

Christ Church Huntingdon Sermon 31st March 2019.

Suffering 2- Suffering and the Middle

Let's start by looking back to Mark 14:34. "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,*" Jesus said to them. **Let's Pray.**

I recently was introduced to these lyrics from American Christian rapper Lacrae, when some of his relatives and his bandmates' relatives were battling with cancer:

I'm hanging on by a thread
And all I'm clinging to is prayers
And every breath is like a battle
I feel like I ain't come prepared
And death's knockin' on the front door
Pain's creepin' through the back
Fear's crawlin' through the windows...
Tell God I need a whole lotta hope keeping it together
I'm smilin' in everyone's face
I'm cryin' whenever they leave the room
They don't know the battle I face
They don't understand what I'm going through.¹

I've put a link to his music video on the dig deeper resources this week and it's very moving. It raises an issue in that last line. *Is there anyone who understands what I'm going through?* What we'll see today is that there is. Jesus Christ suffered with us, and he suffered for us.

This is the second of our three talks in this series on Suffering. And while I hope we are all clear that we will never get to the bottom of the question "Why?" (not in this life at least), there are three perspectives in the Bible from which we can view suffering, which can at least show us how trustworthy God is in the midst of suffering. And that is really the aim of this series.

Last week we saw **suffering viewed from the beginning (the Creation and Fall)**- 1) a Creator God who is still Good and still God, despite bad things happening. And 2) a fallen world into which suffering has come as a result of our rebellion. Next week we will look at **suffering as viewed from the end**- from the day when God wipes away every tear.

But today we look at **suffering as viewed from the middle- Jesus Christ and the Cross**, and wonderfully we are introduced to the "man of sorrows who was familiar with suffering" (Isa 53:3), someone who knows what it is like to suffer and lose everything. Someone who can comfort us in pain and loss- someone who has been there and out the other side, who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.

There are 2 points today and the first when you think about it is mindblowing...

1) We have a God who shares in our suffering

Back to the verse I started with from our reading: Mark 14:34. "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death*".

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jv8IqJm6q7w>

Jesus is in Gethsemane, and as he contemplates the cup of suffering that the Father is giving him to drink: separation from the Father, and the wrath of God for the sins of the world he is utterly overwhelmed with sadness, grief and pain. To make matters worse his closest friends who are now fast asleep and totally unaware of what's going on will all scatter, one betraying him, some denying him.

Perhaps Jesus can echo the words of Psalm 88 which we read earlier, finishing with “darkness is my closest friend”. (Incidentally, a pastor I know who suffers with depression said that he found that Psalm incredibly helpful because it meant someone else had these feelings too and that God recognised that people sometimes feel like that, so he repeated the Psalm to himself again and again- I've put his interview on the resources too²).

My point so far is simply this. In Christ, God hasn't stayed aloof from our suffering world. He knows what it is like to suffer. He came down and joined us. At the cross, Jesus went into the very epicentre of suffering.

▲ You may know the story of Joni Earickson Tada³ who as a 17 year old girl went to the beach with friends one sunny summer's day, and dived off the rocks into what she didn't realise was very shallow water. Tragically she broke her back leaving her a quadriplegic for the rest of her life. Her story is an incredibly moving and inspiring one, as she moved gradually out of despair depression and doubt, and began to find a voice as a Christian

speaker and campaigner for those with disabilities. Once, a few years after her accident, a friend at her bedside said something about Jesus that was extremely comforting. “Why he was paralysed too”. She realised that Jesus on the cross was pinned motionless in excruciating pain unable to move, and this brought a feeling of immense solidarity- Jesus is the God man who suffers with us. We have a God who shares in our suffering.

Here's how British writer John Stott put it: *“I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. **That is the God for me!** He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his”⁴.*

So for those who suffer right now. You may never know why it sometimes seems to go from bad to worse, and in Lacrae's words at the start, you are “*hanging on by a thread*” and that “*fear is crawling through the windows*”. Well never forget this... we have a God who suffered and suffers with us. Jesus-God with us. God with scars. He knows what you are going through.

² <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/peter-adam-on-depression/>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joni_Eareckson_Tada

⁴ John Stott, The Cross of Christ, IVP. p335

God suffers **with** us. But so much more than that, we have a God who suffers **for** us...Let's move onto our second point...

2) We have a God who uses suffering...

Please turn back to Ps 119:67 on page 619.

Psalm 119:67 ⁶⁷ Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. And **v71** ⁷¹ It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

Here is an extraordinary thing that we touched on last time. Though suffering is impossibly painful, as Simon shared so bravely last week in his story, it is **sometimes** (and I stress *sometimes*) possible to see good coming out of it. That is certainly the case for the Psalmist here- v71.

Now I'm not wanting to minimise hardship, nor am I saying that there has to be a silver lining to every cloud, so that we can see the benefits of what we are going through. Sometimes we might say "life just sucks". In fact I think the book of Ecclesiastes teaches us that we don't need to find a rhyme or reason to every event in this "life under the sun".

But it's part of the genius of God- this true God- the God of the Bible who made us and who controls every event in this world- that he works suffering to bring good out of it. There could be many examples, but I'd like to focus on three before we close...

a) he used the suffering of the cross to bring our rescue.

The Cross is the ultimate example of God using suffering. When Jesus was in the lowest pit of suffering- cut off from the goodness and love of the Father that he had experienced undiluted since before the beginning of

time- at the point of greatest darkness, (literally in fact), it wasn't an accident, it wasn't a total disaster, it was actually the point of greatest hope, the brightest light, because God was punishing OUR sin in Him. That is ultimate suffering for good.

In Isaiah 53, 700 years before Jesus even came, we get the reason for the Messiah's death so clearly (we started the service with it)...

Isaiah 53:4-5 *Surely he took up our pain*

and bore our suffering,

yet we considered him punished by God,

stricken by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was on him,

and by his wounds we are healed.

When Jesus was dying he was dying in our place. He was taking the punishment of suffering for our sin that we deserve. So God was using Jesus' suffering to rescue all who trust in him, meeting sin and hell and death head on, and swapping places with us to take on himself the brokenness of the universe. We'll think more about that as Easter and Good Friday approach, but Jesus didn't only suffer **with** us (point 1) he also suffered **for** us to bring us rescue.

But that rescue has to be received personally. And God can use suffering to do that too.

b) God uses suffering to bring people to Jesus.

Jesus' rescue isn't automatic. We need to receive it by coming to Jesus in what the bible calls repentance (turning from our sin) and faith (turning to trust him).

But in the gospels there are many examples of people for whom it was their suffering that brought them to Jesus. Take the paralysed man of **Mark 2** who we looked at last term. He was on a mat. His friends brought him to Jesus for healing- what they thought he needed. But Jesus gave him so much more- He healed something far deeper: his sin problem at the root of his brokenness. So God used suffering (a) in Jesus to bring about the rescue we need, and he can actually use suffering (b) in us to bring us to receive that rescue by repentance and faith in Jesus.

God uses suffering to bring people to salvation- to know Jesus Christ. Now I need to tread carefully here, but a word for the person who isn't a Christian: the person who is resisting Jesus, the person who may have a great respect for Christians, and even for Jesus Christ, but for whom at the moment Jesus is a dead figure of history rather than our Maker, our Judge, our King.... it may be that God is using suffering to cause you to come to him. As CS Lewis said "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world". Jesus himself when questioned about a tower that fell on innocent victims to warn his hearers: **Luke 13:4-5** do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

If you are not a Christian, can I gently ask- will you respond to your suffering with bitterness (a resistance to Jesus), or softness: a turning to the One who suffered for us. As one preacher put it, the sun that melts the wax also hardens the clay. Will you let suffering soften you or harden you?

▲ Ernest Gordon was a prisoner of war at the famous Japanese "Bridge over the river Kwai" death camp- you may have seen the film. Here in the blood and filth of the jungle, he and many others found Christ in the testimony and love of fellow prisoners. Here he is on a boat back to England looking back on the story with a fellow survivor... *"Well" he said, "It's all over. I wouldn't have missed it for anything. It was rough all right. But I learned an awful lot that I couldn't have learned at the university or anywhere else. For one, I've learned about the real things of life, and for another, it's great to be still alive" I knew exactly what had made him say this. The experiences we had passed through had deepened our understanding of life and of each other. We had looked into the heart of the Eternal and found him to be wonderfully kind*⁵. Ironically it sometimes takes suffering to see God is Kind and worth trusting.

And can I say one more thing to Christians under this. Sometimes it takes our suffering too, to bring others to faith. The suffering of sacrificing our comfortable lives, or our time and money to go after people with the gospel (in this year of outreach). Or God might allow people to see Jesus in the way that we suffer, and that might point people to Christ. Paul himself rejoiced at how him being in prison *"really served to advance the gospel", because it became "clear to others that he was in chains for Christ" (Phil 1:13).*

⁵ Ernest Gordon "To end all wars"- p217.

c) God uses suffering to make us more like Jesus

The unbeliever needs to come to Jesus. The believer, however, needs to grow more like Jesus, and God sometimes uses trials to test and refine us so that “*our faith may be proved genuine*” (1 Peter 1:7) or as James puts it “*the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*” (James 1:4). Or as the book of Hebrews puts it.. **Hebrews 12:11** *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

I remember a lady I once met- a wonderful kind godly woman. When her husband was dying of cancer well before his time she said, “Now I know that God really loves me, because God disciplines those he loves”.

Far from being evidence God was against her, she saw this heavy hand of suffering as evidence God was working in her to transform more and more into the likeness of Jesus. And you could hardly have met a more gently kind godly lady who in her eighties had her neighbours around for tea, cakes and Christianity Explored on DVD. Sadly for us, but wonderfully for her, just a few months ago she was taken to glory and is now reunited with her husband and her Saviour Jesus!

The hammer blows of suffering hurt, and none of us choose them or ask for them, but in God’s sovereignty he uses them to mould and shape us like a master craftsman working on a beautiful statue.

I don’t know why Job lost all he had, or why Lacrae’s family members were facing cancer, or why your and my loved ones are going through what they are going through, but I pray that in this crucible of suffering, God would refine you and melt you, perhaps to enable you to know him for the first time, or to be made a little more like him so that you demonstrate to the world how wonderful Jesus Christ is- the one who suffers with us and suffers for us.

Sometimes lovingly God sometimes uses suffering to remind us of what is truly solid, lasting, joyful, wonderful- HIM!

▲ Simon Guillebaud, a missionary in Burundi with Great Lakes Outreach tells the story of meeting a man who lost everything in the genocide except his life and the clothes on his own back. He had lost his home, family members, everything. And the man said, “I never knew Jesus was all I needed, until Jesus was all I had”.

Let’s have a moment of silence.

We’re going to listen to a song now that focuses on the power of the Cross.

“Christ became sin for us, took the pain, bore the wrath, we stand forgiven at the cross”. Let’s listen quietly as we consider how serious our sin was to take Jesus to the cross, and how much he loves us, because he wanted to die for us.