

This morning, I am in the second week of a sermon series I've entitled "The cross: why the death of Jesus matters." From last week until Easter, I will be doing my best to explain what the death of Jesus on the cross means for us and for the world. For those of you who have called yourself a Christian for a long time, I would encourage you to take to heart the words of David Prior in his commentary on 1 Corinthians: "We never move on from the cross, only into a more profound understanding of the cross."

Last week we looked at Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15 that "Jesus died for our sins," trying to understand what that means. This morning, I want to look closely at why the death of Jesus matters for our suffering.

If you've lived long enough, you're familiar with what is commonly called "the problem of evil." Here is one version"

- 1) If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
- 2) If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
- 3) If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
- 4) If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.
- 5) Evil exists.
- 6) If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.
- 7) Therefore, God doesn't exist.

But for most of us, the problem of evil is not just something we wrestled with in our college Philosophy 101 class. It's something we struggle with daily in our lives – how can a good and loving God allow me to be abused, or my son to die, or tornadoes to happen, or children around the world to starve? The problem of evil is very real, and it is painful to wrestle with on a personal level.

Even those who follow God struggle with the problem of evil. Elisabeth Elliot, a prominent Christian writer and speaker in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tells of visiting friends of hers in northern Wales who owned a sheep farm. She shared about how the sheep are vulnerable to being eaten to death by insects and parasites, and so once every year, the shepherd has to take his sheep to a huge vat of antiseptic and completely submerge his sheep. The farmer, in order to save his sheep from death, has to actually hold his sheep underwater in the antiseptic until they have been disinfected. As Elliot put it:

*One by one John seized the animals. They would struggle to climb out the side and Mack the sheep dog would snarl and snap at their faces to force them back under. When they tried to climb up the ramp in a panicky way at the far end, John the farmer would catch them, spin them around, force them under again, holding them ears, eyes and nose submerged for a few seconds.*

*And as their lord and master was pushing their head under, drowning them at least as far as they could tell, their panicky little eyes would look up over the edge of the vat, and it was easy to see what they were thinking. What is god doing?*

Reflecting on that experience, Elliot continued:

*I've had some experiences in my life which have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor sheep. There are times I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from my great shepherd whom I trusted. And like these sheep I didn't have a hint of an explanation.*

The problem of evil is real and painful, not just in the classroom but in real life. **But instead of an answer, God gives us an even greater mystery – the cross.** God the Father allowing his innocent Son to die a horrific, unjust death upon a Roman instrument of torture. If you believe the Christian story, we have here at the cross the only innocent man who ever lived – Jesus himself said “who among you can convict me of sin?” - dying the most unjust death ever – being accused of blasphemy, making himself out to be God, when he was indeed God - experiencing the greatest of all possible suffering, as the wrath of God on human sin is poured full strength on Jesus, as he bears the penalty for our sins. How does that square with the problem of evil?

But somehow, here at the cross, we find something to help us in our time of suffering, to address the problem of evil, not just in the classroom but in our life. We will not find the answers to all of our specific questions, mind you, but at the cross we find hope, strength, and even love. So this morning, let's consider the question: Why does the death of Jesus matter for our suffering? Let me share three reasons this morning:

- 1) **Suffering is real, painful, often unfair, but NOT meaningless**

There are many different ways that people try to address the problem of evil in our world. There are some worldviews that minimize the pain of suffering, calling it an illusion, or claim that there is no unjust suffering because all suffering is just karma for the sins of your past life. And even in the church, you have some teachers who would tell you that if you just have enough faith, you can overcome any sickness or suffering, that suffering is your fault and that the faithful Christian should be able to avoid most of the suffering in life.

But suffering is real. It is painful. And it is often unfair. We don't need to call it something that it is not. Jesus sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was betrayed and abandoned by those closest to Him. He was mocked, tortured, abused, slandered, falsely accused, and nailed to a cross where He died a slow and painful death and experienced the wrath of God on human sin. Suffering is very much real, painful, and often unfair.

**But does our suffering mean anything? Is there a purpose, or is it meaningless?**

I think that the fear of many people is that suffering is meaningless and without purpose. As the cultural anthropologist Richard Schweder put it, *“The reigning metaphor of the contemporary secular view is suffering is just chance misfortune. The sufferer is a victim under attack from impersonal forces devoid of intentionality, and that means suffering is separated from the narrative structure of human life, a kind of noise, an accidental interference, into the life drama of the sufferer.”*

This is where the cross brings us so much help in the midst of our suffering. **Think of what it must have been like to be one of Jesus disciples at the cross that day.** How would you make sense of the cross as you saw the great man of God hanging there? The truth is that God has never been more absent or unloving than He did on that day, as He allowed His innocent, perfect Son to die an unjust death without intervening. After all, what kind of a loving Father would let that happen?

But now, with the benefit of hindsight, what do we see when we look at the cross? We realize that God was never more loving or present than He was at the cross. After all, it was God the Son on that cross, willingly giving His life to save ours. Instead of being absent, God the Son was dying for us.

So, why does the death of Jesus matter for your suffering? You are going to have many times in your life when you can not understand what God is up to, like Elisabeth Elliot's story about the sheep dogs. You will question God's love. You

will cry out to God, asking Him where He is. **When you feel like God is absent or unloving, can I encourage you to look at the cross.** At the cross, God never seemed more absent and unloving, but He was never more present and loving. Look to the cross and trust that God may have a plan and purpose that is beyond your limited understanding. **You may not know WHY God is allowing you to suffer, but you can know that it is NOT because He does not love you.**

***Romans 5:6–8** - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

***Romans 8:31-32** - What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

Can you accept this? Can you believe that if God is big enough to create everything, then he is big enough to have a reason for allowing your suffering that you can not understand? Can that help you to trust, knowing that God is perfect in His love, justice, and sovereignty, sees the end from the beginning, and knows what He is doing, even when we can't comprehend it?

***Isaiah 55:8-9** - For **my thoughts are not your thoughts**, neither **are your** ways **my** ways," declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup> "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Elisabeth Elliot, who lost two husbands amidst many other inexplicable troubles, learned to trust God no matter what, and put it this way:

*God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.*

Look to the cross this morning and know that God loves you so much that His Son willingly died in your place, and that if He allows suffering in your life, it is not because He does not love you. Take some time and consider that for a minute as you consider the suffering you have experienced or are currently experiencing in your life. The beautiful and incredible thing about God is that he is able to take the suffering and pain that you experience, that you sometimes bring upon yourself,

and at other times is visited upon you with no fault of your own, and bring something good out of it.

*Romans 8:28-29 - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

**Notice what the good is.** It's not that the marriage will always turn around, or that the kids will always come back to health, or that your cancer will always be healed. What is the promise? The promise is that God can take any evil and turn it to good, conforming us to the likeness of His Son. **This does not minimize the evil of what was done to you,** or what you did to yourself. No – it is a promise that if you will trust Him and not turn away from Him, God will always be at work to purify you through suffering so that you might be more like Jesus, people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What a source of hope, to go through suffering knowing that no matter what others have done to you, no matter what you have done to yourself, or no matter what else you might be going through, that God is always at work to bring good out of it. And one of the most common ways He brings good out of our suffering is to equip us to more effectively minister to others.

## 2) **We can not truly love without suffering**

When I look at the cross and consider the suffering of this world, first of all I see that suffering is real, painful often unfair, but NOT meaningless. I do not have to minimize it or explain it away, but I also can trust that even when God seems absent and unloving, He is very much present and acting out of love for me. **But the second thing I see at the cross is that to love anyone is going to involve suffering.**

*John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

When I look at the cross, I see the love of God displayed. Not some Barney the purple dinosaur, fluffy kind of love, but a costly love, a bloody love, a sacrificial love, a love that took my place and bore my punishment and gave me eternal life. And if we are going to love anyone – a child, a spouse, a friend, a brother or sister in Christ – we need to know that that love, if it is going to be genuine, will involve suffering.

As Tim Keller put it: “All love, all real, life-changing love, is substitutionary sacrifice. You have never loved a broken person, you have never loved a guilty person, you have never loved a hurting person except through substitutionary sacrifice.”

If you have ever been a parent, or been parented, you know this is true. A child is born completely dependent. The only way they will survive and thrive is for at least one parent to sacrifice their own independence, and sleep, and finances, for years. If you decide that the child needs to just wait and revolve their life around you, then the child will grow up emotionally needy or troubled. To truly love your child, you must decrease so that they might increase. You must limit your freedom so that they might find freedom. You must die to yourself daily, that they might truly live.

**Or consider marriage. I do marriage counseling**, and a reliable predictor of unhappy marriage or divorce is an unwillingness on the part of one or more spouses to compromise, to give up freedoms for the good of their partner. If one spouse won't stop going out weekends, or buying whatever they want, or giving up a negative habit, then the marriage will suffer and possibly break. No wonder that when Paul gives us his grandest vision of marriage, he begins with these words:

***Ephesians 5:21** - Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

And then he goes on to tell wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord and husbands to lay down their lives for their wives like Jesus laid down His life for us.

You can not truly love without sacrifice. **If you don't want to suffer, then I would suggest that you do not love anyone or anything.** As C.S. Lewis wrote in “The Four Loves”: “*To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.*”

**The truth is that some of you are suffering deeply because you have chosen to love deeply.** You are in pain because you have been willing to enter into the lives of hard-to-love people. Your life is marked by battle scars because this world is a

battleground and you have chosen to follow Jesus into the war in order to rescue people.

We can not truly love without suffering. Don't forget this picture of Jesus the Messiah:

*Isaiah 53:3–5 - He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. 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 we look at the cross, we see that true love always involves suffering. And at the cross we see Jesus willingly giving up the comfort of heaven in order to suffer and die in excruciating fashion out of love for us, in order to save us. Are you willing to follow Him out into this world, being willing to suffer so that others might find life?

*Hebrews 12:1–3 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

The joy set before Jesus was having you restored to God. It was His love for you that allowed Him to endure the cross and scorn its shame. Look to the cross, that you might not grow weary and lose heart as you love others and suffer for them.

This world is a battleground, and the wounded are everywhere. Are you willing to follow Jesus into the war and sacrifice your comfort so that others might be loved and rescued? There are **orphans and children in foster care** everywhere. Would you be willing to give a home or family to a child in need? There are **widows and elderly** dying slowly in loneliness. Would you be willing to sacrifice your time to give them a friend? There are people without **clean water or sanitation** around the world. Are you willing to give up your time and money to give them health? There are people around the world who do not know the Lord. Would you be willing to go to them, or support others who can?

Or think about church: Are you willing to sacrifice a Sunday in here to teach children in Children's Church, or to care for children in the nursery? Are you willing to forgo a conversation with a friend to welcome a stranger? Are you willing to park in the back so that a new family or parent of young children or an older person can park closer to the front door?

**All true love will involve suffering.** And sometimes God allows us to go through suffering because it will equip us to minister to others in a way that otherwise would not be possible. Paul suffered tremendously, but wrote these encouraging words about how God used his pain:

*2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ **our comfort overflows**. <sup>6</sup> If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. <sup>7</sup> And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

When we look at the cross, we see that suffering is real, it is painful, it is often unjust, but it is NEVER meaningless. **One of the main reasons that God allows us to suffer is to equip us to minister to others in a way that we could not do if our life was always comfortable and easy.**

**Think of Joseph.** Sold into slavery by his brothers. Put into prison unjustly by Potiphar and his wife. Forgotten in prison. But eventually put in a place where he would save his family from famine and death. And as he reflects back on his journey, he says this to his brothers who had caused him so much harm:

*Genesis 50:20 - You **intended** to harm me, but God **intended** it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

**What would it look like to be able to say that?** I know that some of you have suffered unspeakable horrors at the hands of other people. Your parents, your boss, your pastor, your spouse, someone or some people have hurt you deeply and left real scars. **What if you looked to the cross and saw that your suffering, while real, painful, and unjust, was not meaningless?** What if you came to believe that all true



love involves suffering, and that perhaps God is taking the awful thing you went through and equipping you for ministry to others that will save many lives.

Can I encourage you, that whether or not your suffering has come because of something you've done, something another has done, or just because you live in a fallen world, to put your hope in God and believe this this morning: **"This suffering is so that the work of God might be displayed in your life."** Bring the pain, the suffering, to God and trust in His ability to bring something beautiful out of the pain.

As Donald Miller put it in his book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*:

*"Somehow we realize that great stories are told in conflict, but we are unwilling to embrace the potential greatness of the story we are actually in. We think God is unjust, rather than a master storyteller."*

**How does Jesus' death on the cross help us make sense of suffering?** It teaches us that suffering is real, painful, and often unfair, but NOT meaningless. It shows us that we can not truly love without suffering. And thirdly:

- 3) **Jesus suffered and died so that suffering and death would be destroyed forever**

As Paul wrote at the end of his great chapter on the resurrection in **1 Corinthians 15:55–58** - *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

The death and resurrection of Jesus overcame the power of death. One day death will be destroyed forever, and we will have eternal life:

**Revelation 21:3–4** - *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Death and suffering will be destroyed forever. And somehow, in a way that I can fully comprehend, there is nothing we will have lost in this world that will not be restored a hundredfold when we are with God forever.

*Matthew 19:28–29 - Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”<sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.*

Suffering is real, painful, and often unfair, but when we look at the cross, we realize that suffering is NOT meaningless. God is always working for good, to make us more like Jesus and to equip us to minister to others. And as we see Jesus dying for us, we realize that we can not truly love without suffering, and that we have been called to enter into the battlefield and love others with a sacrificial, Christlike love. And finally, praise God, we see that Jesus’ death will destroy suffering and death forever. Let’s pray:

God, I trust you with my pain. Help me to see Jesus on the cross and to know that you love me. Help me to trust that you are working for good, to make me like Jesus and to equip me to minister to others. Thank you that suffering and evil will not have the final word, but that in you we have eternal life. Until that day, give us the courage to enter the battlefield, that we might be willing to sacrificially love others, that you might use our suffering for good, for the saving of many lives. Amen.