

Christ Church Huntingdon Sermon 7th April 2019.

Suffering 3- Suffering and the End

Let's start by looking at Romans 8:18: "*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*".

▲ Emma's grandfather was 102 when he died a couple of years ago. And in many ways, he lived a very simple and straightforward life- as a farmer in the West country, and (apart from one holiday in Spain!) never moving more than a few miles from where he was born. But he was an amazing Christian man, and even in the last few months of his life he was talking with the nurses who came to look after him about Jesus.

One of them, a young woman, said she could never be a Christian because of all the suffering in the world. And Grandpa, who himself had suffered quite profoundly in his life, aged 102, said surprisingly strongly, "Don't you think there's a reason for all this suffering, when you look at how we've treated God? And we all need Jesus who has come to rescue us!" He died a couple of weeks later trusting in Jesus Christ to take him home.

We come to our final of three talks looking at suffering. We've taken a break from our normal sermons that follow one bible book through consecutively, to look at the shape of the whole Bible and some extracts of its teaching on suffering. And I hope these sermons will help you say some helpful things like Grandpa when someone asks you about suffering, as well as to help you in suffering itself either now or in the future. Perhaps this diagram will summarise where we've come and where we are going.

Week 1 we started with **Creation**¹- a good God, who made a perfect world without suffering. But when humanity **rejected** God, deciding to be boss instead, sin and suffering came into the world (what we call "the fall").

Last week we saw how Jesus didn't stay aloof from suffering, but in his kindness came and suffered *with* us on the **cross**, and suffered *for* us in our place- rescuing all who put their trust in him from the hell that we deserve. So there's a choice to face at the cross- will we trust Christ or not?

Today we look at the **wonderful future** that awaits Grandpa and all who trust in Jesus. What the Bible calls the new heaven and the new earth, "Heaven" for shorthand. I've got one main point, which we will spell out on the screen, and then we'll finish briefly with four things you can do to help someone who's suffering. Let's look at the main point in 3 parts...

1) The hope of Heaven...

Let's start with our main passage today- a famous one for weddings (we had it at our wedding!)- Revelation 21v1-4 (page 1249). A couple of important things to note about the new heaven and earth... Although it's picture language, it's wonderful what's there and what's not there.

What's there- a new or renewed creation, with a wonderful relationship, pictured like a wedding couple... God in perfect relationship with his people. He will be there God and they will be his people. That's the most wonderful thing about heaven- we will be with God.

¹ Diagram/powerpoint and other resources can be found [here](#).

Ted Donnelly has written an excellent book on “Heaven and Hell”, and it’s well worth reading, on both subjects, both of which we can treat as certain realities because Jesus treated them as such. And Ted Donnelly says about heaven, that though some aspects of the symbolic language in chapters like this are hard to understand, nevertheless *“the Bible’s favourite way of describing heaven is not in the least hard to understand, but so clear that a child can grasp it. In the New Testament, **heaven means being with Jesus.**”*² What a helpful reminder. Heaven is about being with Jesus. And what a wonderful person Jesus is. How wonderful it will be to be with him in all his glory. It is likened to being at a banquet (Psalm 23) or like being in the Father’s home (John 14). But in both cases, a banquet and a home with Jesus!

What’s not there? Verse 2. No longer **any sea**. Don’t worry surfers, and beach lovers, there’s nothing wrong with those things, but in Hebrew thought, the sea spoke of chaos and unrest- the place of evil (do you remember Jesus sending the evil spirits into the pigs into the lake?) So no more chaos, and no more separation- because seas separate people.

And v4 there’ll be **no tears**. No tears! Isn’t that magnificent. I wonder when you last cried. I wonder what made you cry? A bereavement, an injury, a relationship in pieces, loneliness, physical pain or something else. No more tears? Why not? Because if you are a follower of Jesus, God himself, your creator, your husband, your comforter will have wiped them away personally. Isn’t that an incredible image?

² Edward Donnelly, “Heaven & Hell”, Banner of Truth, p80.

Why not? Well there’s **no more death or mourning or crying or pain**. It’s wonderful. It’s a whole new creation. Yes in a way it’s still this world, because heaven, the new Jerusalem has come down to us (v2). But it’s new- the first heaven and the first earth has passed away (v1).

A renewed world with none of the things that make life difficult now.... No mosquito stings, financial stings; no blood viruses, computer viruses; bed bugs, stomach bugs, programming bugs. No broken bones, broken relationships, broken hearts. No hearses, hospitals, hankies. No comas, no chemo, no cancer. No anxiety, no addictions, no antidepressants. No pain.

Heaven will be amazing. To be with Jesus, and to be without suffering. We recently finished reading the Narnia books, and the Last Battle (book 7) ends with this. *“There was a real railway accident,” said Aslan softly. “Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.” And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before*³.

³ The Last Battle, CS Lewis, p171-2.

That hope of heaven sounds great- particularly to anyone suffering right now, but is it real? Is it based on anything solid, or is it just wishful thinking?

2) The hope of heaven is built on reality...

It's not just "pie in the sky when you die!" It's real! Psalm 34:17 and 18 says "*The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles*". There's a promise that God will rescue us from all our troubles. But it doesn't happen in this life. Next it says "*The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit*", bringing realism that there will be tears in this life. The next verse promises that "*The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones*". So there's a "now" and a "not yet" Troubles now, but ultimate protection to come looking forward to the safety that all believers in Christ will have in the new heaven and the new earth.

So it's built on reality, because it's based on God's promise but more than that it's based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Take John 11 for example. We'll come back to this verse on Easter day. There's the promise, and the basis. **John 11:25** "*Jesus said to Martha, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'*"

Promise- life after death. **Basis-** Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He himself has power to raise the dead (John 5:21). And Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead to prove it (and incidentally, his enemies didn't deny that he did it, they just got more mad and plotted to kill him.

But it's no good killing the man who has the power of life in him, because he will rise again. And that's exactly what happened, and it's built on solid evidence- the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances of Jesus (up to 500 people at one time) and the changed church.

The hope of heaven is built on the reality of Jesus. ▲ In Spanish the word for hope is the same as wait. I'm hoping for a bus, I'm waiting for a bus. And in Latin America, you never know whether it will arrive (one of our congregation is out there now)! But in Christian language. The hope of heaven is a reality. It's waiting for Jesus to return and put all things right. God has promised he will come back and sort everything out. He's never once failed to keep one of his promises.

I'm not saying that's easy. A few weeks ago I found a voicemail on my phone from one of my best friends to say that his mother had just died. When I spoke to him, he said how at his Christian mother's bedside, witnessing her die, death feels so real, and the Christian hope so unreal. But in all his pain and sadness, he was clinging onto the gospel, and later at the funeral he was able to speak from this chapter- John 11 about Jesus who both wept and had the incredible power to bring life out of death.

We long for the day when all suffering is over. And it will come. It's based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the Easter **facts**. Go back to those facts regularly, and talk them through with others. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. (See 1 Cor 15:1-3).

3) The hope of Heaven is built on reality and it keeps us going through suffering.

Ro 8:18 is the verse that we started with. *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us”.*

Sufferings can feel like huge mountains. But compared to the glory that is in store for us when we meet with Jesus in heaven, it doesn't even register on the scales in comparison. As we look back from the mountains of heaven, the sufferings of this life will look in comparison like molehills.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul speaks of the suffering that Christians feel, “hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down”, but *“we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body”.* And he's able to speak in verse 17 of our *“light and momentary troubles”.* That's what they will feel like at the eternal weight of glory is revealed. I don't want to sound flippant, and suggest that anyone who's going through something painful now is going through something small. No it feels like an Everest now. But by comparison to the glory then, the suffering we look back on will have.

So the future gives a real perspective on suffering.

I've told some of you the story of Florence Chadwick. ▲ Florence Chadwick was a long distance swimmer in the 1950's. One time she was swimming across the Catalina Strait in California- a distance of about 26 miles. It was a foggy day and she couldn't see the destination, and so she gave up and climbed into the rescue boat.. *“It was the fog. I could have finished. But when you can't see your goal, you lose all sense of progress &*

begin to give up”. Unbeknown to her, she was just ½ a mile from the destination. She did it a second time, on a clear day when she could see her destination, and she didn't give up. Patiently she persevered to the end. It's so hard to experience suffering. And some of you are in the middle of it at the moment. But just beyond is the wonderful promise of the new heaven and the new earth. A solid reality that is guaranteed for all who put their trust in Jesus. Hold on! Keep trusting Jesus.

I want to finish this series with a few practicalities for how to help others who are suffering...

1) PRAYER The first thing that you can do is pray. We underestimate how powerful that is. Either praying with someone (and there will be people available to pray with you after the service today) or praying for someone away from them in your own time. God answers prayer, it makes a difference- either changing the circumstances, or changing us so that we have the strength to cope with the circumstances. *“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”* James 5:16.

2) LISTEN. I was particularly helped by our “life group” that meets each Wednesday on this. One of the most helpful things you can do if someone is suffering is be with them, and listen actively. Not shoving in your opinions and solutions at the earliest opportunity, and telling the person that you know what they are going through- because you don't- no two people suffer in the same way. But listening- really listening, reflecting back to check that you have heard them rightly. There's an amazing power in

simply listening to someone- especially if they have been through a trauma or a bereavement. As one of my friends says, we have two ears and one mouth, so let's do double the amount of listening. Even long after someone has been through suffering, they may want to talk. James 1:19 *"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry"*.

3) **PRACTICAL CARE.** A girl in our last church shared how when she was suffering with depression, friends would come around and help do the washing up, and just hang out with her while she couldn't do very much. It was such a support. We can be Jesus' hands and feet to people. Can you walk someone's dog, buy their shopping, make a meal, give them a phone call, mow their lawn, buy them some flowers? John says, *"If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth"*. **1 John 3:17-19.**

4) **SHARING TRUTH.** Now it may be appropriate and wise to stop at 1, 2 or 3. We don't have to give lots of advice, and sometimes as I said in week 1, we are too quick to theologise, when people just need an arm around them. But when the time is right, it's helpful to share God's truth. Not your opinion of what they need, or your analysis of what's happened, but perhaps simply some bible verses that focus on God's faithful character. Perhaps some of the verses that we have looked at in this series- about Jesus and his suffering, or about heaven, or just about how trustworthy God is. On the back of the dig deeper this week, there's an extra list of

Bible verses that we came up with in our Life group, and there may be some ideas there. The Psalms are great because they are so human, and include complaint and lament- honest questioning of God. Psalm 44:23 says *"Wake up Lord, Why are you sleeping?"*

The rest of the Bible says that he's not, and one day Jesus is coming back to put everything right, but isn't it encouraging to know it's OK to ask the question?!

We always have a few copies of this little booklet available on a Sunday, particularly designed to help those going through loss and grief. In it amongst lots of helpful teaching Simon Manchester tells part of his own story... *"Once in the midst of a tragic family loss, someone wrote to me the words of Psalm 18 verse 30: "As for God his way is perfect". It didn't explain everything, but it reminded me of the rock of his character on which I could stand"*⁴. Share the truth. God hasn't changed.

So as we conclude....

The hope of heaven... is built on reality... and it keeps us going through suffering. So keep looking forward!

We're going to finish now with a song which the band are going to sing to us. It's a beautiful song all about heaven. *"There is a higher Throne"*⁵.

⁴ "At a time like this"- Simon Manchester- Matthias Media, page 13.

⁵ <https://www.gettymusic.com/higher-throne?rq=there%20is%20a%20higher%20throne>