

## Christ Church Huntingdon Sermon 24<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

### Suffering I- Suffering and the Beginning

**Why....?** It's a question that has been echoing down through history ever since the start. Like here in Psalm 88:14, "**Why** do you reject me and hide yourself from me?" Why? Why does God allow suffering? Does he not care? And I guess we have all asked it at some point for different reasons...

1) Some people ask it as a **philosophical** or theoretical **issue**. It's not that they have had a particularly tough life... maybe life has gone pretty well for them. But even if they are attracted to the idea of God, or they are impressed by the lives of Christians, they can't shake this problem. As one young man put to me when we were knocking on doors in the local area: "If God is so good, why does he let so much s\*\*\* happen?" And he's got a point. Look on your TV screen or internet news feed, and there's another shooting, or earthquake, or murder or tragedy. Why? Time and time again people tell me that it's the reason they can't become Christians. ***If God is all knowing and all powerful and all loving why would he allow so much suffering?***

2) For others it's a deeply **personal issue**. There's nothing of the philosophy class here. They ask this question because they have been in or are currently in the deepest pit of suffering- so painful that they can hardly begin to process these things. I think of one man who grilled me on this subject about his three children. The first child in the pit of depression threw himself off a cliff. The second was killed in an accident while on drugs. The third has a severe mental illness which leaves him in need of 24 hour a day professional care, and he's just lost his wife. For this man there is nothing theoretical about this question. It is deeply personal and deeply painful. And that might be where you are this morning. ***Why? Why would God allow it?***

3) For others it's a **practical issue**- they want to know how to help people who are struggling with suffering at the moment, or to prepare themselves if it is to come their way. Which it will. ***Why does God allow suffering?***

Well if you are hoping for nice clear answers to this question over the next three weeks, I'm going to have to disappoint you. While the Bible, God's perfect word to us, speaks clearly on everything that we **need** to know, he hasn't necessarily told us everything we **want** to know! There are no easy answers on this one. People far cleverer than me and great Christians have pondered this one for centuries, without coming to a final answer. That's a challenge to us who like things neat and tidy. Life's not like that!

I also want to add that when someone is numb with depression, or a loved one has been violently killed the day before (as we had in a previous church), or a relationship has just shattered into tiny pieces, arguments and clever explanations are not what people need anyway. They need an arm around them and maybe a listening ear, not a sermon. I'm conscious that for some this topic will stir up memories and hurts that we may not have visited for a while. I ask us to be extra sensitive and caring one to another as a community during this time, and if you need extra help or support right now please talk.

So as we consider this topic (taking a break from a normal verse by verse look at the bible) I'm not promising easy answers. But I do want to offer three perspectives or angles from different places in the Bible that I hope will help us and our friends on this question. These are:

- Suffering and the beginning of the Bible (Creation and the Fall)
- Suffering and the middle of the Bible (Jesus and the cross)
- Suffering and the end of the Bible (Heaven and the future)

So for today: **Suffering in the light of the beginning**, and I hope you have got your bibles open at Genesis where our reading was. There are two main points that I would like to make today...

### **1) Suffering doesn't stop God from being Good.**

The Bible presents God as all powerful (*He's God*) and all loving (*He's good*). We see that throughout, but it's here in chapter 1 in embryo. Look at v31 for example... *"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning-- the sixth day."* Gen 1:31.

**God is God.** The Christian faith presents him as having made everything. Just with a word (v3) he spoke "Let there be light" and there was. Incredible power- incredible authority. God is God. And **God is good**. These verses speak about the excellence of the environment that God has made for his creatures. It was good...it was good... it was very good. And in this way it reflects him- the creation is good, because it has been made good by a good creator.

Now over the page is the fall (or rebellion) of mankind, which we will come to in our next point. But though mankind rebels, and the creation becomes a dangerous place, God himself hasn't changed. Again and again through the Bible, God (the real God- the God of the Bible) is the Father of orphans, gracious and compassionate, close to the broken hearted, the God who is light and life and Love. I'm going to come onto a more reasoned argument in a moment, but purely on an anecdotal/experience level you will find that many Christians who suffer won't say that in tough times they lost their faith in an all loving, all powerful God, but curiously it was strengthened and became more real when as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death, they found the Shepherd all the more present (as Johnny shared from Ps 23).

Personally I remember a strange experience, when living in Oxford I got in the way of an angry teenager who punched me in the face, causing my glasses to break and cut my eye. Unexpectedly, rather than cursing God, while waiting for the ambulance and wondering if I would ever be able to see out of my left eye again, I found myself speaking to my next door neighbour about how good God is.

But for others this just doesn't make sense. Think of actor Stephen Fry and his recent outburst during an interview on Irish TV (I've put a link on the "dig deeper" resources with this talk on the website). He says *"God- How dare you? How dare you create a world to which there is such misery that is not our fault. It's not right, it's utterly, utterly evil"*.

Others put it like this... "You can't have it both ways. Think of the recent shootings in New Zealand. Either God is not powerful, because he couldn't stop it or he's not loving, because he didn't want to stop it". "But" they say "the fact that there is suffering is proof that if he's there, he's not good."

But I was helped by John Dickson on this point in his little book *"If I were God I'd end all the pain!"* for anyone who would like a copy. John Dickson starts his book telling his own story of how his father was killed in a plane crash. And later on he lays out the common view like this...

Thought/Point 1) An all-powerful God would be able to end suffering.

Thought/Point 2) An all loving God would want to end suffering.

Fact: Suffering exists. Conclusion: **An all powerful, all loving God therefore does not exist.**

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<sup>1</sup> John Dickson "If I were God I'd end all the pain", Matthias Media, 2001, p15-16.

But he proposes a second equation...

Point 1) An all-powerful God exists.\*

Point 2) An all-loving God exists\*.

Fact: Suffering exists. Conclusion: **God must have loving reasons for permitting suffering.**

\* Here he & I would cite evidence from creation, conscience and Christ.

In other words just because we can't find good reasons why God might allow something to happen, doesn't mean that there aren't any. We are not God!

Here's another quote, this time from New York Times Bestseller Tim Keller *"If you have a God, great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God, great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know"*<sup>2</sup>.

As I read the Bible, and especially look at the person of Jesus, I see a good God. Jesus loved, served, cared, fought, and died to love us. While I don't know all the answers, I am willing to take it on trust that he knows best what he is doing.

I'm not saying that's easy to do. But I hope as we go on in the series- particularly next week, we will see glimpses of the trustworthiness of this God who has given up his own child for you and for me. There's a lot more that could be said here, but I hope at least for starters we can see that the presence of suffering in the world is not evidence against God's goodness. It may just be that we don't have all the information yet. Genesis 1 says God is God and God is good.

Next we look at suffering from the beginning of the Bible, but a little further on- not Genesis 1 - God the creator, but Genesis 3- Man the rebel. And the point I'd like to draw out from Genesis 3 is that...

## 2) Suffering came into the world because of our sin

Have a look at Gen 3:17-19... *To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. <sup>18</sup> It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."*

The Bible portrays everything at the start as a perfect garden. There are three perfect relationships- (*upwards*) mankind and God (*acrosswards*) man and woman and (*downwards*) man and creation. Even if you have trouble with the concept of Adam and Eve as the first real humans (which they were) please stick with me, because what happens here explains so much.

First mankind eats from the fruit God commanded him not to eat from, which incidentally is not sex, or an apple, but the decision to abandon God in favour of our own ideas and self rule. They choose to be God in God's world.

It's a crazy thing to do because God is God, and we are not- and he knows far better than us what's good for us- after all he made us! He protects us and looks after us, provides for us and cares for us. When we decide that we want life without him in charge, there are going to be consequences, and this passage shows how deep and catastrophic those fracture lines are. The world is broken.

So in Gen 3 we see each of those three relationships becomes cursed by God. Upwards, man and woman are hiding from God (v8) and they are driven out of his presence (v24). When we turned our backs on God, which all of us have done, asking for life without him, he gave it to us.

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller "The Reason for God", Hodder and Stoughton, 2008, p25.

Before, we were face to face with God walking with him in the garden, but now we can't see him, because we are banished, and we can only know him if he takes the initiative to come after us.

Acrosswards there's fragmentation in the relationships between humanity: the battle of the sexes, blame, abuse. If anyone here has ever experienced the pain that can come simply from another human being- you need only to look back here, to the deep deep fracture between humans that comes from rejecting God, and within a page of chapter 3 we have the first murder between two brothers.

Downwards we are out of sync with the creation. The environment is now full of pain (v16) thorns and thistles (v18) and work becomes toil (v19). So we live in a world of natural disasters, cancers, predators, disease.

We can never overestimate how serious it is to live in God's world as if we know better than him. Pain and suffering weren't there before our rebellion. It's because we sinned that suffering has come. We turned our back on God, and our relationship with each other is ruined AND our relationship with our environment around us.

Now I want to make one thing crystal clear. By saying suffering is because of our sin, I am not saying that the more suffering a person has the more they have sinned. I've put a couple of bible passages in the "dig deeper" questions that prove this. If we were to line up everyone in Huntingdon in a line with those suffering the most at one end, and those suffering the least at the other, it wouldn't be the most guilty who are suffering most. People who seem to get extra suffering are in no way extra guilty. But the bible teaches we have all sinned, and so suffering has come into the world, and we live in a world that is deeply deeply broken.

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So as we close, suffering is hard to take, it's hard to get our heads round. Actually, if you don't believe in God, then suffering shouldn't be a problem to you. If this world is all a cosmic accident, and there's no rhyme or reason, suffering is just be the next thing that comes up on the roll of the dice. We can't complain about it, nor can we evaluate it, it just is.

But for most of us, who believe deep down that there is a sense of right and wrong, that people matter, and there must be more, I would suggest that comes from reality- that there is a God. Viewing Suffering from Genesis 1 helps us to see that God is indeed God and Good, and though we might not understand why he lets things happen, he might be so "God" and so "good" that he has a bigger picture that we don't know about.

And Genesis 3 shows us that there is a reason suffering has come into the world in the first place- we have turned our backs on our maker. Suffering is part of God's judgement on a world that has turned it's back on him.

But it doesn't end there. Next time we will look at suffering in the light of the cross (the middle), and then suffering in the light of where history is going when God sorts everything out (the end), and while we may not get all the answers we want, I hope we will see that God can still be trusted.

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Let's finish with the verses that we started the service with, in fact for Emma and I verses that were read at our wedding. They give us a good attitude to foster as we finish our first study on suffering. Let's love God not for the good stuff that he gives us, but for who he is. So that if good things are taken away, we can still say these words. *"Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. Hab 3:17,18.*

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**Let's Pray:** Oh Lord when we begin to tackle this question, there's so much we **don't** know. But we thank you for what your Word clearly reveals about your character. You are strong, powerful, authoritative, in control, you are **God!** And you are gracious, loving, merciful, despite our sin, brokenness and fallenness- you are **good**. Teach us more about yourself, so that we don't just love you for an easy life or in the good times, but instead we trust you through thick and thin, In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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