

The origin and experience of suffering

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[0 : 00] We're beginning a series of sermons which will take us through Lent all around the topic of suffering. So when you hear the Bible readings over the next few weeks, they're going to jump around a little bit rather than working through passage by passage.

But today, the origin and experience of suffering. There's a famous scene in the Robert Williams film Good Morning Vietnam that stands out. I wonder if you remember it.

The song Wonderful World is playing while the camera takes the viewer flying through a blue sky over a stunning country covered by lush forests, picturesque mountains, deep winding rivers.

But as the camera continues its journey, it begins to pick out things that aren't quite so wonderful. Warplanes screaming overhead, dropping bombs on the villages below.

Return machine gun fire bursting into the sky. People running from the exploding ordnance. Scenes of carnage, injury and death for those not able to escape.

[1 : 04] There's a juxtaposition going on there, isn't there? Between the beauty of Louis Armstrong's vocals and the scenes of brutality in war. Brings a powerful and disturbing image to our mind.

But that is our world, isn't it? We live in a world both of great beauty and of deep ugliness. A world of wonderful joys, but also of deep pain. Where excellence and depravity often live side by side with each other.

And where life and hope and fear and death come to us all. Our world is one where the grievous and varied suffering is part of the human experience.

Why is that? And how can we cope with it? How can we thrive in a world like this? And is there any real hope for us? Well, over the next six weeks, up to and including Easter Day, we're going to be thinking about suffering from a distinctly Christian perspective.

We'll look at the reasons the Bible gives for suffering. God's sovereignty over suffering. And how we can walk with God through times of suffering. We'll consider how we might better pray whilst we're suffering.

[2 : 12] How we can even rejoice in our suffering. And how we can share in the suffering of others. On Good Friday, our reflections will focus on the suffering of God.

And then on Easter Day itself, we'll rejoice in Jesus' victory over suffering and death. And our aim is that we might all have a biblical view of suffering so that we might survive and thrive in a world where suffering is part of life.

Because it is, isn't it? Suffering does come. No one is immune. Today is five years since the first lockdown, the COVID pandemic. It was something that affected everyone.

No one is immune. And that's true with every other kind of suffering as well. Not the super fit nor the super rich can avoid suffering. Not the uber religious or social activists or those who retreat from ordinary life are immune from it.

The fires that hit Los Angeles a few weeks ago showed that, didn't they? The houses of both the poor, the middle classes and the super rich were burnt to the ground.

- [3 : 21] Viruses and cancers, fires and accidents and diseases, friendship problems, marriage breakups, financial worries, mental health crises will affect almost every family at some point over their lives.
- And of course, everyone eventually dies. So everyone has to cope with grief. We may not like it. I don't think we're supposed to like it, actually. But suffering is part of life in this world.
- So why is that? Well, to answer that question, we need to go back to the start of history. But before we get to that reading in Genesis chapter 3, we need to recall what happened in Genesis 1 and 2.
- Because in those chapters, we read that God created a world where everything was good. In the beginning, there was no suffering. In the beginning, men and women lived together in a perfect relationship with one another.
- And in a perfect relationship with the God who made them. In the beginning, nature was in perfect balance. Work was a joy. Food was plentiful. Safety was guaranteed.
- [4 : 26] And God's peace and presence rested upon his creation in full and glorious measure. It was perfect. Perfect. But that perfect situation did not last for long.
- But we should not forget that it was there in the beginning. You see, pain and death and suffering are not natural to the world that God has made. They are interlopers. That's why they hurt so much.
- Because we instinctively feel that life should not be like this. And whilst we'll deal with this issue in greater depth later in the series, we must remember that through Jesus, the world will not always be like this.
- The books of Genesis and Revelation are bookends of history. At the beginning of Genesis and at the end of Revelation, humanity is perfect. Living in a perfect world with God's perfect presence in the midst.
- And we are in those between times right now where life is hard and painful. But that isn't the end of the story. Let's not forget that. So how did things change? How did God's perfect creation come tumbling down?
- [5 : 38] Well, Genesis 3 tells us, doesn't it? Let me summarise it for you. It was because human beings, in believing Satan's lies, doubted God's goodness, desired to rule in God's place and disobeyed God's commands.
- And those actions had terrible consequences. We'll think through those in a moment. But you see, we cannot do those things. We cannot doubt God's goodness, reject his authority, break his laws and remove God from his rightful place of rule in his world without there being devastating effects.
- And some of them were immediate. So notice in verse 7, there is shame and fear. The verse tells us that once Adam and Eve had grasped and ate the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened and they realised they were naked.
- They sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. Why did they do that? Because all of a sudden they had a sense of shame. Shame about their appearance, which had never been before.
- And they knew fear because standing there naked, even in front of one another, well, they suddenly felt vulnerable and unsafe. There was shame and fear.
- [6 : 48] There was guilt as well. Verse 8, God comes into the garden to walk with them as he seems often to have done. And what do Adam and Eve do? Well, they hide. They hide.
- Guilt is driving them into the woods. For the first time in human history, they knew they had done something wrong and they run to hide from the consequences.

Then come blame and mistrust. Notice what happens when Adam and Eve are questioned by God. Adam, the head of the family, blames his wife. Eve, his wife, blames the serpent.

And if you'll forgive me this pun, the serpent has no leg to stand on. But this has been Satan's plan all along, hasn't it? To disrupt God's glorious creation.

And it has worked a treat. Then comes the enmity. War has come to God's good earth. First between human beings and the snake. We see that in the curse of verse 14.

[7 : 46] But also enmity between people and creation. Work will now be hard. Verses 17 to 18. As if the earth will fight against being tamed.

There's enmity between husband and wife too. Even the marriage union will be disrupted by power plays and unruly desires. Then comes the dislocation. Adam and Eve sent packing from the garden.

That they were made for. But worse, they are driven from God. Driven from God's presence. Forced to live their lives in a world where God is present.

Because he doesn't entirely leave it. But he is now distant at arm's length. And then suffering and death. Death does not come instantly. But Adam and Eve would both suffer pain.

And they would both die. As would all their descendants. They would have the comfort of dying in old age. Having had many children. But some of them would die violently. Like their son Abel.

[8 : 48] Others would have their lives cut short through sickness. Or natural disasters. And as they waited for death to take them. Pain and suffering would accompany them. In work.

In relationships. In childbirth. And as disease and infections became the norm. And as violence grew from one-on-one envy. To nation pitting itself against nation.

Shame and fear. Guilt. Blame. Enmity. Dislocation. Suffering. And death. That's the world that Adam and Eve created. That's the world in which we live.

And it's like this. Because they turned from God. To self. And sin. The book of Romans describes Adam and Eve as our first parents. And as our representatives.

So what they did. We do. We follow in their line. Our hearts. Like theirs. Are now marred by sin. Our desires twisted. As theirs were. Twisted towards independence from God.

[9 : 50] And rebellion against God. And like a virus. Their sin has infected all creation. Their sin. Their sin tipped over that first domino.

And everything else has been a chain reaction. To their rebellion. See we cannot cut God out of his world without serious consequences. He is our provider.

Our protector. The sustainer of life. If you like. He's the guardrail. Throughout which the car will fall off the road. And tumble down to the bottom of the cliff.

Without his preserving and life-giving power. The world and all in it. Became doomed to decay. And so it proved. This is the broken world.

The suffering world in which we now live. And it is broken because we are broken. We are broken because our first parents rejected God. And brought sin into the world. If you want an ultimate reason why there is sin.

[10 : 48] And suffering. And death. It is here. In humanity's rejection of God. That is the ultimate origin of all human suffering. And until Jesus returns.

This is the world where we will live. A world of pain and sorrow. Where creation groans. Longing for it to be made new again. And no matter where we are in the world.

No matter how rich or powerful we might be. No matter how careful we might be. We cannot avoid suffering. Well thanks Dave.

You've cheered us up on this beautiful Sunday morning. Thank you for those wonderful encouraging words. Well they may not be encouraging. But it is the reality isn't it? It is the world in which we live.

So how are we to live in such a world as this. And not be crushed by the fear of suffering. Or the experience of suffering. Well let me suggest three ways. First of all we must be realistic.

[11 : 48] And we must be honest. Suffering will come. So we are to expect it. And prepare for it. See despite the overwhelming experience.

Of human history. That suffering is endemic in life. Some people seem to live their lives. As if nothing will touch them. That everything will be rosy.

That if they eat the right foods. Do the right exercises. And do their best to live in love and faith with all. Then every little thing is going to be all right. Some people had a religious devotion to that.

There's a branch of heretical Christianity. Called the prosperity gospel. Which says that if we love and serve God in the church. As long as we give generously to God.

Then God will reward us. By pouring upon us. The blessings of a long and happy. Healthy and wealthy life. That is a heresy.

[12 : 47] That is not true. That isn't the way the world works. It is not the way the Bible speaks. Jesus said that in our gospel reading. Didn't he? On the night before he was to be crucified.

He called his disciples together. And whilst he gave them hope. That the temporary grief in losing him. Would be overcome with joy. He was absolutely clear.

That those who followed him the most closely. Would be treated the most harshly. Next week we'll look more closely. At some of the particular reasons for our suffering.

Reasons that sit underneath that big one. Of human rebellion. But we know don't we. That sometimes suffering comes our way. Not because we've done the wrong thing. But because we've done the right thing.

That's true for many of our brothers and sisters. In different parts of the world. Chapter 16 of John. Verse 2. They will put you out of the synagogues.

[13 : 45] A time is coming when someone who kills you. Will think they're doing the right thing. Verse 33 sums it up. In this world we will have.

Happiness and pleasure. A complete rosy life. No. Trouble. In this world you will have trouble. We must get our expectations right.

Suffering will come to us. No matter how much money we spend. Or how much effort we try to make to avoid it. And if we imagine that somehow we are immune to pain and suffering.

Well the arrival of those things into our lives will wash us away. Like the house built on sand. But if we take heed to Jesus' word. Then we can make sure can't we.

That our foundations are solid. That we are prepared. Because we know what may come. Well what preparations might we make. Well I guess there are some practical things that we might do humanly speaking.

[14 : 43] Things that will minimise. And maybe reduce the possibility of suffering. Things like keeping physically fit. Eating the right foods. Maybe being financially astute. Sunday evening we spoke about the importance of talking about death.

So we're not flawed by it completely. When it raises its dark spectre. In our family lives. But spiritual preparations are so much more important.

When suffering hits us like a train. It can shake our faith to the very foundations. We can think that God has deserted us. Where are you? Look at me struggling here.

How do we cope? Well if we don't know God well enough to trust him and his love. We will be washed away. So in times when life is good.

It is vital that we dive deeply into God. To get to know him well enough. To trust him no matter what comes. To know that his love.

[15 : 45] And with absolute certainty. Will never run out. Even if all the gifts he has given us are taken away. See do you know his word well enough? To know his promises.

Do you know his word well enough? To bring to mind the scriptures that will encourage you. Even if you get to a point where you can no longer read the scriptures for yourselves. Do you know them enough?

Have you memorised enough of the scriptures to be able to bring it to mind? Are you so practised in prayer that we can cry out to God honestly and fervently. Knowing that he hears us.

Or is prayer something that you just leave for emergencies. If that's the case you won't do it then. Unless you're doing it now. Let's get prepared.

By diving deeply into God. Knowing the God who has given us all these good gifts we enjoy. And knowing that he will be with us. In our time of suffering. Let's be realistic.

[16 : 45] Suffering will come. Let's expect it so we're not flawed by it. And let's prepare for it. Secondly let's be hopeful. Confident even. That suffering will not last forever.

See as Christians we have great reasons for hope. That however deep our suffering. However grief. How deep our grief may get.

That it will not last forever. We'll speak more of this in weeks to come. But for now let me remind you of where we started. That suffering and pain and death are not natural.

They're interlopers into God's good creation. They are the result of sin and human rebellion. And when Jesus comes again to judge the world. He will make us perfect.

So we are fit for his perfect creation. A creation having been renewed. Where there will be no more suffering or pain. Or sin. Or death. Death. So however deep our pain.

[17 : 47] However grievous our wounds. However long our suffering may go on for. And some people face serious suffering. Their whole lives through. It is not the final word. It is not the end of the story.

It will not last forever. There is great hope in that truth. Isn't there? And in the meantime we have the privilege of prayer. I spoke about that a moment ago. And through our prayers God works out his purposes.

Sometimes that will be in miraculous intervention. So that that period of suffering will go. Sometimes that will be through the work of human hands. That God will work his deliverance.

But sometimes it will simply be in the renewal of our strength. That we can continue to endure. But our prayers fan the flames of our hope. And they lift our eyes away from our struggles.

And on to the God of all glory. And the source of our hope. Who will one day take it all away. Let's be hopeful. Because we know that suffering will not last forever.

[18 : 49] Here's the last one. Let's be at peace. For we know that God is in control. Again this will be something we look at. At much more detail in a few weeks time.

But let me just point you now. To Jesus' final words at the end of John 16. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart. Jesus says. I have overcome the world.

It may not look like it. Sometimes it doesn't feel like it. But the truth is. That God is sovereign over his world. Just as he has always been. And it may have been a long time.

From the Garden of Eden. To the coming of the Saviour. But God has been at work. And was at work all the way through those centuries. We get a glimpse of God's great plan of salvation. In Genesis 3.15.

But there was never any doubt. From that moment. That God would bring about his purposes. And work away for people to be reconciled to him again. In the beginning that hope was faint.

[19 : 51] Slightly obscure. Hidden. But throughout the ashes of suffering and strife. God has been at work. Bringing salvation to birth. God's timing is not ours.

His methods are not ours. You and I would never imagine that salvation would come through Jesus' death on the cross. That life to us will be brought by the death of the King of life.

Nor that freedom would come by Jesus making himself a slave. But that is exactly what happened. God's purposes in history are never defeated. His kingdom will come.

And his will will be done on earth. As in heaven. As we'll pray later. And in that lies our deep peace. Because on that macro level of all eternal history.

And in the might new level of our lives. God is in control. He's in charge. We don't need to worry. We can be at peace. That means we can trust him in our suffering.

[20 : 51] And know for certain that no one and nothing can snatch us out of his hands. Nor keep us from his love. And because God is in control. Even as he did on the cross.

Using evil to accomplish his purposes. We can trust his promise to us. That all things work together for the good of those who love him. And have been called according to his purposes.

Friends. Jesus has overcome the world. He's won the victory. He's in charge. So in the midst of our suffering and uncertainty in life. We can have real lasting peace.

This is a sinful, painful, broken world. You will all have, as I do. Stories of our own suffering and grief and pain.

But we know who is in charge of history. And we know the end point of history. And we know what eternity holds for those who are in Christ. So let's not be derailed by suffering.

[21 : 50] However painful it may be. Let's make sure we are expecting it to come. And that we are preparing for it to come. Let's remain hopeful when suffering does come.

And let's remain at peace in the midst of the storm. Because we know with absolute certainty. That the good and faithful God. Who controls history.

And who has given us his son. Is walking with us now by his spirit. And that he will bring us safely home. We hold on to those truths.

And suffering will not floor us. Amen. Amen. Amen.