him so Paul shared his testimony about being of being healed by Ananias who is who was a devout Jew but in chapter 9 way back in chapter 9 was already introduced as a Christian a follower of Christ and so again this shows the sovereign power of Christ who uses his people to heal others I have a testimony of being miraculously healed as well you might have one or two as well and that adds to the strength of your faith testimony as we testify about the sovereignty and the power of Jesus

Jesus is sovereign in the blink of an eye he turned his enemy into one of his primary agents and then he showed his sovereign power by healing him well there's no resisting him now Paul has seen what the sovereign king Jesus could do there's no resisting him now this is an example of the doctrine of irresistible grace isn't it God's grace cannot be resisted now the doctrine of irresistible grace is not about God forcing himself on humans and then we're forced to take his grace even though we don't want to no it's about this when we encounter Jesus we find his power so great that we can't help but bow down or fall on our faces onto the ground and we find his beauty so overwhelming that we can't help but desire him we're not forced to take him we desire him we find his holiness so attractive that we can't help but follow him and his ways

Jesus truly is irresistible he is sovereign and when we encounter him we can't help but say Lord you are Lord what shall I do and there have been so many people across history who had who had strongly opposed Christianity but when they encountered the reason Jesus they just could not resist his beauty people like Rosaria Butterfield or Lee Strobel or C.S.

[19 : 16] Lewis or Augustine or Paul and perhaps yourself how have you seen God's sovereignty in your conversion or at least in your story of faith if you were born a Christian how has encountering the reason sovereign Lord Jesus changed your life like it changed Paul's life it certainly has changed my life I encourage you to think about that so that you can share it with the people around you when they ask about your testimony but just like our faith story doesn't stop at conversion but continues with a life of service so did Paul's in verse 14 to 18 then

Ananias said the God the God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the righteous one that is Jesus and to hear words from his mouth you will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard and now what are you waiting for get up be baptized and wash your sins away calling on Jesus name when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to me quick he said leave Jerusalem immediately because the people here will not accept your testimony about me so again Paul shows the Jewish crowd that is not against Judaism he still went to the Jewish temple to pray even after his conversion Ananias called the God whom Paul had just encountered the God of our ancestors meaning the same

God as the God of the Jews he's not some foreign God he's the same God as the God of the Old Testament in verse 17 to 18 there Paul shows that Jesus is the Lord of the Jewish temple he can appear in the Jewish temple which is the house of Yahweh the implication is simple for the Jewish crowd that was listening to Paul it means that Christianity is the true continuation of Judaism because the Messiah that the Old Testament Jews had been waiting for was here and he's Jesus and he's followed by the Christians basically what Paul is saying here you're persecuting Christians but they're actually the true continual followers of the Old Testament promise for us today it's a good reminder that Jesus has always been understood as coming from the

God of the Old Testament and even one with him you know Jesus said I and the Father are one so there are no two different gods the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament no there's only one God and Jesus is one with him both scripture and the testimonies of early Christians connect Jesus with the Old Testament God but notice here that Paul was chosen not only to be saved by Jesus not only to be healed but also to be sent to be the witness of Jesus and if the Jews in Jerusalem don't accept his testimony then he is to go to the Gentiles and proclaim Jesus there but Paul did not really like it so he replied in verse 19 to 21 Lord

I replied these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you and when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him but the Lord said to me go I will send you far away to the Gentiles Paul's reply shows that perhaps he felt much more equipped to proclaim the good news to the Jews you know these people he's got a good reputation among these people someone who was zealous for the law someone who had persecuted their enemies he wanted to stay and proclaim the gospel to the Jews but Jesus said no I will send you to the Gentiles so here again we see the sovereignty of Jesus not only in turning his enemies from being against to being for him but also his sovereignty in sending them to be his agents

[24 : 40] Paul showed the crowd that he's not against the Jews in fact he wanted to stay and serve them but he brought the gospel to the Gentiles because Jesus the sovereign king said so and after witnessing Jesus' sovereign power Paul could not resist Jesus can sovereignly use not only our suffering not only our conversion but also our lives with all their strengths and weaknesses with all their brokenness and past mistakes for the sake of his service and he does sovereignly call us each one of us not only for salvation but also for lives of service I think

I've told you the story of my Molucan friend before but let me retell and continue the story when I was about 10 years old and living in Java there was a new kid in our neighborhood who was just a bit older than me and later on we found out that he had come from the Molucan islands from the eastern part of Indonesia and we found out that he had lost his entire family he was an orphan he told the story of how they were caught by the Islamic because they were a Christian family and this was during the civil war back in late 90s and early 2000s and one by one they were caught and one by one they were interrogated and they were asked whose follower are you and each one of them said I'm a follower of Christ and each one of them was butchered limb by limb in front of this kid and when it was time for him to be interrogated for some reason one of the

Islamic soldiers stopped him stopped the people and said let me handle this kid and so he took this kid to the Nibai harbor got him on a boat and said leave this island and so he was saved and he escaped to Java and he said to us I've sometimes wondered why I'm the only one in my family who's saved why that guy chose to spare me but I think I know why now God has saved me so I could come here and share my testimony to encourage my brothers and sisters on another island now I get invited by multiple churches to share my testimony so people could hear about the powerful Jesus who has powerfully saved me this kid knew that he was saved not so that he could live life for himself he was saved for service

Jesus had shown his sovereign power to him by miraculously saving him and now he had to bear witness to that how has God sovereignly saved you how has God sovereignly called you to service and bear witness to his sovereign power your testimony of conversion life of service and even suffering can encourage other Christians and even help other people who don't know Jesus to encounter Jesus for themselves so I encourage you to use your testimonies to encourage others and help people around you to see Jesus just like Paul did here in this text God is sovereign so let's pray father father we thank you that you are sovereign and that your son

Jesus is the sovereign king help us to use our lives to proclaim the sovereignty of Jesus and his great mercy so that people around us can see Jesus as well through us and through our testimonies in Jesus name we pray amen