

Why does God let people get hurt?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning everybody. Why does God allow people to get hurt? Why does God allow such suffering in the world? I must admit I feel far too young to be speaking on such a weighty topic. So to lend this sermon some gravitas, I thought I'd tell you a story about how I have suffered. Several years ago I caught my finger in a door. It was this finger here.

And you don't think it sounds that serious at this point, do you? Well, let me tell you the whole story. I didn't catch it in the handle end, I caught it in the hinge end. So I was running my hand along a wall and my finger slipped into that little gap where the hinges are just as somebody shut the door. And it really hurt. And what had happened is I sort of crushed my finger. And it didn't look so bad, it just looked swollen. But under the fingernail all this blood started to collect. So it was like this pocket of pressure under there pushing down all this damaged tissue. I see a lot of anguished faces. If you're not coping right now, just think of something nice. The World Cup is coming up, just think about that. So it was really, really sore. Like I couldn't sleep for days. And I was thinking I need to get some anti-inflammatory cream to bring down the swelling. So I go and see my doctor and I explain what has happened. And he said that must have hurt. We agree on that. And I say, listen, have you got any anti-inflammatory cream? And he goes, yeah, yeah, we could do that.

Well, how about this? How about you let me ram a red hot poker through the top of your fingernail to relieve the pressure? And I said, well, what about the cream? Because to me, that, because I mean, it's just in the drawer over here. I'll just help myself. And he said, no, no, no, let's go with the red hot poker option. Now, I promise you, this is a true story. And this is exactly how it happened. So he leaves the room and he says, just wait here. I'll just go and get the equipment. And so I'm hoping for some amazing piece of medical technology. But he comes back into the room holding two things. One, a Bunsen burner. And two, a paperclip.

So he lights, he lights the Bunsen burner and he gets the paperclip and he bends one of the ends of it out and he holds it over the flame until it's glowing red hot. This is a true story. I swear to you this happened. So it's glowing red hot. Then he starts walking towards me with it. And I said, just, just hold on a moment. Just, just be totally honest with me, doctor.

Is this going to hurt? And he lied. He lied to me. And he said, Aaron, hurt? Well, I mean, you may experience some level of discomfort during this procedure, which I discovered later is kind of like telling somebody that is standing in the path of a tidal wave.

[3 : 0 8] They're about to experience some moisture. All right. So he says, just put your hand on my desk. I put my hand on his desk. He put his hand on top of mine and puts all his weight on it because he knows I'm going to try and escape if I get the chance. All his weight's on it. He brings the glowing red hot paperclip to the top of my fingernail. And then he goes, you should look away for this part. But I've just, I just want to see what's happening, you know? So I watch. And then he just leans in it and he pushes, he drives it through the top of my fingernail and pulls it out. And it slides in remarkably easily because it's glowing red hot metal. And he pulls it out and all the blood and stuff just bursts out.

And when I came to, the amazing thing is the pain had completely vanished from not being able to sleep for a couple of days. The pain was completely gone. Now, wouldn't it be nice if all of the pain and suffering we experienced in our life was so easily diagnosed and treated?

But it's not, is it? As we get older, life just seems to get more complicated. We keep bumping in to suffering, pain, evil, and anxiety. And it certainly has, for many, has profound implications on their view of God. Many years ago, there was some graffiti written on the wall of a subway exchange in Chicago. Somebody had got on top of somebody else's shoulder and written very high up, God is dead, signed Nietzsche. Somebody had crossed that out and wrote, Nietzsche is dead, signed God. Somebody had crossed that out and wrote, God is dead, see Time magazine, front cover 1966. Somebody had crossed that out and wrote, Time magazine is dead, signed God.

Somebody crossed that out and said, God isn't dead. I spoke to him this morning, signed Billy Graham. Somebody crossed that out and wrote, who's Billy Graham, signed God. Anyway, the graffiti went on and on and on until somebody wrote, God isn't dead, he just doesn't want to get involved.

And remarkably, no one wrote anything else after that. For many people, it's very hard to believe in a loving God when the world is so much suffering, so much evil. And I think for a lot of people, they draw, they come to a couple of different conclusions because of the suffering they experience will see in the world. One, God is dead. In other words, God doesn't exist. Or two, God doesn't want to get involved. In other words, there might be a God, but he's not a good God. So there's either no God or he's not a good one. Now I would like to look at these conclusions and offer an alternative interpretation for God's seeming lack of activity in the face of suffering and evil. So the first possible conclusion, there is suffering in the world, therefore God doesn't exist. I would very respectfully question the logic here. It's like saying, because we have crime in Vancouver, it means we don't have a legal system. I mean, if anything, the fact that we name good and evil in the world suggests that there is a God. Here is what I mean by that. For on what basis do we judge good and evil if there is no transcendent morality? If there's no transcendent morality, we're just animals. And if we are just animals, then it makes total sense for the strong to dominate the weak. The fact that we do have, though, a moral compass that is very sensitive to issues of justice points to an overriding moral law, and that points to an overriding moral law giver.

[7 : 28] Now, I'm very aware that this is a totally philosophical argument, and that your questions about suffering might be very personal. You might be having a really rough time at the moment.

And if you're personally really, really suffering at the moment, and that drives you to abandon God, again, respectfully, I think it's a mistake. Because it doesn't make your problem easy to handle if you abandon God. All you've done is distance yourself from a source of comfort and hope.

And after you stop believing in God, then your problem is still there, isn't it? The second conclusion people might come to is this. There is all this evil and suffering in the world.

God doesn't seem to do much about it, therefore he can't be very good. And it sounds reasonable, but I have a couple of things to say about this. Firstly, what exactly do we expect God to do?

You might think, well, you know, there's all this injustice and hunger and suffering. Why doesn't God just do away with all the evildoers? Why doesn't he crush all the evil people in the world, make them disappear? But to fully wipe out evil, God would have to wipe out us, you and me.

[8 : 58] Because we are all implicated in the suffering in the world. We've all had dark thoughts. None of us have lived up to our own expectations. So for God to completely rid the world of evil, he'd have to get rid of all of us. And he doesn't do that.

He stays his hand. And that says something about the character of God. I mean, you could argue, then why doesn't God just change people? All the bad people in the world, why doesn't he just change them?

But you're asking God to take away our free will. You're asking God to make us something other than human. Second thing I'd say about the accusation that God hasn't done much evil in the world is, is I would say the exact opposite.

I'd say God has done some amazing things in the face of evil in the world. And we celebrate it at Christmas time. God the Father sent his Son to be with us.

God born a baby, a child, very vulnerable, in a manger, a feeding trough, in a barn, to a young couple, a very young couple, who were citizens of an occupied country.

[10 : 21] That's how God chose to come into the world, very vulnerable. God entered into our suffering. You might say, well, what does that matter with the issue we're dealing with?

Well, it doesn't answer the question of why there is suffering, but it does help us answer the question, what do we do with our suffering? What do we do with our pain?

And that is, we bring it to somebody who understands. Because Jesus, that child, knows what it is to suffer. Let me read out a couple of passages of Scripture.

Some examples of the suffering that Jesus experienced. From Luke 22, 39-48. Jesus, knowing that he's going to be crucified, arrested and crucified shortly, goes off to pray.

From verse 39. Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, Pray that you will not fall into temptation. He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.

[11 : 38] Yet not my will, but yours be done. An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Christ knows what anxiety looks like. He knows what fear looks like. Now listen to Christ.

On the cross. Matthew 27. In the same way the chief priests and teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. He saved others, they said, but he can't save himself.

He's the King of Israel. Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him. For he said, I'm the Son of God.

In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him heaped insults on him. About the sixth hour, until the ninth hour, darkness came over all of the land.

[12 : 41] About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Aloï, aloï, alama sabachthani. Which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus knows what it is like to go through intense pain, rejection, ridicule, injustice.

And Jesus knows what it's like to ask God the why questions. Why? Why? Jesus knows your pain.

In the book of Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 15, it says, We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize. So Christ knows your anxiety, your fears, your pain, your suffering.

My wife is eight months pregnant. Very, very excited. But it has been a very anxious pregnancy for us.

[13 : 43] Because this is our third pregnancy. And the first two didn't quite make it. And during that time when we were suffering and asking God why this was happening.

Why us? We had a lot of support. But the people that we went to the most were our friends who had also had miscarriages. And that is, I think, because the people you trust the most with your pain are the people who have gone through it themselves.

And understands. God the Son suffered terribly. We can trust Him. We can trust Him.

Now, if you've been listening very carefully, you would have noticed that I have very strategically avoided the initial question. Why does God allow suffering? Why does God let people get hurt?

And the reason being, the Bible does not give us a slam dunk answer. The Apostle Paul talks about how it can make us stronger, which is great, but it's not a complete answer.

[14 : 56] We just don't know. But, when we take that question to the cross, when we bring that question, why do you allow suffering?

And we bring it to the cross, why do you allow suffering? We don't get an answer. But we do get what the answer is definitely not.

And the answer is definitely not, I don't care. The answer is definitely not, I am God and I'm not interested. We know God is very interested.

Look at what He did. Look at what He did. So, we have to reframe the question. It's not, why does God allow suffering?

The question is, can we trust God with our suffering? Now, we've had a partial answer so far, yes, because we know Christ has suffered as well.

[15 : 58] We know God has suffered as well. But that doesn't mean we have to stop asking the why question. God is not afraid of those questions. Let me read Psalm 13 to you again.

How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death. My enemy will say I have overcome him and my foes will rejoice when I fail.

But I trust in your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord. For he has been good to me.

In verse 2, the writer of this, David, says how long? Four times in the first two verses. Four times in the first two verses. How long?

[17 : 00] People have been asking God the question, what's going on? For a very long time. Four times he says that. So the writer David is, whatever he's going through, we don't know.

But his suffering is great and it is prolonged. But do you see the shift in verse 3? Give light to my eyes. It moves from this question, how long, why, what's going on, to a prayer.

Help me. Help me. And then it moves from a prayer to a statement of trust in verse 5.

But I trust in your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in your salvation. How can David make that transition?

How can he write this? How does he move from despair to trust? Well, he can do that because he knows the salvation of God.

[18 : 06] He knows what that looks like. Now the word salvation there, the Hebrew word, also means deliverance.

And it's pointing back to God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery. You might know this. The Hebrew people were once enslaved by the Egyptians and God rescued them.

He saved them. He delivered them. So David trusted in God because he'd seen God act. He'd delivered them before. So back to the question.

Can we trust God in our suffering? Yes. Because God has also delivered us. Let me put it this way.

In the Old Testament, we see echoes. We see echoes of God saving his people. The deliverance of the Hebrew people.

[19 : 06] The protection of Israel. Military conquests against the odds. And those are echoes of a bigger thing. A main event. A central act of salvational deliverance that God had in mind later on.

And that central act of salvation was Christ's crucifixion. Crucifixion. And for those of you who are not Christians here, I know it doesn't sound like deliverance. But it is.

See, the crucifixion is more than just God knows what it is to suffer. Although it is that. And that's important. It's more than that. Because it's in the crucifixion that we have a great reason for hope.

A reason that we can move from despair to trust. Let me pull all the threads together and finish this off. As I said earlier. For God to destroy all the evil now, he'd have to destroy all of us.

But he doesn't. And yet God is perfectly just. He's loving. But he is just. And so there must be punishment.

[20 : 13] Justice must be seen. Justice must be done. And I know that sounds archaic and weird to some of you. But think about when you watch Law and Order, that TV show. It starts off with like they find a body.

And then there's a dun-dun-dun. And they move to like the police station. And they're investigating. And they're interviewing people. And there's a dun-dun-dun. You know, there's like transitions, right? And at the end, it ends up in the courtroom.

Dun-dun-dun courtroom. And then the gavel comes down. And the person is found guilty. And he goes to jail. And we are happy about that. That the bad person, you know, justice was done, aren't we?

We love that. That is great. It would be horrible if they got. Every now and then they do a show where the bad person gets away. And it's horrible. I hate it. See, we want justice to be done. How much more does God want it?

For all the evil and suffering in the world, God wants justice. But instead of pouring out his anger on us, his justice on us, he pours it out on his son, on the cross.

[21 : 13] And Jesus pays the price that we should have. And because of that, we can have a relationship with God.

The greatest resource you can have to handle the inevitable pain and suffering of life is to be reconnected to the creator, to the father.

And know that you are forgiven for your part in that pain and suffering. But the story of Jesus doesn't end on the cross.

Three days later, Jesus rose again. And here we see an echo of another big event. That Christ will come back one day and make everything right.

All injustices will be put right. All evil will be stopped. All suffering will end. Because God will not tolerate evil and suffering forever. And a time will come when he will make everything right.

[22 : 10] And we read about this in Isaiah 65. Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days.

Or an old man who does not live out his years. It's wonderful hope, isn't it? I'm reading Lord of the Rings at the moment.

I read it about every 18 months. I love it. It's like putting on a pair of comfortable shoes. And every time I read it, I get something new out of it. I'm towards the end of the last book now.

And towards the end of the book where Sam is... He discovers that Gandalf is alive and that he didn't die. And... In Moria, you know, where the thing killed...

Sam thinks Gandalf is dead. And he's not. And Sam says, is everything sad going to come untrue?

[23 : 17] And that is the great Christian hope. That yes, everything sad will be put right. There will be no more tears, no more suffering.

So, why does God allow suffering? I don't know. But can we trust him? Yes. Because he knows what we're going through.

And he's made a way for us to be connected to the Father. So, we can handle that suffering. And he's given us a great hope. That all things, one day, will be put right.

Now, my suspicion is that there are some visitors here. And if you're visiting here for the first time, and what I've said to you this morning has rung true, and you would like a relationship with God, and you know you haven't lived the perfect life, and things are rough for you at the moment, and you actually want that hope, you want the hope and the peace that you see in some of your Christian friends, you want that faith, you really would like that, then I'd invite you to pray this prayer this morning.

Because that relationship with God begins with just a very simple prayer. It's a prayer asking God to forgive you, and asking Jesus to be the Lord of your life.

[24 : 54] So, I'm going to pray that prayer now. And we'll all close our eyes. And if you would like to move from despair to hope, and have that relationship with God, just let this be the prayer of your heart this morning.

Dear Father, I don't understand exactly what you are doing in the world, Lord. But I want to trust in you.

Help me to trust in you. I'm sorry for my part, and the evil in the world. Forgive me.

Thank you. Thank you that Jesus died for my sins. Father, come into my life.

I want a relationship with you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I'd like to point out to you a little insert.

[26 : 10] It's about a short course that we run here at St. John's called Christianity Explored. It's basically like a seven-week course. We meet once a week in the evening.

We eat a good meal. We have a great chat about spiritual things. And there's people there to attempt to answer all your questions you might have about faith.

So if you've prayed that prayer for the first time, I'd love it if you came along. If you didn't pray that prayer, you couldn't bring yourself to do that, but you want a safe space to ask some questions, come along to this.

Just write your name and your phone number on the bottom, and pop it in the mailbox as you leave the church, or just hand it to me afterwards. If you've got any more questions about it, it's contact details.

Give me a call at church. Thank you for listening. Amen.