

Today, I want to speak to you on “Why Do Good People Suffer?” I’ve taught on suffering before. In fact, one lady told me, “Preacher, I never knew what suffering was until I heard you preach. Now I know.” Some preaching and some teaching is like suffering. Once a long-winded preacher had been going about an hour and didn’t seem anywhere close to ending. He said, “I’m really on a roll here, and there’s a lot more that I want to say, but Jesus has just told me to stop, so let’s end the service. Jesus has told me to end my message.” The song leader said, “Let’s stand and sing, ‘What a friend we have in Jesus.’”

Many people have suffered at the hands of either a long or a pointless sermon preached, and I hope that’s not today’s feeling. Suffering comes to all of us at some point in our lives, and it’s not something to be joked about either. Even worse is when we see incredible suffering happening to people for no apparent reason, maybe as a result of terrorism or a natural disaster. And therefore it’s very rational to ask the question – why does God allow suffering.

This idea of suffering has puzzled us for centuries. The question is simple, and yet the implications of a response are so complex and far reaching - If God is entirely good, and entirely powerful—why is there suffering? Some people look at what the Bible says about God and then look around in the world and say, “The character of God and the reality of suffering contradict each other!” What’s the answer? Yesterday I was in visiting someone whose husband died a while back, and she really found it hard to understand when I told her that God loves everyone so much, and yet she is sitting today without her solemate. Her logical question is that if God loves us that much, why would he take away those we love so suddenly.

But I think for me, suffering both within my family, and seeing suffering to others, as well as the stuff on TV, it’s helped me learn a few important things, which I hope help you in your own journey of understanding. As I’m sure you realise I don’t have time to delve in detail on these :

I. Suffering is part and parcel of living in a broken world

Our reading reflects the wickedness of Pilate, a cruel Roman Governor. He did not trust the Jews, and so on a day when he watched them prepare their sacrifices for the temple, he ordered his soldiers to massacre them. And that folks very much reflects that we deal every day with cruel wicked people in our society. We all remember and will never forget how one man could wipe out 6 million Jews in the 2nd world war. The Bible speaks of the depravity of the human heart. Jeremiah 17:9 says that “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” For each one of us, we don’t have to go very far before we realise that in life we have to keep ourselves safe. Each one of you right now will have a key in your pocket which is a testimony to the fact that you cannot trust to leave your front door open at the risk that someone will come in steal and take advantage of your possessions. And therefore we cannot blame God for the actions of wicked people. It begins in each one of us. And even if today you claim that you live a clean life, the reality is that in the gossip that comes from our mouths, the thoughts that we think about individuals, the judgements we make of others, shows that we are part of the problem.

Sometimes as we know people suffer and it’s not because of the wickedness of someone else. It could be the result of an accident or natural disaster. Again for me the reason why these things happen is because we live in a broken world. We live in a beautiful world, but more and more we are realising that the things that are happening to it are a result of the greed of humanity, whether that’s global warming, mining for minerals and resources that we don’t really need. Romans 8:22 reminds us that the whole of creation is groaning, and in many ways today you can literally hear it. The way in which I look at it is this. I have a lovely home which I am very proud of. But I realise I have 2 young boys who without a lot of

realisation mess their rooms up. And for me that's annoying. That's how I believe God looks upon his creation when he sees what we are doing to it.

The second thing I've realises is that suffering is in no way related to goodness.

The question in the minds of Jesus' audience was, "Did those people suffer and die from Pilate's cruelty or from the tower falling?" The assumption was, they must have been bad people to suffer like that. There is a tendency for us to look at someone when they are suffering and to think, "Maybe they are just getting what they deserve."

In John 9, Jesus was walking along when he saw a blind man. His disciples asked Him, "Master who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?" Don't we sometimes think the same way? What did this person do to deserve their suffering? Pay attention to what Jesus told His disciples, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned that he was born blind, but this happened that the work of God might be displayed in his life." (John 9:1-3) Folks, I think we still make the same false assumptions today.

Jesus asks, "Do you think those upon whom the tower fell were worst sinners than you? No!" That kind of thinking attacks our sense of fairness or justice. We think bad people should be the ones to suffer and good people shouldn't. But that's not the way it works. Let's consider the title of this lesson again: Why do good people suffer? It's actually not a very good question, because no one is good in the first place! Once a man approached Jesus and called Him "good." Notice Jesus' reply in Luke 18:19: "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone." The Psalmist says, "There is none good—no not one."

Maybe you've pondered the mystery of, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Have you ever stopped to wonder, "Why do good things happen to bad people—like me?" Suffering is no respecter of persons, at one time everyone will suffer—the good, the bad, the ugly. In fact, the Bible promises those who follow Christ WILL suffer. But the good news is that any suffering we endure in this world is only temporary. The Bible says in Romans 8:17-18, "We share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Yes, we will suffer in this life—but this life is not all there is!

After the tragic suffering at 9/11, the great evangelist Billy Graham spoke at the memorial service. He said this, "I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and He's a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering." Dr. Graham said next, "For the Christian, the Cross tells us that God understands our sin and suffering, for He took upon Himself in the person of Jesus Christ our sins and our suffering. And from the cross, God declares, 'I love you. I know the heartaches and the sorrows and the pains that you feel. But I love you.'

Folks, the story does not end with the Cross, for beyond the tragedy of the Cross there is the empty tomb, and in this run up to Easter we have this hope. We know the rest of the story, that because of the Resurrection we can have eternal life, for Christ conquered evil and death, and hell. Yes, there is hope. The message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what our community needs to hear today! For without the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, suffering has no meaning and people are left with many many questions; it becomes a hopeless encounter with pain. But because Jesus suffered and died and rose victorious over the grave—we have hope!