

Wednesday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Mercy in Suffering

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Preached at Ascension Lutheran Church, Littleton, Colorado

Text: Numbers 21:4-9; 1 Peter 2:21-25; Matthew 8:14-17

Focus: Christ suffered on the cross for our salvation.

Function: That they would take comfort in suffering, knowing that God is with them.

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... redeemed me... with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death..." (SC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Suffering is one of the most difficult realities with which theology and philosophy must grapple. In fact, the existence of suffering in our world is one of the primary reasons why many atheists reject belief in God. The way they figure it, a good God would not allow human beings (or other creatures) to suffer. Or perhaps he is good but not powerful enough to prevent it, in which case, why bother believing in a weak god? The other alternative, of course, is that God is cruel and malicious and sadistically delights in causing people to suffer, in which case he is not worthy of worship. And so, the atheist concludes, there is no god—at least none worth mentioning.

But Christian theology comes at the trouble of suffering—or *The Problem of Pain*, as C.S. Lewis calls it in his famous book—from a very different angle. The answer to the question, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?" is, of course, that there *are* no good people. We are all sinners. "The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (Ps. 14:2-3). Christians understand that the ultimate cause of suffering is human sin. We suffer pain, disease, and want because Adam and Eve sinned against God in the Garden of Eden:

"And to Adam [God] said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; <sup>18</sup> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return'" (Gen. 3:17-19, ESV).<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, there are three primary causes of suffering in the world catalogued by Christian theologians:

1. We suffer because other people sin against us.
2. We suffer because God disciplines us.
3. We suffer because God sometimes tests our faith.

Let's tackle these one at a time.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

First of all, we suffer because of other people's sins. You lose a child in a car accident because a drunk driver got behind the wheel and killed them. You lose your business or job because somebody else told lies about you, stole your property, or took credit for your work. You suffer persecution because the devil stirs up governments or religious fanatics to arrest, torture, or kill you for your faith in Christ. We suffer because other people sin against us. And all of the sin in the world traces its origins back to Adam and Eve.

The second reason we suffer is because God disciplines us. Sometimes God has to get our attention and get us to snap out of it so he can call us to repentance. For if we persist in unrepentant sin, we are doomed and damned. But God calls us to repent and confess our sins so that we can turn to him for mercy and grace. "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Heb. 12:6).

Today's Old Testament is a perfect example of this. God punished the Israelites for their ingratitude and distrust by sending fiery serpents among them. The bites of these venomous beasts were deadly. But when the people cried out to God for mercy, he had mercy upon them. He told Moses to make a bronze serpent—a symbol foreshadowing the cross—and anyone bitten who looked to the bronze serpent would be saved. Their life would be spared! The fiery serpents were a painful lesson about gratitude and contentment, but the Israelites learned—and turned from their sin. God is not capricious. He does not punish us for the purpose of his own pleasure, but to get us to check ourselves before we wreck ourselves by a life of sin.

The third reason we sometimes suffer is because God is testing our faith. He wants to test our metal and see what we are really made of. Are we only the fair-weather faithful, only praising God when times are good, or do we have a true faith that holds onto his Word and clings to the cross even when things are at their worst?

The classic example of this is the Book of Job. In Job 1, God boasts about Job to the devil, saying, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" (Job 1:8). Apparently, Job was a strong believer with great trust in the Lord.

But the devil was unimpressed. "Tsk, tsk," he said. "Of course Job trusts you! You've made his life cushy and easy. But, believe *me*, if you do something to mess with him just a little bit, he'll turn back to bite the hand that feeds him."

Surprisingly, the Lord took up the devil's little wager and told Satan that he could do *anything*—absolutely anything—to ruin Job's life without touching the man himself. So the devil sent raiders to steal all his cattle and livestock—essentially robbing Job of his livelihood. And then, worst of all, he caused the roof to cave in at the house where Job's children were gathered to celebrate their brother's birthday part. All ten died in the roof collapse.

Job was devastated. In his terrible sorrow, he tore his robe and shaved his head. But he didn't curse God. Rather, he declared, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). (*Aside: By the way, that verse is the inspiration for the heartbreaking praise song, "Blessed Be Your Name."*)

But things go from bad to worse. In chapter 2, God spits in the devil's eye again, boasting of Job's success. So the devil begs to have at him again. This time God allows Satan to do whatever he wants to Job's body—so long as he doesn't kill him. So Job is afflicted with painful oozing sores that cover his body from head to toe, and he can find no relief from the excruciating pain. His own wife urges him to "Curse God and die," but Job will have none of that. "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we no receive evil?" (Job 2:10). And in all that, Job did not sin.

But by the time you get to Job, chapter 3, the poor man has had enough. He curses the day of his birth, wishing he'd never been born—so great is his pain and sorrow. Then for the next 35 chapters, he cries out to God—and argues with his friends—"Why me, Lord?! Why me? How can you treat me this way?" Job says that he wishes he could place God under a subpoena to summon him to court in order to be forced to give an answer.

Yet when God finally shows up in Job 38, he doesn't give Job a straight answer. Instead he thunders, "Who is that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known me" (Job 38:2-3). In other words, the answer to Job's question, "Why me?" is basically, "Who are *you* to ask?" God wisdom is beyond our wisdom, and his ways are not our ways. Even though we, the readers, know the cause of Job's suffering, the prophet does not. He's left in the dark—figuratively and literally.

That's the trouble with suffering. Even though suffering may be for any of the three reasons I mentioned—sin in the world, punishment for sin (discipline), and the testing of our faith—God rarely, if ever, gives us a clear answer as to which of the three reasons it is. He kind of leaves us hanging here.

And that's why the ultimate answer to suffering is God himself: his peace and his presence. His mercy in suffering. The Good News of the Gospel is that God does not abandon us in our suffering. He is *with* us and *for* us. And in the flesh of Jesus Christ, God's own Son sent to die for us, we found our hope. God doesn't leave us hanging with our questions and doubts. Instead Jesus hanged on the cross to bear our suffering and sin. As St. Peter writes in our epistle:

"For Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.... When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin

and live to righteousness. By *his* wounds *you* have been healed” 1 Pet. 2:21, 23-24).

Jesus knows what it’s like to suffer. He suffered the worst pain and death of all—death on a cross for the sins of the whole world. Jesus did not suffer punishment because of anything he had done wrong. Jesus suffered because *we* have done wrong, each and every one of us sinners.

Yet God in his mercy sent Jesus to suffer and die for you and me so that we might be forgiven and brought into heaven. And because Jesus suffered, died, and rose again, he has defeated death and suffering. His resurrection ushers in the coming kingdom, in which there will be no more sorrow, no more suffering, no more pain, and no more death. There is only one answer to suffering: Jesus Christ who “suffered, died, and was buried” for us. And because Christ promises to be with us always—“even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20)—we know that even in suffering, we are not alone. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.