

Kingdom Come: Suffering

Introduction

- Today our topic is 'Kingdom Come: Suffering.' It is the last one in a series we have been doing over the last couple of months called 'Kingdom Come.' We've explored God's reign and rule, repentance, signs and wonders, God's Kingdom in our communities and today we are exploring suffering.
- Years ago I went to Indonesia. I volunteered in an orphanage in the middle of the jungle called 'Living Waters'. A Dutch missionary had received a vision from God to set this up. There were children with some horrendous stories who had been orphaned or abandoned and then rescued and brought to the orphanage. Yet amongst these awful stories of sadness and suffering, God was doing something miraculous. He was restoring the lives of children and giving them hope and a future. I remember when we drove into the orphanage there was a sign that said, 'warning: you are entering a miracle zone.' As I was preparing to speak today I was reminded of this orphanage and how it represented this juxtaposition of suffering and God's glory at the same time.
- I believe that it can be through the greatest suffering that we see God's glory manifest.
- I believe that amidst great suffering, when the darkness feels heaviest, it is often then that the light of Christ shines brightest.
- John 1:4-5 tells us that in Jesus '*was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*'
- In the world today, we are witnessing great suffering and conflict in Ukraine. Suffering is a reality in our broken world. But Jesus is the life and light of ALL mankind.
- When we talk about suffering, it's not something abstract. It's something that we will all and probably have all experienced to some extent in our own lives which is why I think it's important to talk about it and understand what the Bible tells us about it.
- Jesus tells His disciples in John 16:33, '*in this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*'

- I believe that the key to walking through suffering and finding any kind of purpose and comfort through it, is by looking to Jesus, the One who has overcome the world, has overcome the darkness and even suffered Himself.

Why suffering?

- The first question we might ask is 'why suffering?'
- Why do people have to suffer?
- I can't do that question justice in the next 20 minutes but I believe it's important to understand the bigger story of salvation and creation in order to understand why suffering exists.
- As Christians, we believe that suffering exists because we live in a broken and fallen world. God created it to be 'very good' (Genesis 1:31) but when humans chose to do their own thing, sin entered into humanity, bringing with it a suffering and brokenness. By sending Jesus into the world, fully God and fully man, God the Father made a way through Jesus' death and resurrection for humanity to be reconciled with Him, to receive eternal life and one day for creation to be restored.
- We currently live in this world where the Kingdom of God is now and not yet- what I mean is that we do see breakthrough in the name of Jesus, we do see hope and restoration and healing, yet sometimes we do not. The fullness of the Kingdom of God will not be here until Jesus returns again to make all things new.
- Revelation 21 tells us about our future hope, the new heavens and the new earth. Verses 3-4 say, *'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. 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."*
- So as Christians we live with this tension- the victory of Christ, an incredible future hope and yet still the effects of sin on earth until Jesus comes again.
- Our Christian hope and certainty is that one day there will be no more suffering, but how do we journey through suffering here and now?

Joseph's story

- Preparing for today I felt drawn to Joseph's story in Genesis.
- Joseph's story is a story of suffering and yet great redemption. It is a story of how Joseph walked through difficulties and found purpose in his pain.
- If you haven't heard of Joseph, here are a few key events in his life:
- Joseph's siblings don't really like him very much because he is his Dad's favourite child and also has dreams where he is ruling over his brothers. So, one day they decide to sell him into slavery in another country- *'So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.'* Genesis 37:28.
- I remember when we were younger, my brother and I used to fight. Anyone relate or any parents relate?! One morning I had been teasing him and so he tried to come back with a really good insult and ended up saying, 'you're as fat as a baboon!' I expected my Mum to tell him off but she just burst out laughing because it sounded so ridiculous! We used to argue as children but now we are great friends, and I'd like to think that he would never have sold me into slavery and let me be taken away like that!
- In Genesis 39 it tells us that God was with Joseph and that he prospered in Egypt. He was put in a position of power and influence, but then he gets falsely accused of trying to sleep with his master's wife, and thrown into prison unjustly. Genesis 40:20 says *'Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.'*
- Whilst in prison, Joseph correctly interprets some dreams and asks the chief cup bearer, whose dream he interprets, to remember him to Pharaoh to get him out of prison.
- Unfortunately, the cup bearer forgets, which leaves Joseph in prison for another 2 years.
- Eventually, Joseph is released from prison because he correctly interprets Pharaoh's dreams and is put in charge of Egypt, submitting only to Pharaoh.
- And then, long story short, Joseph is reunited with his brothers and his father and forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery.
- **So, throughout his life, Joseph is despised by his brothers, sold into slavery, taken to a foreign land, falsely accused of something and thrown into prison and forgotten about until years later.**

- What I want to focus on today is 3 things that we can learn about suffering from the life of Joseph.

- 1) God is present in suffering.
- 2) Through suffering, God accomplishes His kingdom purposes.
- 3) God can redeem even the greatest suffering.

1) God is present in suffering

- When Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt, he must have felt pretty desperate and alone.
- Yet Genesis tells us that even in Egypt, even in his suffering, the Lord is with him. *'The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered.'* Genesis 39:2.
- Again, we read in Genesis 39:21, *'While Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden.'* Genesis 39:21.
- The Lord is present even in our suffering.
- The Lord is kind even in our suffering.
- Just because our circumstances are bad doesn't mean that God is bad.
- Throughout and despite Joseph's suffering and hardships, we see the character of God. We see His kindness and provision and favour.
- Psalm 34:18 says *'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.'*
- The Lord is with His people in suffering.
- In Isaiah 41:10, God says to His people and I believe also to us today, *'So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.'*
- If we can find any kind of comfort in suffering, it is that God doesn't leave us or abandon us. We might not understand why things have to happen and I don't believe that God causes suffering, but I believe that His presence in it gives us a strength to continue.
- You may know the story of Daniel in the Bible. Daniel and his friends are thrown into a fiery furnace because they refuse to bow down to King

Nebuchadnezzar. 3 of them are thrown into the fire, yet in Daniel 3:25 the king exclaims, *'Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'*

- Daniel and his friends come out of the fire and not a hair on their head is touched or singed. The king then says, *'Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!'* Daniel 3:28.
- The Lord was with them in their suffering and as a result, others saw and God was glorified.
- Sometimes, all we need to hold onto is the truth that God is with us in suffering.

2) Through suffering, God accomplishes His kingdom purposes.

- Joseph's suffering is not pointless.
- In Genesis 45:4-7, we have this emotional moment where Joseph reveals himself to his brothers- the brothers who sold him into slavery, who were jealous of him and who he hasn't seen for years and years.
- He says, *'And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.'*
- I love Joseph's perspective. He doesn't view his suffering as something pointless, but as something that God has used to accomplish His plans and purposes to save lives.
- What if our suffering is a channel for God's glory to the world around us?
- I think that in order to have this perspective, Joseph must have really trusted God.
- Joseph must have really believed God to be faithful.
- Do you trust God in your circumstances? Do you believe He is faithful?

- Joseph held onto faith that God was not mean or unkind, but a God who can bring purpose to pain even when things look so bleak.
- I don't mean to look on suffering and trials lightly and I am not saying that we shouldn't be sad because I think it's important to acknowledge our emotions.
- What I am saying is that Joseph had faith that God used his difficult circumstances to ultimately bring about deliverance for his family and for a nation.
- I believe that even today, we can trust in a God who can be glorified through our suffering and that God is working even through our difficult situations.
- We have to ask Him for His perspective and that He would help us trust Him.
- *1 Peter 1 says, 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... in all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.'*
- The early church faced suffering. Christians throughout the world face suffering today. We face suffering personally in our lives.
- Yet even in trials, we have a Living Hope to cling to. Trials can refine our faith and result in the praise and glory and honour of Jesus.
- How many of us see our trials and suffering as a way of refining us and ultimately bringing God glory?
- Through Joseph's trials and sufferings, he believed that God could accomplish His purposes.

3) God can redeem even the greatest suffering

- In Genesis 50:20, Joseph says to his brothers, *'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.'*
- We see that God put Joseph in the position as ruler over Egypt so that, with the wisdom God gave him, Joseph could store up grain and save many lives from hunger and famine.

- We see this beautiful reunion between Joseph and his family.
- We see the redemption of relationships that God weaves so beautifully.
- God can redeem even the greatest suffering and turn what the enemy meant for evil into good.
- God can redeem broken relationships even today. He can redeem broken lives and give us a second chance.
- This brings me to the greatest redemption story there ever was. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Our Saviour who loved us so much that He became like us, suffered because of us and died for us.
- Isaiah 53: 4 says, *'He (Jesus) 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.'*
- Jesus took our sin on the cross and died for us.
- Jesus' death didn't look like redemption. When He died on the cross, darkness descended upon the land... yet He rose again 3 days later, victorious over sin and death, paving new life and hope for us.
- 1 Peter 3:18 says, *'For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.'*
- Through His blood shed for us on the cross, we can experience forgiveness, hope and redemption. We can be part of an eternity with Him, gaining an inheritance that never fades or spoils or perishes (1 Peter 1:4) and a right standing with God.
- **Can I encourage you today, that even when it feels like we are facing our greatest trials and suffering, God is with us.**
- **God can accomplish His kingdom plans and purposes through our suffering.**
- **God can redeem even our greatest suffering.**

Testimony

- I know what it is to experience personal suffering. I lost my Mum very suddenly in 2016 and last year Josh and I lost a baby to miscarriage. These losses shook me and make you feel pain in ways you haven't before.
- But through these desperate situations I have known the presence of Jesus. I have known His nearness as I weep and as I ask questions and as I grieve.

- I have experienced the hope of Jesus and the love of Jesus.
- I have experienced the God who redeems and restores and comforts us through suffering and so can you today.
- I know that God can take our brokenness and what the enemy meant for evil, and that He can turn it into good.
- Last year when we were processing our miscarriage and the loss of a child we already loved, I felt God say to me, 'Susie, I lost my Son.' On the cross, the Father saw the Son die- theologically I don't want to say the wrong thing here, but in my pain last year I felt the pain of the Father with me, comforting me and reminding me of the death of Jesus.
- *'Christians suffer in hope.. Jesus suffered to ransom us from our sins and reconcile us to God, and his resurrection is the first installment of the restoration of all things. We may still ask why when our bodies hurt and our hearts ache. We may wonder when God will make all things new. But we remember who suffered in our stead to secure our salvation. And until Christ returns, we follow our Servant King on the road to Calvary.'*
<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/gods-answer-to-human-suffering>
- Many of us might feel like we walk around with wounds.
- My question to you today, is will you follow your Servant King, Jesus, on the road to Calvary?
- Will you trust Him in your suffering?
- Will you open your heart to Him and allow Him into your pain and confusion?
- The one who bears the greatest wounds for us is Jesus Himself.
- There is no greater hope in suffering than the God who suffered Himself and is with us today by His Holy Spirit.
- NT Wright says, *'Jesus doesn't give an explanation for the pain and sorrow of the world. He comes where the pain is most acute and takes it upon himself. Jesus doesn't explain why there is suffering, illness, and death in the world. He brings healing and hope. He doesn't allow the problem of evil to be the subject of a seminar. He allows evil to do its worst to him. He exhausts it, drains its power, and emerges with new life.'*

- We can have new life in Christ. We can know the God who suffered for us. We can know God personally in our suffering.

Application

Key takeaways:

- **Persevere through suffering.** Just like Joseph did and just like Jesus did. Romans 5:3-5 says, *'we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.'*
- **Look to God for hope through suffering.** Romans 15:13 says, *'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'*
- **Let others see Christ in the way that we respond to suffering.** Matthew 5:16 says *'let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.'*

Let us invite the light of Christ to shine in us and through us in every circumstance.

When we persevere and hold onto hope in suffering, people will see there is something different about us and our God.

Let us support others in suffering by being present with them. We don't have to have all the answers but by just listening and being there for them we can share the love of Christ with them.

Pray and finish by taking communion together

- Let us remember the suffering of Christ, yet the victory and glory of Christ and the new life He has won for us today.