

The Suffering Problem (Evening Service)

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[0 : 00] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, Amen. Oh, good evening, everybody.

Happy Canada Day. Just on behalf of my wife, my children are Canadian, but my wife and I are not. We just want to say thanks for having us.

It's lovely here. We are doing a short series called The Problem of Christianity.

This is week three, and each week what we're doing is we're looking at problems people have with the Christian faith, a problem like Christian exclusivity or the problem of God's wrath.

These are understandably significant and real barriers for people. However, I think one of the strengths of the Christian faith is that it is intellectually robust.

[1 : 05] It does stand up to critique. So when someone says, well, Christians are just intolerant, there's actually a number of things you can say in response to that. And so what we're doing with this series is we're trying to deal with maybe your own personal struggles with these issues, but also equipping you in your personal witness to Jesus and the questions that might come up.

So this week we're looking at the problem of pain and suffering. This, of course, is a problem for every belief system, including atheism, isn't it?

But tonight we're going to talk about how it presents as a problem for the Christian faith, because the problem is this, if God is so good and so powerful, why do we suffer? There is so much pain in the world, it does seem like no one's in charge, because it is such a cruel place.

That's the argument people will make. What does the Bible have to say about this? Well, lots and lots of things. What we're going to do is we're going to look at what John 11 says about it. It's a magnificent story, and I think it's going to be really helpful to us.

So we'll look at it in detail, and then we'll talk more generally about suffering and pain. And I want to acknowledge that for some people this is an intellectual question. That's good.

[2 : 24] For some people this is a very personal question. And at any point, you just need to check out. That's totally fine. So John 11. The passage has two great surprises, two great shocks.

The first surprise is the emotions of Jesus. It's a great surprise, I think. The second surprise is that the focus of the story is not the raising of Lazarus.

Now, you might think, well, it's clearly about the raising of Lazarus. Actually, that's on the side.

There's another focus. There's a bigger point Christ is making. So two great surprises.

One, the emotions of Christ. And two, the real focus of the passage. Okay, so let's look at the first surprise, the first shock, the emotions of Jesus. So it says here in verse 35 that Christ comes to the tomb, and he weeps.

He weeps. And that's a surprise. Because you think Christ coming to a tomb as the Son of God, the story would seem to make more sense if he had a little bit of swagger, if he was a bit more presidential.

[3 : 39] Coming to the tomb. Everything's okay, everyone. It's going to be fine. I'm here now. Don't worry. But no, he weeps. Why does he weep?

It's a great verse, isn't it? Verse 35, the shortest verse in the Bible, and one of the deepest, one of the most surprising. And it's surprising because in a few minutes, he's about to say a few words and raise this corpse from the dead.

Yet he weeps. At this moment, he weeps. So he can't be weeping because he's thinking, oh, no, I'll never see Lazarus again. He was a really good friend of mine. What am I going to do? I really like, you know. Why does Jesus weep?

He weeps because death is awful. It is an intrusion into God's good creation. And he's coming to this tomb of his friends.

And Jesus is confronted by the evil of death. Now, that's quite a radical thing to say. The evil of death, actually.

[4 : 42] Because in our current cultural climate, the sort of dominant narrative is that death is part of the circle of life, that it's natural. And more recently, there's been lots of debates around assisted suicide.

And in those debates, death is presented as a solution to a difficult problem. Death is seen as an ally or sort of presented as like a friend.

And when you succumb to death on your own terms, it's associated with dignity. That's what one of our bishops wrote recently.

It's very smart. It's very wise, actually. But Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He does not consider death to be a friend. Christ says death is an enemy.

It is not a solution. It's the problem. Death is this alien thing in God's creation. It needs to be conquered. Jesus weeps when confronted by death.

[5 : 38] And these tears are a great gift to us because they remind us that in times of great pain, that God does not stand at a distance thinking sad, pitying thoughts about our plight. He enters into the situation.

He entered into our pain. Jesus in John 11 weeps with his friends over death. And now, very importantly, Jesus doesn't just weep.

He gets angry. And that's what verse 33 says. It's a weak translation. It doesn't come out as it's translated from the Greek to the English. Look, we read Jesus was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

It kind of makes him sound like he's just really, really extra, extra sad. It's not what it's saying. It literally means he was furious. The Greek word is, I've read, I read that the Greek word is often used to describe the noise an animal would make when it's angry, like the snorting of a horse. And it's, in the New Testament, it's one of the strongest words in Greek to express just repugnance, just total indignation. There's a message version of the Bible, a translation of the Bible.

[6 : 50] And Eugene Peterson wrote this. And he translates this passage, verse 35. No, he translates verse 33 this. Quaking with rage. Jesus approached the tomb.

I think it's a brilliant translation. Quaking with rage. Jesus is angry by death. He is offended by it. So summary so far. Jesus enters our pain.

He weeps. And he gets angry at the results of death. And he rages against this thing, this power that has oppressed us since Eden.

I love that. I love the fact that he gets angry. Because it tells us he's going to do something. He's fired up. And the great news of the passage we see later is that the one who weeps and the one who gets angry also has the power of life and death in his hands.

And he has the power to conquer it. This leads to the second surprise of the passage. So the first shock, first surprise, are the emotions of Christ. And we're glad about that.

[7 : 52] The second shock is this. The focus of the passage is not the resurrection of Lazarus, I believe. It's given such little attention, actually, when you read it.

Like, imagine if you were a witness to this event and you were writing it down. I think you'd really play it up. You'd play up the whole raising from dead bit, wouldn't you? You'd make a big drama of it. A stone was rolled away and the crowd gasped.

There was silence. A small little girl screamed. You know, I don't know. Like, you just sort of like, make a big deal out of this. Drag it out. Listen to John. Verse 43.

When he said these things, he cried in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. And the man who died came out, his hands and feet bound in linen strips, his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said, unbind him, let him go. That's it.

Just two verses. It's not the focus. I think the raising of Lazarus is an example of the real focus. I'll say that again. The raising of Lazarus is an example of the real focus of the passage.

[8 : 58] And the real focus of the passage are these tremendous words of verse 25, when Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Now, to understand what Jesus is saying, we need sort of some context there.

So let's look at the dialogue leading up to verse 25, to this astounding statement here. Because it's a big, that's a big thing to say, right? I am the resurrection and the life.

So beginning of verse 21, Martha says to Jesus, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. And Mary and Martha disappointed in Jesus. Verse 23, Jesus says, your brother will rise again.

And Martha says, I know he'll rise again on the resurrection on the last day. So what do we have here? Mary and Martha are disappointed that Jesus took his time getting there. Jesus actually, we read, deliberately waited to make sure that Lazarus had died before coming.

So they communicate their disappointment to Jesus. And Jesus says, your brother will rise again. I know. They say, I know. You know, at some point, Lazarus will rise again.

[9 : 57] I know. I think what's going on here is Martha thinks that Jesus is doing a little bit of lightweight pastoral care. I think that's what Martha thinks. I think Martha thinks Jesus is doing the equivalent of, oh, there, there, bless your heart.

Bless your heart. You'll be okay in the end. Just keep plugging away. It'll work out. It always does. I think that's what they feel like Jesus is doing. See, she responds with the pat answer, the right thing.

You know, like, I know. I know it'll be okay one day. And this sort of exposes her heart. Like, you know, her brother has died. And where's her trust right now?

How is she processing this? How is she thinking about this? She's trusting in this kind of nebulous idea that it's going to be okay one day at some point, maybe in the future, a long time away.

This sort of vague and fuzzy optimism that somehow things will kind of fall into place, perhaps, in the end. And into that sort of vagueness, Jesus says these words, I am the resurrection and the life.

[11 : 05] Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. So here's the heart of the text. You see what Jesus does.

He speaks into that vagueness and very strongly says, you can trust me now. In the midst of this, you can trust me. So he doesn't point these grieving women to the miracle. He points them to himself and says, I'm the resurrection.

I'm the life. Believe in me. See, what he's saying is this. If we trust in him, that's what he's saying. If we trust in him, he will give us life now. A life so amazing that bodily death cannot stop it.

We trust in him. We'll live forever with him. Starting now, from the moment you commit your life to Christ. And then to demonstrate what he's talking about, he raises Lazarus with three words.

Lazarus, Lazarus, come out. And he only needs three words because no authority can stand before the one who is the resurrection and the life. And Jesus replaces their vague optimism with what the BCP calls a sure and certain hope demonstrated by this miracle.

[12 : 15] It's that. How does this relate to our topic? If God is good, why is there so much suffering? It's a good question, right? It's a very fair question, too. We should never shut that question down.

That's a very reasonable question. Someone asked me that. Here are a few things I would say about a good God in what seems to be quite a cruel world.

I'd say this. I'd say you are not going to get any slam dunk answers from the Bible when trying to explain all the pain that you might experience.

Trying to find a reason for why you went through what you went through? That's going to be tough. But when trying to explain it, when trying to process it, when trying to think it through, we know the answer can't be.

It cannot be God just doesn't care. God is indifferent. That cannot be the answer. We can't say we suffer and God is indifferent. Why can't we say that?

[13 : 18] Because Jesus wept. And Jesus raged. And he entered into our pain. He didn't stop there. He plunged himself into the worst of pain and separation on the cross.

And he did it for us. God loved us and so hates suffering and evil, he was willing to come down and get involved. He didn't sit up in heaven looking down, grimacing.

He entered our world. He entered our pain. So when someone says, why does God allow such suffering to continue? We can say, I don't know. I don't know.

We might find out answers decades later about why we went through this or that. But often we just don't know. But we have the cross. And the cross says to us this. It says, God hates evil where he wouldn't have gone to the cross.

Think about that. If God, if he hates evil and suffering so much as to lose a son, then God must have a good reason to let this suffering continue. And he must have had a good reason to allow you to go through this.

[14 : 20] And we won't always know why that is, though. And that's the hard part, right? That's the difficult part. We don't always know why. Second thing I'd say is that God has given us immense hope, this crazy, amazing hope.

I'm the resurrection and the life. If you only have a vague optimism about your future, Jesus wants you to have a sure hope.

Because God's end game is a new heaven, a new earth. So our future with God is not some ghostly, ethereal, vague existence.

It's a perfected and beautified world. Our bodies, our homes, our loved ones, our planet restored. And it's a life that God promises us that starts the moment you actually commit your heart to Christ. It starts now for us.

[15 : 23] It's a very powerful idea. And that's the great hope that Jesus points his friends Mary and Martha to. And gives us the example of Lazarus to show how powerful an idea it is and what it actually looks like.

But in the book, the brothers Karamazov, which I always have trouble saying, not Dostoyevsky though, he talks about this hope. Let me quote.

It's a little longish, but it's a really great quote. I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for. He's talking about when Christ returns and makes all things right.

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for. That all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage.

That in the world's finale, something so precious will come to pass that will suffice for all hearts. For the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity.

[16 : 29] Of all the blood that they've shed. And it will make not only possible to forgive, but to justify what has happened. Now, if Russian literature is a bit too highbrow for you, let me quote Lord of the Rings.

The Return of the King, right at the end. So, Sam Gamgee. So, he wakes up in a bed. You remember this, right? I've read the book. He wakes up in a bed.

And at this point, he kind of wakes up in a daze. He thinks all is lost. He thinks all his friends have died. He thinks the mission's a disaster. And he wakes up in this room, this beautiful room.

And he's surrounded by all his friends. And he sees Gandalf. And he looks at Gandalf. And he says, Is everything sad going to come untrue? Isn't that a great line?

Is everything sad going to come untrue? It's a wonderful scene. This is exactly what Christians believe. This is what we hope for. This is the great hope.

[17 : 29] Everything sad will come untrue. That's a promise. That's a promise. And it's a very potent idea. And it's one that can get us through pain. Let me sort of finish up here.

Why does God allow suffering to continue? My experience is we're a light on answers a lot of the time. It is something to do with the glory of God.

We know that. We don't know what that looks like exactly. But we do know that we have a God who entered our pain. Who wept and raged.

And we have a great hope that all the suffering and cruelty of the world will end one day. We have those two things. It's a great temptation to use personal stories here.

And I had a really great list of terrible things in my life. And it's not always wise to talk about those things, though, I don't think.

[18 : 31] Because what can happen is that my story becomes a hero. And that people come up to you afterwards and go, Oh, I didn't realize, you know, you were a redhead. It's just awful. You know.

But I will say this. I'll say this. As I've had my fair share of pain in life, I can testify to the fact that the answers, they don't come for a long time.

Sometimes, literally, it's decades for me. Where I look back and go, Ah, okay. Maybe that's what God was up to. But some of them I just experience as pain and just awfulness. And so my question is this.

This is what I ask myself. I don't have answers. So I change the question. And I'll make the question this. Aaron, can you trust Jesus at this time?

Right? Are you going to trust Jesus in the midst of this awful thing? And I know I can. Because God entered our pain. And he has given me a wonderful hope.

[19 : 42] In verse 26, Jesus asked Martha actually a question. And he says, after telling her, you know, I'm the resurrection and the life, he says, Do you believe this? Well, let's be people who can

say with her, Yes, Lord.
I believe. Amen. Amen.