

The Suffering Problem

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- [0 : 00] Will you please pray with me? Father, will you give us an increase of your grace now that we could truly hear your word to us, grow in your grace and grief and suffering and how you enter into that and remind us by your resurrection that you are with us.
- In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Please be seated. I want to say to you as well a happy Canada Day.
- This is my first Canada Day that I get to celebrate as a Canadian. It only took me 25 years, but it's good to be a Canadian.
- Well, now even though this is Canada Day, it feels a little bit like that movie Groundhog Day to me.
- Not to confuse the two celebrations, but if you know the movie, the way it works is day after day after day, this man repeats Groundhog Day until he gets it right.
- [1 : 20] And so a year ago, I was with you on this Canada Day weekend and the sermon topic was the suffering of Christ. Two years ago, I was with you on the Canada Day weekend preaching again and the subject was the glory of God.
- If you were listening to the text this morning, I know that you were. These two things actually come together in John chapter 11, verses 1 through 44.
- The glory of God and the suffering of people. So these two things are coming together and hopefully I won't be preaching on Canada Day next year on the same subject.
- But we're going to look at this today because we're seeing that the suffering and the glory of God come together and they don't seem like they fit.
- It's not what we expect from a glorious God where there is suffering because of his love for us. So I want to look at three things with this this morning, which has to do with our expectations, the existence of God, and then the exclamation of Jesus Christ.
- [2 : 31] So just those, I know it's easy, just expectations, existence, and exclamation. So let's look at these now, starting with expectations. Today we see how God's gloriousness and the love of God, I think, work together for suffering.
- This is not the disciples' expectation of God and Jesus. Mary, Martha, the Jews of Bethany have clear expectations of Jesus.
- And their expectations are shattered and challenged with the illness, the death, and the suffering that goes along with what's happened to Lazarus. We see this in three waves of messengers that are sent to Jesus.
- In verse 3, we read that the expectation comes from someone whom we don't know, sent by Mary and Martha, probably, Lord, he whom you love is ill. It's loaded with expectations.
- Verse 21, Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Expectations. Verse 32, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.
- [3 : 33] Exactly the same as Martha said, Mary repeats, loaded with expectations. You see, the disciples have an idea of God and suffering. They've seen Jesus treat illnesses and suffering and expect consistency.

Jesus has performed miracles already, and he will do the same again, they think. He has the ability to heal, and they want him to use that now.

It's like there's a science to illness, suffering and healing. They make the same mistake that you and I do. And God's ways are not our ways. And so the disciples were, they were not the first, though you know as well as I do, to have these kind of expectations of how God will respond to our illness and our suffering and death in the world.

You remember Job from the Old Testament. Job suffered greatly. He agonized personally. He questioned God publicly. And he wanted an answer.

He asked many why ones. He got many from his friends. Job didn't get one from Yahweh, though. But at least Job prayed.

[4 : 46] And he mauled over his prayer like a lion over his prey. Job never got an answer to his question, though. Job got something better. Instead of an answer, Job received an answerer.

And this wasn't easy for Job. And I know that it isn't easy for us, Christians or those of you this morning who might be here who aren't followers of Jesus. Have you ever felt like this, like Job?

Have your friends ever complained that God is indifferent to suffering? In your life, your family, the world in which we live. We think about places like Syria, our indigenous people, abused women, starving children, natural disasters.

And we think, what on earth is going on, God? We have expectations. Just like those in this story today. We in the world have a problem with Christianity then, and with Christ, perhaps.

We want an answer, and the solution doesn't come to us quickly enough. Our expectations rise and fall on our experience. However, hear this.

[5 : 52] It's really important that we have expectations. God uses our expectations, even if they're not in sync with who he is and how it is that he wants to address them, what he's on about.

Let me give you an example from another religion, just how distinct we are from others in this series that we have with the problem of Christianity. You know, about Buddhism, perhaps.

And Gautama Siddhartha gave four noble truths when he was asked about suffering. And he said these four things, that life is suffering. That the cause of suffering is desire.

If you want to end suffering, you must end desire. And the way that you end desire, the fourth part of this is to reduce one's ego.

Well, that's not Christianity. God wants us to have desires, bring our expectations to him, as those did that day in John chapter 11, verses 1 through 42.

[6 : 51] So let's go from expectations then to the existence of God in our midst through Christ. Jesus doesn't give an explanation for suffering in John 11 directly.

You know that Christians have something of an explanation for suffering in general terms that goes back to the beginning of the Bible in Genesis, where sin entered the world and then so too suffering.

And women's consequence of sin is then signified in childbearing. Thank God for epidurals. Why aren't the men laughing?

Men's consequence of sin is signified in the pain of earth keeping. With sin came suffering. More than an explanation for suffering, the Bible shows us how God uses suffering.

And when the news comes to Jesus about the illness of the one whom he loved, our Lord makes this incredible, audacious claim in verse 4. You can look down with it if you have your Bibles open if you wish, just to make sure that I'm working from the Bible.

[7 : 53] In verse 4 it says, It is for your glory so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it. Through this. Through this illness. This suffering. Through this death. And Jesus introduces the subject of glory alongside illness, death, and suffering.

The messengers to Jesus were sure about his love for Lazarus, but why the glory of God? Now Jesus introduces this theme, which runs throughout chapter 11 and all the way to the end of the book.

The demonstration of God's glory, I think, is absolutely vital to making sense of suffering. God uses the condition of Lazarus in all men and women for his glory.

So our life and all of it is about God's glory. Him losing no opportunity to glorify himself, even in and through suffering.

So Jesus takes this opportunity to demonstrate the glory of God. And that's why he leads his disciple on this path of his discussion about glory. First he says early on, This illness does not lead to death.

[9 : 03] And then he says, Our friend has fallen asleep. And then finally he says, Lazarus has died. We need to look at the purpose statement that follows this on Jesus.

Why is this actually happening? Verse 15 reveals Jesus' motivation. What it is that he really thinks about what's going on. How it is that he's going to use this. He says, So that you may believe that the Son of God may be glorified.

That's what he's on about. Verse 40 confirms and connects this. He says, Did I not tell you that if you believe, you would see the glory of God? God's character, his pure attributes on display, demonstrated by Jesus.

That's what this is about, he's saying. So what does God do with our suffering? Uses it to reveal his glory. Now you may think that these two things, as I've already said, yeah, they don't actually really go together, do they?

And if that's what you think, you have a good companion in C.S. Lewis. He once said this about suffering. Lewis thought that God was with him when all was well, but when it wasn't going well, he was in suffering, the door was closed.

[10 : 15] But then he had another mind about this. He said on this because that he thought God also screamed to us through a megaphone when we suffer. See the two different things?

God's really speaking clearly to him through suffering. Other times the door is really closed. The Lord's purpose is to glorify himself, as I've said, so that we might believe in him.

He uses our suffering, but more importantly also, we know through the whole of John and also the Gospels, the New Testament, what's told to us about before in the Old Testament, that God also enters into our suffering.

He suffers for us, and he will suffer with us. And so God isn't indifferent to suffering. He cares much about pain, but he cares even more about giving us a kind of comfort and promise that we don't expect.

So in verse 25 and 26, he says this, whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

[11 : 24] And then he asked this question, do you believe this? It's the question to us today about suffering. Do we believe this promise that Jesus makes and he presents and powerfully demonstrates?

Jesus surely loved Lazarus. It's named three times in this text that he loved him. And we may think God doesn't love because there is suffering, but the Lord suffers with us and gives us the grace to believe that he is who he is, does what he says that he is, that he actually exists and is there.

He is here. Let me give you an example of what this kind of belief produces, the benefits of it in the midst of suffering.

This last week, we finished our ninth of nine sessions in a grief group. And a number of people from St. John's and some who actually weren't with us have been given permission by one of the participants to share the story.

So keeping confidences and anonymity, not sharing anything about this person. But the last night is actually about praise after having the previous one on acceptance and hope.

[12 : 39] But before that, a whole range of what you might accept in terms of a grief group. Those who are in shock and denial and guilt and sadness and just despair.

Well, I asked this question about the participants. Where did they see the grace of God in the midst of their grief and their suffering? And it's always a painful question for me to ask because there's always this kind of gap where no one actually speaks.

And then finally, someone spoke up. A woman who had lost her adult child in the opioid crisis as an overdose. And this person said that God's grace came to her the moment she found her adult child dead on the floor.

God gave this person grace by her not being able to see his face. And that's where she found that God was with her in the grief of that suffering.

Trying to make this dramatic or manipulate you or work on your emotions. That's not the point of this. The point of this is that God is with us in our suffering. And so when we come here, when we're in Bible studies, when we pray with one another, when we encourage one another, there's lots of reasons for that and ultimately and always to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ who he is, that he died, that he rose again, and that he is with us.

[14 : 03] And there are moments that we'll see the hand of his grace in our lives and other people's lives through illness, through death, through suffering. That's the existence of Christ with us.

Finally, the exclamation now. The existence of God with us may be really hard for you to accept. It's a big ask, I know. But how can we be so sure? Why should we believe that suffering has any meaning at all?

And my only response to this is this. And that is to listen to the Lord Jesus. Listen to his claims. Listen to his command. And Jesus' claim and command in this story of Lazarus is a little bit like a trailer.

You know, not the one that follows a truck, but the trailer of a movie. You know, the trailer that comes out as the movie is about to be released.

And in John 11, we get something of a trailer. This trailer has two critical scenes to it. The first one is an exclamation of hope in verse 23.

[15 : 07] And the second one is Jesus bringing death to an end. Let's look at the first one. Turn with me to verse 23.

In the scene with Martha, Jesus promises that her brother will rise again. She replies with faith that she knows about the resurrection at the last day. And Jesus exclaims that he is the resurrection and the life.

This exclamation is huge and has huge implications. Implications that life is for those who believe in Jesus even though we die. Our death is not the end, says Jesus.

Jesus. We know this. Others don't. They're grappling with it, struggling with it. But even children actually know this. Peter Kreft in his book Making Sense of Suffering says this.

He tells a story about a mother who had two small children and one of the children died. They were pre-adolescent and the youngest one was pressing the mother, what has happened to my brother.

[16 : 14] And finally, she explains, well, he's been buried to complete the circle of life. And the young boy protested, but I don't believe my brother has become food for the worms.

Jesus exclaims something bigger, something better. Not only is there a resurrection at the end, but he is the resurrection and the life. The Jews believed in the living God and a resurrection Jesus now equates himself with all of that.

He is the resurrection. He is the life. It's not just an idea. He realizes this now, not just later, though it will come about later. But the one who is the resurrection of life is with them now, in person.

He pronounces this. He promises it. And it happens in the midst of suffering. And this is life, I think, when we believe it. And this is life, it happens.

Lastly, then, in terms of exclamation, Jesus then brings death to an end. Verses 43 and 44, look down, Jesus presses through his grief.

[17 : 21] He sees clearly when he comes upon the cave of death. And the glory of God is ironically fused with suffering. Jesus has performed some pretty big miracles, each of them a sign of things to come.

But there is nothing like this one up to this point. Jesus speaks to his Father in heaven, not for himself, but those who are around. And his whole reason for doing is it so that they would believe.

And he's showing us that miracles are not ends in themselves. Relief of suffering would have no meaning were it not connected to Jesus. And Jesus is making sure his disciples make this connection.

And he wants us to make this too. So angry and agitated at death of the one he loved, Jesus screamed aloud and he uses his love for Lazarus in anger against death and suffering.

And he doesn't just cry out loud, but he commands Lazarus to live. And he's alive again. Jesus isn't just showing us that he has power over death in the future.

[18 : 31] He isn't just saying in a small way this is what to come someday. Jesus loves us who are bound and guaranteed to die. The resurrection of life has come now for all who stuck out the suffering and pain.

An Anglican theologian once said this. He thought that the exchange between Jesus and Mary and Martha depressed him because the church hasn't gotten the cynics and sometimes the rest of us any further than the Pharisees got Martha and Mary before this exclamation and demonstration of Jesus.

In other words, resurrection is merely something in the future, right? Something that's in a year or another generation or, well, never in my lifetime.

Well, no denying there is suffering in this world, but suffering and death has lost its grip because Jesus is, as he exclaims and demonstrates here, the resurrection and the life.

Yes, there is suffering and death. We know that. But the grace of the one who is the resurrection and the life is enough for our suffering today and tomorrow and in the future.

[19 : 51] The resurrection, one, is with us in person and power in his people. And he is so through the gospel brought to bear on our life because he gives us the grace that we might receive the belief that he has for us that he is who he says that he is and has done what he's done.

And yes, will come one day when the dead will be raised, will be reunited with him in a great reunion forever where there is no suffering and no pain.

Let me close with this comment about the relationship of suffering and the love of God wrapped up in God's glory. So, Miroslav Volf who is a Christian from an Eastern European country where there was lots of conflict and suffering in Yugoslavia.

He's Croatian but also a theologian at Yale. He says this, when we are thinking about ourselves and the struggles that we have with suffering or maybe someone else that we're walking alongside who struggles with this too, the first thing to do is not to tell someone that they've got the wrong expectations.

I think actually we have these expectations and God uses them, draws us into his purpose for what's going on and this is what Wolf says about this. He says, our very protest against God in the face of suffering and evil presupposes God's existence.

[21 : 20] and why are we disturbed by the brute and blind forces of tsunamis that snuff out people's lives. If the world is all there is and the world with moving tectonic plates is a world in which we happen to leave, what's there to complain about?

We can mourn we've lost something terribly dear but we can't complain and we certainly can't legitimately protest. The expectation that the world should be a hospitable place with no devastating mishaps is tied to the belief that the world ought to be constituted in a certain way.

And that belief, as distinct from the belief that the world is just what it is, is itself tied to the notion of a creator. And that brings us to God.

It is God who makes possible our protest that there is evil and suffering in the world. And it is God against whom we protest. How can I believe in a God when tsunamis strike and kill little children?

I protest and then I believe in God. God uses our expectations, right or wrong, and draws us into what it is he's doing to glorify himself and show us his love that he truly is with us in Jesus Christ and by his spirit.

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