

The reasons for suffering

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[0 : 00] Please do be seated and let me pray for us as we come to God's word this morning. Father, you do not lead us always by quiet waters and easy paths.

So as we consider what your word teaches us about suffering, we pray, Lord, that you would grant us ears to hear and soft hearts, where your word may take root and be our guide.

In Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder ever if in the midst of a time of suffering you've ever asked yourself this question. What have I done to deserve this?

Have you asked yourself that? If so, you won't be alone. It's a very common question. But as we began to see last week, it's never the right question to ask, or rarely the right question to ask.

You see, that way of thinking implies that bad things only come to bad people who do bad things. And good things only come to good people who do good things. And so if we are suffering, it's because we have done something wrong.

[1 : 11] But that isn't generally the way the world works, is it? And nor is it what the Bible teaches us about suffering. Having that mindset, though, can cause us to feel either terrible guilt when suffering comes to us, or great anger towards God for his apparent injustice, when we can see that there is nothing we have done that has caused it.

But it can also lead us to do something far more damaging, and that is to point our finger at others and say, I wonder what they did to deserve this. When someone is suffering, that's perhaps the most unhelpful and most unkind thing that we can say to them.

And yet I've got dozens of books on my shelves at home, where someone has said exactly that kind of thing to a fellow Christian. One I'm reading at the moment is a beautiful book called Broken Works Best by Catherine Campbell.

In it, she tells how when she and her husband had a daughter born with some serious genetic problems, a number of Christians wrote to her and instructed her to search within and find the sin that was there that had caused this thing to happen to her daughter.

Can you imagine how hurtful that would have been to a parent already grieving over the birth of a child who would grow up to face so many problems and who would never live to adulthood? It's cruel, it's unkind, and it is utterly at odds with the teaching of the Bible.

[2 : 41] So why does suffering come to us? And when we are a friend, ask those big why questions, what might we say? Well, last Sunday morning, we began our series in the Christian view of suffering by seeing the overarching reason that there is suffering in the world.

There is suffering in the world because there is sin in the world. Ultimately, that's the big reason for it. The big reason for all human suffering and pain and grief and death is human rebellion, a rebellion that goes back to Adam and Eve.

You see, there was no suffering in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. And when Jesus comes again, there won't be any more suffering either. But right now, we live in a world marred by sin and rebellion against God, where suffering is one of the painful side effects of those things.

So that's the big overarching reason. But today, we're going to look down a level and see some of the human causes of suffering, but also some of the reasons that why God might allow suffering to come into our lives.

I want to acknowledge first, though, that some suffering comes from the effects of sin upon creation. We kind of touched on that last week a little. When people suffer from the effects of earthquakes or volcanic eruptions or storms or droughts, things we often call acts of God.

[4 : 08] I think we're on safe biblical ground to say that these are the result of living in a world where creation is itself broken and groaning under the weight of human sin.

In many cases, the diseases and illnesses we experience are part of that curse. Of course, there might be lifestyle factors involved that have increased our risk of disease, whether it's smoking or drinking too much or a bad diet, for example.

But many diseases don't have a simple explanation, do they? They simply happen because the world is broken. But we also live in a world where how we live matters.

For good or ill, we do have an impact on the lives of other people. And sometimes those actions have serious consequences. Now, of course, for the most part, we live at peace with one another, don't we?

But at other times, human stupidity or carelessness or downright human sinfulness does cause pain and suffering to ourselves or to others.

[5 : 12] So, for an example, not paying full attention to the road on which you are driving is foolish. That can have serious consequences. But driving whilst you're drunk or blindfolded isn't stupid or careless.

It's wicked and sinful. Walking too close to the edge of a cliff path is foolish. You may well fall off and hurt yourself. But throwing someone off isn't foolish.

That's sinful and wicked. Not being careful about your finances can cause all sorts of trouble. But theft or exhaustion or gambling away your family's livelihood is wicked.

Sometimes factors overlap. Sometimes it's the sin of a nation or a company rather than an individual that causes suffering. Think of wicked regimes or exploitative business practices.

But even in our rather sheltered lives here in the UK, I think it's clear that so much human suffering can be explained by the carelessness or sinfulness of people towards one another.

[6 : 19] Well, what should be our response to this? Well, if we are at fault, we need to take responsibility and admit our culpability. That's the first step to dealing with the issue, especially if it leads us to repent to others and to God.

Of course, that's the first step of receiving God's forgiveness, isn't it? Of allowing God to lift us out of our misery. But if others are at fault, forgiving them is vital too.

Even if they never acknowledge that guilt themselves. If we carry around resentment and anger and unforgiveness in our hearts, it will eventually hurt us and those we love.

Forgiving those who have caused us pain isn't easy, but it is the path of peace and it is the command of Jesus. But what about those times, and there are many of them, when we can see no one to blame?

When a well-run business fails because consumer demand has changed? The times healthy non-smokers get lung cancer? The times when children are born severely disabled or die young?

[7 : 31] The time when a sudden heart attack rips a family of a loved one? You see, we have the big answer of living in a fallen world, but if God is good, why do these things happen?

What is the point? Isn't God supposed to be in charge? Why doesn't he do something and stop these things happening? I'm sure that both Job and the blind man in John chapter 9 had asked that question.

Because those who heard about death, those things certainly asked them themselves. We read how the disciples saw the man born blind and immediately asked the question many were thinking.

So who sinned, Jesus? This man or his parents? Whose fault was it? Job's suffering is greater than anyone else in the Bible, save Jesus.

In our reading, we heard how this righteous, God-fearing man lost his wealth and all his children in one day. In chapter 2, we read how his suffering carried on, how he was afflicted with such terrible physical suffering that all he could do was sit among the ashes and scrape his sores with broken pottery.

[8 : 40] His wife, seeing his suffering, no doubt carrying her own pain as well, told him to curse God and die. His friends, after sitting silently with him for a while, encouraged him, like the friends of Catherine Campbell, to confess his guilt.

Because all his suffering was obviously his own fault. Both of these men, however, had done nothing wrong. The Bible is clear about that. So what was going on?

Why did God allow such suffering to come into their lives? Because that is clearly the case with Job here, isn't it? And it's the case with the blind man too. And we know also that God is not a distant God.

He reigns as sovereign over his world. He is involved with everything that happens. In fact, the Bible tells us that nothing happens in God's world without his say-so, but also without him having his own reasons.

We'll think more about God's sovereignty next week. But consider what Jesus says about the man's blindness in John chapter 9, verse 3. Jesus says this happened.

[9 : 48] This man's blindness came so that the works of God might be revealed. And whilst Job never hears why he suffered, we get to know that.

We get to see behind the curtains. We know that it is Satan's doing, but that God allows his suffering to test and to prove Job's faith. For most of the time in our own lives, we, like Job, never know the full reasons why suffering comes to us.

But these two passages teach us that just because we can see no good reason, it doesn't mean that there isn't one. We may not be able to see what's on the screens, if you like, of the heavenly control rooms, but we can know that they are not blank, that life is not random, and that in God's world, everything happens for a purpose.

God is sovereign and good and evolved in his world and in the lives of his people. Hence the reason that God was the one who set the limits on Job's suffering at the beginning, just as he was the one who brought it to an end later on, just as Jesus did as he healed the blind man and restored his sight.

So can I suggest that when times of suffering come to us, as they will, that instead of raging against God or sinking into a pit of despair, as we might feel like doing, we instead ask, train ourselves to ask these questions.

[11 : 19] Lord, what are you teaching me here? Lord, what are you going to accomplish through this suffering? And Lord, how can I live through this for your glory?

You see, God's ultimate purpose is for us in this life, is not health, wealth and happiness. It is holiness and fruitfulness. The Lord is not simply our shepherd and guide who leads us through quiet waters and restful valleys.

He is a gardener who prunes us, a parent who disciplines and corrects us, an instructor who trains us, a loving father who has purposes for us that have eternal weight and significance.

And whilst we may not know what God's purpose is for us in our time of suffering until it is long behind us, in fact, we may not know until we reach glory, as we consider these kinds of questions, we can keep in mind some of the ways that God uses suffering for his eternal purposes.

So as I round things up, let me just give you eight very quick ways that God may use our suffering. We may not know for certain, but to know that there are some reasons I think can be helpful in helping us to think things through.

- [12 : 39] The first one is to reveal our sin and to bring us to repentance. As the Bible makes clear, as Jesus teaches here, there is no automatic link between someone's suffering and their own sin.

That is a very dangerous link to make. But sometimes our sinfulness does cause our suffering. If I drive carelessly down the road and crash into something and spend six months in hospital, there is no one to blame but me.

But if the link is there, it will be obvious. We will not need weeks of counselling to uncover the problem. When we experience suffering in any form, it's right to search our hearts to make sure there is nothing in our lives of which we need to repent.

But far more often, God is using suffering in other ways. So secondly, he uses it to shape our character. Romans 5, Paul writes this, we also rejoice in our suffering because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope.

The grand purpose of our Christian lives is to become more like Jesus. And sometimes God uses suffering to help that along. Thirdly, to test, prove, and strengthen our faith.

- [13 : 59] Satan claimed Job only trusted in God because of all the gifts God gave him. But that wasn't true, was it? Despite his suffering, and intense suffering, Job's faith didn't falter.

His faith stood up to the test. In fact, it was made stronger through it. Suffering can do that to us as well. Fourthly, suffering is sometimes used to reveal God's glory.

We sometimes forget this, but the universe was not made for us, but for God. As a way of celebrating and declaring his glory. Suffering can work that way too.

Perhaps through a miraculous healing like that in Job chapter 9, or through a Christian who suffers and endures patiently and with great hope. Watching a Christian do that brings great glory to God and reveals him to a watching world.

Fifthly, to accomplish God's purposes. We'll think more about that next week when we focus on the story of Joseph. You'll remember his story, how his wicked brothers pretended he was dead and sold him into slavery in Egypt.

- [15 : 09] Yet God used that evil, and it was an evil thing, and Joseph suffering to save many lives so God could display his glory. That can happen in smaller ways too, but there is comfort for us in knowing that somehow under God's gracious hand, all things work together for the good of those who belong to him.

Sixthly, God can use suffering as an opportunity for mercy. Sometimes God's purpose for our suffering is not about us, but about other people. Giving them opportunities to serve, to give mercy, to show love and compassion and care.

Godly character and deep friendships can be formed in this way. Number seven, to get our attention and point us to God.

C.S. Lewis said that pain was God's megaphone. That God whispers to us in our joys, but he shouts to us in our times of pain. And whilst we might be tempted to turn away from God because of suffering, so many others are brought to a point of reaching out to God when suffering robs them of their own strength and where they have no one else to turn to.

And lastly, God uses suffering to demonstrate his love for us. John 3.16, And we know what that giving entailed, don't we?

[16 : 42] Jesus leaving the glory of heaven for a life of service, rejection, humiliation, sorrow, pain and death. And all that we might know the depths of God's love for us, receive the fullness of his mercy and forgiveness, know his adoption as his children and be given the gift of eternal life.

The question we often ask in suffering is, why me? Perhaps, as people who are aware of their own failings, we might start by asking, why him?

Because when we have in mind the suffering of Jesus, trusting God in the midst of the sufferings that we face, sufferings that are in eternal terms, momentary trials, then our attitude to suffering may be changed.

We may, like Job, never know why suffering has come to us in that precise moment or in that way. But that doesn't mean there is no reason, nor that God has abandoned us in it.

There will be reasons, because God is sovereign over his world. And however dark and deep our suffering, God has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us.

[18 : 06] And as one who has given his son for us, we can trust him to keep his word. Amen. Amen.