

Saved to Serve

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[0 : 0 0] Ask me, just out of the blue, just ask me, Brother, why do you think God allows his people to suffer? Now, there's a number of ways to answer that 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.

Perhaps talk about whether 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, perhaps we could try to sympathize instead.

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

Luke is the author of the book of Acts. Because last week we read about Paul being captured by the Jews in the temple, and then he got bitten up, and then he was captured by the Roman soldiers.

[1 : 1 7] And the text says that it's been ordained by God. Why would God ordain Paul's suffering? 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 for their faith, but also for other things, why doesn't he just save them?

Then what happens in our text today could be an answer, one answer at least. And Luke answers that question using a story as he continues the story.

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 remember from last week, Paul was seized, and now he's on the way to the barracks.

[2 : 3 3] Remember from last week from Pete's description, the barracks are like up the staircase from the temple courtyard. So now he's on the way to the barracks, up the stairs, probably to be tortured and interrogated by the Roman soldiers.

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

But Paul's ability to speak Greek made the commander 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.

And so the commander thought, oh, maybe this is him. Maybe this is the Egyptian rebel. Maybe now he's back to overtake Jerusalem, and that's why the crowds were beating him up.

But no, in verse 39, Paul answered, no, I am a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city.

[3 : 50] Please let me speak to the people. Paul was from Tarsus. He was born in Tarsus, which was a prominent city back then in the Roman Empire because of its political, economic, and intellectual life.

So saying that he was from Tarsus is probably like today saying that someone comes from London, for example, you know, cultured, educated.

And suddenly Paul became a respected man in the eyes of the commander. And so in verse 40, he allowed, the commander allowed Paul to speak to the crowd.

Now, remember that this was a huge crowd. Because earlier in the story from last week, the whole city was aroused.

The whole city of Jerusalem was aroused, and people came from all over the city of Jerusalem to the temple to seize Paul. And now Paul could speak from up the stairs to the entire crowd being guarded by hundreds of Roman soldiers, sort of like a royalty.

[5 : 04] And so one event after another unfolds, and then suddenly Paul is in the position to actually evangelize to the Jews. The crowds that were there to beat him up now became the crowds that were listening to him.

So if last week we were left wondering why God allows his people to suffer, why did God allow Paul to be captured to suffer? Here, Luke gives us a hint of God's sovereignty in Paul's suffering.

Paul's being in custody doesn't hinder God's mission. It actually offers new opportunities for evangelism to continue, and this time towards a different audience.

God can use dire circumstances to advance his kingdom. And so that's basically what I said to the fellow teacher of mine a few years ago when he asked that question.

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.

[6 : 24] 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 her into a coma. She was suffering. 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, right? 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 they became very much involved in various ministries and fellowships until the end of their lives.

[7 : 31] After I told this fellow teacher of mine about this story, I said, Look, 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 family members, for which her sisters have always been grateful, my mom included.

They're not grateful that their sister died, but they're grateful that their sister's death helped their parents to get to know Jesus. 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 past suffering to advance the 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.

[9 : 03] Perhaps he has used your suffering 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 here. Thousands of years after this was written, after his suffering ended, and we still get encouraged every time we read about his suffering.

In any case, we can trust God in our suffering because he is sovereign over it. It doesn't make it easier. Suffering is hard.

But it does mean that we can trust him because God can use it to advance his kingdom and encourage people. Just like what he did with Paul's suffering here.

So, out of God's sovereignty, 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 in chapter 22, verses 1 to 5.

[10 : 14] He said, Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then 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 way of the Christian way, to their death, arresting both men and women 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 Christians as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

Here, Paul recounted his past life before he had become a Christian. So he grew up in Jerusalem. He was educated under Gamaliel, who is often called the most significant Pharisaic educator of the first century.

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

[11 : 42] 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 as well, just like them.

So what changed him? An encounter with the reason Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 6 to 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.

My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. So, at about noon, meaning when the sun was at its brightest, Paul saw a light that was brighter 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.

[12 : 57] 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.

What shall I do, Lord? 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 risen 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.

I said that to my sister, and my sister was like, yeah, if you said that you're Jesus, I wouldn't believe you. So, so the fact that they believed in him is a strong evidence.

[14 : 16] And if Jesus was indeed risen from the dead, then he's truly the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for. And the Christians then were not against Judaism, but were actually the true fulfillment of the Old Testament promise.

That's basically what Paul is trying to say. 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, the King. Jesus was so sovereign, that just one encounter with him could turn his, his enemy's life upside down.

Even the command in verse 10, get up and go into Damascus, and basically, basically wait for a further command. It echoes God's call to Abraham in Genesis, in Genesis, you know, go from your hometown to Canaan.

Oh, it sounds like a military commander's command to his soldier. Go there, wait for another command. Jesus was able to sovereignly turn his enemy into his soldier.

[15 : 40] Through one single encounter. Paul was going to Damascus to capture Christians, but instead, he was captured by Jesus the King.

And then he was sent to the same place, to Damascus, but now his role was very much different. Now he's an agent of Jesus.

And 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, 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 here, Paul shared his testimony of being healed by Ananias. He's a Jew, a devout observer of the law. But in chapter nine, way back in chapter nine, he was already introduced in the story as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus.

[16 : 54] And so again, here we see the sovereign power of Christ, who uses his people to work miracles, to heal. 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 you testify about how, what, how God has been working, the sovereignty of Christ.

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, by healing him.

Well, there's no resisting him now. Paul has seen what the sovereign King Jesus could do. There's no backing up. 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, it's not about God forcing himself on humans, and then we're forced to take his grace, even though we don't like it, even though we don't want it.

[18 : 16] It's not about that. It's about this. When we encounter Jesus, we find his power so great, that we can't help but joyously bow down, fall on our faces onto the ground.

We find his beauty so overwhelming, that we can't help but desire him. We're not forced. We desire him. We find his holiness so attractive, we find his holiness so attractive, that we can't help but follow him and his ways.

Jesus is literally irresistible when we see him. Jesus is sovereign. And when we encounter him, we can't help but say, Lord, Lord, you are Lord, what shall I do?

What do you want me to do? And there have been so many people across history who had strongly opposed Christianity, but when they encountered the reason Jesus, they just could not resist his beauty.

People like Rosaria Butterfield, Lee Strobel, the modern example, Augustine, Paul, and perhaps yourself.

[19 : 39] How have you seen God's sovereignty in your conversion? Or at least in your story of faith, if you were born in a Christian family.

How has encountering the reason sovereign Lord Jesus changed your life? Like it did Paul. It has certainly changed mind.

And I encourage you to think about that so you can share it with the people around you when they ask, why are you a Christian? This is my experience of Jesus, the beauty of Jesus and his power and his forgiveness and his mercy.

Let me tell you my story. But just like our faith story doesn't stop at conversion, but continues with our life of service.

So did Paul's. And so in verse 14 to 18, then Ananias said, The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the righteous one, that is Jesus, the Messiah, and to hear words from his mouth.

[20 : 53] 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 Jesus speaking to me. Quick, he said, leave Jerusalem immediately because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.

So again, here Paul shows the Jewish crowd that he's not against Judaism. He still went to the Jewish temple after conversion to pray.

Ananias called the God whom Paul had just encountered the God of our ancestors, meaning the God of the Jews, the same God in the Old Testament, not some foreign God.

In verse 17 to 18, Paul shows that Jesus is even the Lord of the temple. He can appear there in the house of Yahweh.

[22 : 02] 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 is now finally here and he's Jesus and he's followed by the Christians.

Basically, what Paul is saying here is you're persecuting the Christians, but really, they're following your Messiah. 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 says, I and the Father are one. So there are no two different gods, the Old Testament God and the New Testament God. No, one God.

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 to be sent, to be the witness of Jesus.

And if the Jews in Jerusalem don't accept his testimony, then he is sent to the Gentiles and to proclaim Jesus there. But it seems like Paul did not like that.

[23 : 33] So Paul 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. And 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 gospel to the Jews. You know, these people know that I'm zealous for the law.

These people know that I used to persecute Christians. These people know that I'm with them. He wanted to stay and proclaim the gospel to the Jews.

But Jesus sent him to the Gentiles. Go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles. Here we see again the sovereignty of Jesus.

[24 : 37] Not only in turning his enemies from being against him to being for him, but also his sovereignty in sending them wherever he wants to be his agents.

Paul showed the crowd that he's not against the Jews. In fact, he wanted to stay to serve them. but he brought the gospel to the Gentiles because the sovereign Lord Jesus, the King, said so.

And after witnessing Jesus' sovereign power, he could not resist. Jesus can sovereignly use not only our suffering, not only our conversion, but also our lives of service 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, not only to be saved, but also for service. I think I've told you the story about my Molucan friend before, but let me retell and continue the story.

When I was about 10 years old and I was 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 in the eastern part of Indonesia, and that he had lost his entire family, so he's an orphan.

[26 : 24] He told the story of how they were caught by the Islamic authorities because they were a Christian family. Now this was back in the late 90s and early 2000s during the civil war in Indonesia between the Muslims and the Christians.

And after they were caught, one by one 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 in front of this kid. And when it was time for this kid to be interrogated, for some reason, one of the Islamic soldiers stopped them and said, let me handle this kid.

So he took this kid to the nearby harbor, caught 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.

[27 : 49] Now I get invited by multiple churches to share my testimony. He was probably 14 or 15. So people could hear about how the powerful Lord Jesus 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 has shown his sovereign power to him by miraculously, powerfully saving him and now he had to bear witness to that by telling everyone what he has experienced.

How has God sovereignly saved you? From calamities or from your own sins? How has God sovereignly called you to service?

Your testimonies of conversion, life of service and even suffering can encourage other Christians and can even help other people who don't know Jesus to encounter the reason Lord Jesus for themselves.

I encourage you to use your testimonies to encourage others and help people around you to encounter the Lord Jesus for themselves.

[29 : 28] Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you are sovereign and that your son Jesus is sovereign and he is king.

Thank you for letting us see him with the eyes of our hearts. Help us to use our lives to proclaim the sovereignty of Jesus and his great mercy and forgiveness and his grace so that people around us can see Jesus as well.

In Jesus our king we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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