

Should We Fear Suffering?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 May 2015

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] And it's a challenging topic to talk about, and for some of you, probably a challenging topic to hear as well, because I know some of you are going through quite a difficult time at the moment. What you're going through will be quite specific to you, and everyone responds differently to suffering.

So it's hard in a general talk like this to cover everything, everything that will be specific to you. I do hope that you'll find some help tonight from this talk, but there may be things which I say which actually don't apply to you, or are not particularly helpful to you.

And so if you have questions at the end, and you don't feel comfortable asking them during the Q&A, then please come and talk to me afterwards. I'd love to be able to do that with you. Okay, I hope everyone had a chance to participate in the survey at the door.

There's no door price, unfortunately. But I ask you to evaluate the following statement. Suffering should always be avoided. Well, the results are in, and I think I've got it on the slide there.

And it says that actually a large proportion of you disagree somewhat or strongly. In fact, the percentages there are even greater than the Word Sunday congregation in the afternoon.

[1 : 20] Now, I have to say, I'm sort of encouraged by these percentages, but I'm also thinking that if we were to ask this same question outside of church, in our society, in the Western world, we'll get a very different answer.

And we'll get an answer which is weighted towards strongly or somewhat agree. Because I think that we in the Western world seem to have made that a priority in our life, to avoid suffering, if not most of the time, then all of the time.

Now, at the most mundane, we can see this in the sort of the modern conveniences that we have, all designed to make our life easier. So when we need fresh water, all we need to do is turn on the tap.

But there are actually people in other parts of the world today who actually have to walk miles to the local well, fill their buckets, and then walk all the way back, hoping along the way not to spill, because then they have to do it all over again.

The same goes for cooking and heating. All we're required to do now is just turn on the stove or turn on the heater. But again, there are people in this world, they have to actually go out probably into the forest to chop wood, bring them back, try and start a fire.

[2 : 44] And those of us who have been to youth camp with Jimmy would know how difficult that could be. And all of that requires time and physical effort. And so for them, hardship is actually part and parcel of daily life.

Now, more seriously though, we see the enormous effort and resources that are put into eliminating suffering in the area of health. The time and money, for example, that goes into, say, finding a cure for cancer.

And even the language we use is insightful, because we say things like, we want to fight cancer, we're not going to be defeated by it. And all that suggests that suffering is the enemy.

This year when Paul Barker, the previous vicar of this church, spoke at Ridley College's graduation, some of you I think might have been there, he commented on the lengths Australians go to to keep ourselves safe.

So if somebody spilled something in a shopping centre, what happens? The cleaners get to it immediately, don't they? Because the last thing they want is for someone to slip and fall and then hurt themselves.

[3 : 55] Now, Paul now works as a missionary in Asia, and he said that when he was in Yangon recently, he walked into a gaping hole by the roadside, probably that deep or something, and he

hurt himself.

And this was a hole that had been there when he visited months earlier. Someone or no one had actually gotten around to fixing it. That would never happen here, he said.

And of course, he's right. Now, we know why shopping centres react so quickly. They don't want to be sued. But even that says something, doesn't it? That we're outraged that we could ever be exposed to that sort of risk or that sort of suffering.

Now, I raise all these examples, not because I think we should be indifferent to suffering, no, but to just give us an insight into how we think as a society and the lengths we go to to avoid suffering.

But why do we think like that? How do we get here in the first place? Particularly when other parts of the world react very differently. They're less outraged by suffering and more willing to live with it.

[5 : 04] Well, I want to suggest, firstly, three influences which I believe are so persuasive in society that they shape our culture. And if you've got an outline in front of you, then you'll be able to follow along as well.

But these influences shape not only how we think as individuals, but they actually shape how whole of society thinks. So the first is the promise of technological progress.

And here I'm not talking just about the fact of progress. I'm talking about its promise. Implicitly, progress promises that not only should we be able to avoid suffering, we actually can.

We've come so far that if only we put our minds to it, we could eliminate it. All we need to do is harness human ingenuity and creativity and we can solve any problem that presents itself.

And so with an attitude like that, whenever suffering arises, we don't think first to endure or to seek divine help. No, our first response is to try and solve it.

[6 : 16] Why settle for endurance when you can eliminate it? Now coupled with that is the second point, what I call the primacy of self.

That is, society now places the individual's view at the center of his or her existence. We tell each other that our goal in life is self-fulfillment, finding happiness, following our dreams and desires.

You determine your own path in life. You get to choose your own adventure. You make of it what you will. In ages past, humans recognized a reality that was out there.

The world was created and ordered a certain way and our goal was to conform our souls to that reality. But now, in this age, reality is what we make of it.

And so we try to change the world to conform with our reality. So C.S. Lewis in his book *Abolition of Man* puts it like this, for the wise men of old, the carnival problem had been how to conform the soul to reality.

[7 : 21] And the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline and virtue. Now in this modern age, the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men or humans.

And the solution is a technique. I just want you to take a look at this latest ad from the ANZ Bank because I think it just captures this view so well.

So let's play that if we can. Okay. The world is about taking great strides and leaving a delicate footprint.

The world is a beautiful piece of engineering. The world is about the world.

The world is about challenging yourself. The world is home to some very clever humans.

[8 : 30] The world is about playing without fear. The world's innovations need more nurturing.

The world is what you make it. ANZ. Your world, your way. It's a great ad, isn't it? Your world, your way.

What an inspiring tagline. But is it true? I mean, since when was this my world and the way it works my way?

And what when suffering hits? When we finally realize that try as we may, we cannot subdue reality to our wishes. We've become so wedded to our dreams that when disappointment comes, instead of doing the work of soul making that is cultivating patience and self-control, we try and do what C.S. Lewis observed, subdue reality to keep our dreams alive.

And I think even us as Christians tend to have that same attitude today. Just notice how we often pray. We ask to be healed. That hits our list of requests.

[9 : 44] right at the top. But do we also ask for patience and humility? Maybe as an afterthought. Maybe as a distant second. Only we're not healed.

No, God, we'd rather be healed. Thank you very much. And related to both these points is our third point. And that is, our culture has taught us to focus on the present life. To be preoccupied with this

present world.

And so, as our society has become increasingly secular, godless, in other words, there's no longer any real hope of the life to come. This is now the life that only matters.

Here and now, in this present world. Whatever happiness and joy we want in life, we've got to find it here and now. Because death would end it all.

And so again, what place does suffering have? None. because all it does is it ruins our joy and our pursuit of happiness. So no wonder then that by and large I think society thinks that suffering is to be avoided at all cost.

[10:50] We've built this entire edifice that's so heavily invested in removing suffering that when suffering comes and it does, it will, we don't really know what to do with it.

We don't have a robust framework on which to rest on, to make sense of it. And so, what do we do instead? Well, we turn to, we medicate to numb our pain, don't we?

Or worse, we turn to alcohol and other harmful substances. Well, let's turn now to what the Bible has to say where I think we'll find a very different perspective, something that's radically counter-cultural.

Now, for Christians, the Bible is what defines our reality. It helps us to understand our world, its moral contours and its cosmic order. And if you've read the Bible, and I know many of you have, you'll be amazed to find how much it has to say about suffering.

It's not afraid to talk about it. In the Old Testament, three entire books are dedicated to it in one shape or form. Anyone want to guess which books I'm thinking about?

[12:01] Job, yeah. Lamentations, yeah. Someone said Habakkuk maybe as well. The other one I had is Ecclesiastes. Almost one-third of the Psalms are laments, songs that are given to express grief and despair.

And if you take a look at your handout today in the middle, I've only included a small selection of New Testament passages. I could have filled the back page as well. I just ran out of time.

All talking about suffering. And so, in fact, we could do a three-week or three-month series on suffering alone. But given the time we have tonight, I just want to mention three main points.

And the first is this, that the Bible tells us that suffering is a reminder that the world is not all good. From the moment Adam and Eve disobeyed God, we live under the curse of that rebellion.

Work is full of toil, relationship plagued by conflict, there's sickness, disease, and then eventually death. Suffering is a part of the fallen world and we can't get rid of it.

[13:04] Whenever we suffer or whenever we see others suffer, it reminds us that the world is not as it should be. Even the physical world, Paul says in Romans 8, is under this curse.

I've got the verses on the screen. That creation is subjected to frustration, longing to be liberated from its bondage to decay, groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

All to remind us of the sin in this world and not just Adam and Eve's sin but ours as well. We as a society, we're so quick to blame God for suffering.

But what about the suffering that we cause? How much less suffering would there be, do you think, if humans actually did the right thing by each other? And just as physical pain warns us, for example, that our hands are on a boiling kettle, so suffering awakens our soul to the sin in this world.

We should, it should cause that kind of reaction in us, that this isn't right, we're crying out to God, we should be longing for justice. That's what should happen when we see suffering.

[14:16] Now sometimes, suffering is a direct consequence of our own folly. So if I steal from my employer and get the sack, then my suffering is a direct reminder of my own evil.

But often, there isn't this one-to-one correlation. It's not so neat. Sometimes, evildoers will get away with their crimes while those who do good will suffer. And so the second point I make is this, that suffering is still a reality even for those who do good.

In our first reading tonight by Esther, the story of Joseph is a case in point. Joseph did the right thing. He didn't touch Potiphar's wife even though she was really coming on strong.

And yet, he suffered for it. He ended up in jail. Suffering comes to those who do good because in a sinful world, evildoers sometimes succeed in their evil deeds.

And often, who they target are those who do good because evil hates what is good. Paul goes so far as to say that we should expect it.

[15:23] So in 2 Timothy, in chapter 3, in verse 12, and that's number 8 in your handout, the 8th passage, he says, everyone who wants to lead a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

And we were going through 2 Timothy just a few weeks ago and that was what we learned. But this truth applies as well even when the suffering cannot be clearly connected to the hands of evildoers. So when Jesus asked about his disciples, remember when they saw a man born, sorry, when Jesus was asked by his disciples when they saw a man born blind in John chapter 9 in verse 2, remember what they said?

They said, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind? That was the assumption that someone had to have sinned. Jesus replied, neither.

But this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. And that brings us to our third point that the Bible says that suffering is a resource which God uses to achieve good.

[16:26] In the case of the man born blind, it was to display the works of God in him. That is, the power of God when he was healed. But with the other New Testament passages, if you look, we see the breadth of the good that God was doing.

So our second reading today in 1 Peter, that's number two on the handout. Peter says there that the good being done is the testing of our faith. Suffering has come, Peter says, so that your faith of greater worth than gold and gold perishes even though refined by fire may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

James, in the first passage, says the same thing. We are to rejoice, he says, when we face trials of many kinds. Why? Because the testing of our faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that we may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Our culture's view is that good only comes when there's no suffering. But the Bible teaches that good comes not in the absence of suffering but through suffering because God is using it to achieve his good purposes in us.

God's number one goal for us is not to give us a comfortable life or to take away all the pain and suffering. No, his number one goal is to purify us, to make our faith strong so that we become mature.

[17:56] for what he has in mind ultimately is glory, a glory that we share with Christ. So look there in passage number 4, 2 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul says, therefore we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day for our light and momentary troubles.

It's very easy to say that, isn't it? Although, very hard when we go through it. But that's the truth. Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. Then again in passage 5, Now, if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may share in his glory.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. So friends, to believe in Christ is to share in this glorious inheritance.

We are heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ. Creation will be ours to possess and rule with Christ. This glory is hidden for now, but it will be revealed in full one day.

[19:11] But in both passages, can you notice that the only way to this glory is through suffering? Because we only share in Christ's glory if we also share in his suffering.

Jesus himself had to suffer to be glorified. So, why would we expect anything different for ourselves? In fact, for Jesus, it was more than that, wasn't it?

Because he started in glory with the Father and actually he left that glory and entered this world suffering willingly in a fallen world. Suffering even though he did good.

Actually, more precisely, he suffered because he did good. And through that, God achieved the greatest good in this world, bringing salvation by the death of Jesus to all who trust in him.

Friends, this is the internal logic that is woven into the fabric of our world. And we often miss it because it's so counter to what the Houcher tells us. God's greatest work is done in the midst of suffering.

[20:15] not in the absence of it. What Jesus accomplished on the cross is full evidence of that. And if we've missed this point, then we miss a basic tenet of the Christian faith.

Suffering is not an optional extra for those, you know, who are extra keen, you know, you want bonus points or something. No, it's integral to the Christian faith. I don't know whether any of you have read this book but Tim Keller's book, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* has quite

a few testimonies of people going through suffering.

And there's a testimony here of Mark and Martha, not me, somebody else. And they tell their story as Mark approaches the tenth anniversary of being diagnosed with ALS or motor neuron disease. So, if you remember the ice bucket challenge from last year, that's what they were raising awareness to. And as Mark tells his story, he's in a wheelchair, unable to move anything but his eyes.

When diagnosed, Mark and Martha were married 25 years and they had four children. And they had always been an active family. So, Mark's quick physical demise from this illness was particularly devastating.

[21 : 23] Anyway, at one point in the interview, Mark makes this comment and I'm going to read that to you. But incidentally, the only way Mark is able to communicate is through a computer. reading the eye movements.

That's how he, that's the only way he can talk to others. Anyway, that's how he's managed to say what he's saying. And what he says is this. I played sports in my younger years and I always hated sitting on the bench.

One day, just after my diagnosis, I cried out to God that I thought I was pulled out of the game when I still had something to offer. God's response to me was this.

You have been on the sidelines for some time. You are now going into the game. And so he says, I'm hanging on to the truth that God is doing much that I can't see and that in his economy it is worth the suffering.

But it is also a daily exercise of faith. Many of us, me included, we think we do our best for God when there's no suffering, where we're at our peak, when nothing is slowing us down.

[22 : 28] But just like Jesus, God actually does his greatest work in us through suffering. Painful though it is, suffering is not something to fear, nor is it a sign that God does not love us.

On the contrary, it is evidence that God is still working in us, changing us for his glory and ours. When we suffer, we're coming off the bench.

We're actually in the game, in God's game. Not in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of God. And so my friends, I think one of the best things we can learn in life is to suffer well.

There's no guarantee of avoiding suffering in life. And so the best thing to do, I think, is to be prepared for suffering. And I think it's better to learn it younger while you're young rather than when you're older.

So if what the Bible says is true, and I believe it is, where do we go from here? How do we learn to suffer well? Well, let me just offer two things. First, if suffering is the way to glory, then we must be prepared to walk through it rather than away from it.

[23 : 37] Now, I'm not saying that then you go out and then you just go and find suffering where you can, you know, walk through it. But in life, there are often times where we must determine whether to choose right knowing that we will suffer, persecution particularly, or we will then avoid it but do wrong instead.

It may mean being willing to endure hardship for our faith, standing up for what's right, speaking up for the weak. But avoiding suffering must not be our number one goal.

Instead, doing what's right before God should be. We have a choice. Do the right thing even though it's suffering, or avoid suffering but displease God.

And I think we need to do that. Do what's right. Well, second, suffering well means that when suffering does come, whether we've gone into it deliberately or it's just come upon us, we need to choose to turn to God rather than away from it.

Even though we may not understand why we're suffering, even though we may feel like we're far from God through that suffering, we can always choose to allow suffering to draw us closer to God.

[24 : 55] To continue to put ourselves under His authority and allow Him to achieve His good purposes in us. For He knows firsthand what suffering means. He knows firsthand what we're going through.

Because His Son, Jesus, suffered as well. So in other words, we're not turning to a God who is unmoved by our suffering. And even if He doesn't choose to reveal everything to us, He knows exactly what's happening.

He knows what He's doing. He knows exactly the glory that He's going to bring to our lives. The glory that far outweighs the suffering that He's putting us through. You see, I don't know about you,

but to me, without God, it's very hard to make sense of suffering.

It's just like that problem of evil that we considered last week. But when we believe in Christ, then we have great confidence that no matter what suffering we're going through, all suffering, if we suffer well, will end well.

All suffering will end in us sharing in Christ's glory. So let us suffer well for the sake of Jesus. Let's pray.

[26 : 08] Father, I want to pray particularly for those who might be suffering right now. God, I pray that you might encourage them to persevere.

Help them to see, perhaps not even why all this is happening, but help them to see that you are a God that cares for them, that you are bringing them to share in Christ's glory.

So strengthen their faith and comfort them right now. For the rest of us, Lord, we ask that you will give us the courage, give us the joy, help us not to fear when we have to do right, knowing that we will suffer.

Help us when we are suffering not to turn to you and or turn away from you in anger, but to turn to you, turn to you in humility, turn to you in reliance and dependence.

Help us to draw closer and make the best use of suffering when it does come into our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.