

Above our Pay Grades; Suffering

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[0 : 00] Hello everyone. If you're logging in for the first time, my name is Aaron Roberts. I'm the minister here for St. John's. And first I want to tell you about a song. Tinnelle Towns is a Canadian singer-songwriter.

Last year she released a song called Jersey on the Wall. In terms of genre, I think you'd call it country existentialism, if that's a thing. And it's a beautiful song. Here are the lyrics to the chorus.

If I ever get to heaven, you know I got a long list of questions. How do you make a snowflake? Are you angry when the earthquakes? How does the sky change in a minute? How do you keep this big rock spinning?

And why can't you stop a car from crashing? Forgive me, I'm just asking. So she wrote the song after she did a gig at a high school and she saw a framed jersey on the high school wall.

And it was a tribute to a senior student, the valedictorian, who died in a car crash just before graduation. How do you keep this big rock spinning? And why can't you stop a car from crashing? Forgive me, I'm just asking.

[1 : 10] I'm going to try and tackle a difficult topic here today. One of the more philosophical issues that have come out of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter, actually, is the question of suffering in the world.

And the question is, why? Why is there suffering? It's a philosophical question whether you're religious or irreligious. If you're totally secular, you must be looking at the world right now and thinking, why can't we just pull it together?

If you're a very religious person, you could be asking yourself, why doesn't God pull this together? And if you're an agnostic, it's the kind of question that could keep you on the fence.

I'd like to think there's a God, but why doesn't he step in and do something about all the problems in the world? Perhaps he's indifferent. Perhaps he's not good. Perhaps he's not powerful. Perhaps he doesn't exist at all.

So what are we to do? Now, this is the sermon portion of the service. So we're going to look at the Bible to see what it says about all this.

[2 : 25] Now, we don't have time to look at everything the Bible says about suffering, but I do want to look at one little story. And you heard it read earlier, and I think you'll agree with me.

It's a quirky little story. In it, there are two tragedies brought up, two tragedies. The first one is in verse 1, the story of the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifice in Luke 13.1.

So what's this all about? Well, it's referring to a political hit. So Pilate, Pontius Pilate, was the Roman colonial governor in Judea, and he had political enemies, and he took them out.

And it's a really gruesome sort of affair. They were assassinated whilst worshipping so that their blood mixed with the blood of the sacrifices. It was public. It was memorable.

It was a political hit. And it's the kind of thing that plays out with regularity around the world in countries run by dictators. The second tragedy, verse 4, talks about 18 whom the Tower of Siloam fell and killed.

[3 : 33] So in the south eastern walls of Jerusalem, there was a tower, fell down, killed 18 people, probably injured a whole lot more.

It brings to mind the Grenfell Tower block that caught fire two years ago. Two years ago, actually, this week. Two years ago, this week, in London. It started with a fridge-caught fire in a low-income housing tower, and 72 people were killed.

So we have these two tragedies. Two tragedies. One, kind of a wrong place, wrong time, terrible luck that you were there sort of disaster, and the other, just an atrocity.

So two stories of suffering. And some people trying to account for the suffering, trying to answer the question, why? You could put it like this.

Why the asymmetrical way pain is distributed in the world? Why do some people seem to have all the luck, and others suffer so much? Why does it happen?

[4 : 40] People want answers. Let's look at the words of Jesus. So Jesus is preaching, and he's interrupted by some folks who mention the political hit.

Now, Jesus actually knows what they're thinking, which is why he says, Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?

And later, when referring to the tower victims, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? The people who came to speak to Jesus believed they had an answer to the why question, the why of suffering.

And do you see how they want to explain away the suffering? It's this. They think the people who suffered were suffering because of their own sin. And here's the thing.

Generally, we like this idea, actually. It's a popular narrative. People are poor because they're lazy, or it's only the weak-willed that become addicts, etc., etc., etc.

[5 : 44] It's a moralistic way of looking at suffering. If you live a good life, you'll have a good life. If you're a good person, you'll have a good life. If bad things happen, it's probably because you're doing something wrong.

We all tend to have this view. We like this idea. I watched The Sound of Music, the movie The Sound of Music. I watched it for the very first time about a month ago.

And I have to admit, more Nazis than I anticipated in that movie. And that's actually what I wrote in my review. Great music, more Nazis than expected.

I also read that Christopher Plummer, who played Captain Von Trapp, apparently he hated the movie. Hated the movie. And years afterwards, he referred to it in interviews as The Sound of Mucus.

This is a true story. Hated the movie. Anyway, at the end of the movie, when Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer sort of get together, they sing a song. Here's the song. Here's the chorus of the song.

[6 : 50] We love this idea, right?

Nice things happen to nice people. Bad things happen to bad people. The tower that fell on those 18, it was because they were worse offenders than all others who lived in Jerusalem.

We like this explanation of suffering because we like to take credit, don't we? Our hearts like to take credit for the good things that happen in our life. It can't be grace. I just must have done something good.

That's the moralistic view. Blame people. And the unhealthy version, if you sort of add a really unhealthy version of religion to that, it becomes God is punishing them because they're particularly bad.

As if there's some scale of badness and God really nails the bottom 20%. That's the basic idea that these people bring to Jesus when they bring the report of the political hit.

[7 : 56] Now, how does Jesus respond to this view? He rejects it. And I have to warn you, he's going to say something we don't want to hear in a moment, but we'll get there.

In response to, did the tower fall on them because they were worse sinners, Jesus says, no. I tell you, but unless you repent, you will likewise perish.

Verse 5. And later, unless you repent, you will likewise perish in response to the tower falling on these people. Wait. That's sort of an unexpected response, isn't it?

That's an unexpected response from Jesus. Where's the nice Jesus? Where's the kind of slightly hippie Jesus? Let's get that guy back. Look, here's the thing.

There are many places where the Bible gives us words of comfort to those who are suffering. This is not one of those places.

[8 : 58] If you want that message, honestly, listen to last week's sermon. It was there. Go have a listen. So what is Jesus saying here? Let's take a closer look. Well, first thing to know, he doesn't actually deny that there's a relationship between sort of sin or bad behavior and consequences.

If you do stupid things, bad things will happen sometimes. Jesus doesn't deny that. He does deny, though, that these folks were particularly bad, so bad that God singled them out for extra punishment.

This is not what happens. The Bible does not teach, and this is important. So if you've tuned out, come back in. Come back in to me. Okay. The Bible does not teach that there is a really tight sort of one-to-one relationship between sin and suffering.

They're suffering more because they sinned more. No, the Bible doesn't teach that. We can't look at COVID-19 and say, well, God is judging us for X, Y, and Z reasons.

We should not try and trace God's sort of sovereign hand through all of this and make these big assumptions about why it's happening. Here, Jesus directs our thoughts away from that kind of thinking.

[10 : 14] When the people bring the news of the deaths to Jesus, he hears in their voice a note of self-justification in the report, and he wants to correct it.

One of the keys to understanding this passage is to remember who Jesus is speaking to. So who is he speaking to? It's not to people who are suffering.

They're just reporting on it. Who is he talking to? He's talking to people who are probably doing okay. He's talking to people whose life is pretty good. He's talking to people who are self-righteous, who think life is good because I'm good.

And when life is good, folks, and this will be counterintuitive, when life is good, that can actually be a spiritually dangerous place to be. Here's why I say that.

Because when life is good, that's when you can start trusting in other things. That's when you can start hoping in other things, things other than God, which is why Jesus says to them, unless you repent, you will otherwise perish.

[11 : 18] Do you see, folks, this is a warning. Jesus says repent, but repent from what? Let me say it like this. The essence of sin is being your own God, being your own Lord, believing you can save yourself, that you'll get through this life and the next by being just good enough.

Jesus says you need to repent of that. There's one God. It's not you. And there's one way to be saved. And it's not through just being a really good person.

Or you could put it another way. In the midst of witnessing a great tragedy, Christ says that these should be times of great personal sobriety for us.

Not times to point the finger, but times to consider our own fragility and our own brokenness before God. Well, that's the little story from Luke 13.

Now, what I want to do just for our last minute is I want to speak more widely on the subject of suffering. Perhaps this is not a philosophical idea for you.

[12 : 38] Perhaps your life is actually very difficult and you're trying to work out why God would allow such a thing as COVID-19, for example. And here is the thing that the Bible just does not give us a slam dunk answer.

Paul in the New Testament does say that suffering can make us stronger, but it's not a complete picture, is it? So, just because we can't see the reason for the suffering, just because we can't know the reason for the suffering, it does not mean there isn't a reason.

You know, when the question of God and the universe and suffering comes up, sometimes the answer is just above our pay grade.

It's above our pay grade. Surely, though, surely, shouldn't God do something, though, right? You might say, well, actually, God has.

He's done something astounding and surprising about evil and suffering in the world. And we celebrate it at Christmastime. God the Father sent the Son to be with us. God, you could say it like this, He put skin on and became one of us and lived the perfect life and died on a cross.

[13 : 52] Now, what does that matter with regard to the issue we're dealing with today? Well, it doesn't answer the question of why is there suffering, but it does help answer the question of what do we do with our suffering?

What do we do with our pain? And that is we can bring it to somebody who understands, because Jesus knows what it is to suffer. When we read, you know, the story of Gethsemane in the garden, we see that Jesus knows what it's like to go through extreme anxiety.

Jesus knows what it is to be mocked. He knows what it is to experience overwhelming pain. He knows what it is to be rejected and betrayed. And the Father, the Father knows what it is like to lose a son in an unjustified act of violence.

So it's not like, you know, it's not like we pray and say, God, I feel sad or I feel anxious, and Jesus is like, oh, you silly little boy. No, we can trust God with our suffering because God knows your pain.

He knows it because he became one of us. And not just to experience it, but to deal with it, to ultimately deal with it.

[15 : 12] And this is the genius of Christianity. No other faith says that God became one of us. And again, why did he do it? Well, remember at the start, we said one of the big problems that we face philosophically with suffering is it's just so asymmetrical.

It's like, it's so asymmetrical in the way it's distributed in the world. For some people seem to suffer so much more than others. Well, the life of Jesus is a prime example of his asymmetry.

The best man had the hardest life. The one person who deserved the best suffered the greatest injustice. He suffered the cross. The ultimate tower fell on Jesus and it crushed him.

The eternal judgment of God fell on him so it wouldn't fall on us, so that God's anger against evil wouldn't fall on us. It fell on him. So look, the original question, why does God allow suffering?

Well, mostly, we just don't know. But we do get an idea of what the answer isn't, what it could never be. The answer can't be God just isn't interested.

[16 : 24] God doesn't care. That can't be the answer because he became one of us and died on a cross for us. So I think we have to reframe the question. Instead of why does God allow suffering, the question is can we trust God with our suffering?

And the cross says yes. The cross says yes we can. Amen.