

Suffering & God's Goodness

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[0:00] Hey, there we go. Hey, I'm all, yes, I'm alive. Wow. Wow. Thank you, technology. Those of you who don't know me, my name is Jesse, and one of the pastors here. It's a privilege to be with you today and actually continue us on in this series.

We're going through a series. We typically preach through books of the Bible. We stop and do topical series every so often, and during the summer months, we've chosen to jump into an apologetic series.

And kind of the—here's the goal for that is we're going to hit on issues and topics that are, one, difficult to understand and often represent obstacles for people in their faith, or for those of us who do believe, they cast doubt in our faith.

And so going through this, we wanted to address them, dive into them, hopefully for those who are believers in Christ already, that it would give you some encouragement. And then for those who are earnestly seeking truth, it would give doubt to your doubts.

Really, that is what we are hoping for, to like undo some of those obstacles and open you up to the fact that like, hey, this faith that we believe in, it is not like believing in fairy tales.

[1:06] There is rational good reasons for the faith that we have and what God is doing. And so today, I am going to do the topic of suffering and the goodness of God.

And so to get us into that, I'm going to read from Ecclesiastes to kind of introduce us to what the Bible has to say. On this subject. So Ecclesiastes chapter 1 verses 2 to 9, it says this, Vanity of vanities, says the preacher.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes to the north and around and around goes the wind.

And on its circuits, the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness.

[2:10] A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be.

And what has been done is what will be done. And there is nothing new under the sun. This is God's word to us. Yay. Doesn't leave you with much hope, does it?

Right? You kind of hear that and you're just like, wow, just sounds like a lot of futility. But it really nails something down, doesn't it? It really speaks to our reality and what we know to be true, even though we don't want it to be true.

And here's the thing. This passage doesn't hide the fact that in this world and in this life, generations go, generations come. Wherever you're at, whatever you're experiencing, nothing new is under the sun.

We all experience the same thing, and that is suffering. To say it another way, you could say suffering is what is. It can't be avoided. It can't be solved.

[3:10] It can't be fully explained. And also, for each one of us in the room, your suffering isn't new and it isn't particular to you. But before I get into my sermon, I'm going to humbly concede like all of those things.

Like, it can't be avoided. I'm not here to solve it. I'm not here to try to fully explain this thing. We can do a deep dive into suffering. But in the end, all the knowledge, all the wisdom falls short of sufficiently understanding and resolving this topic.

But we will go as far as we possibly can today. I will try to do my best. And then at some point, we're just going to have to rest in the fact that there is suffering. But hopefully we can rest in something

terribly beautiful and mysterious.

Maybe you're here and you have been significantly touched by suffering. Maybe that's happened in the past. Maybe you're going through it right now. And maybe you're here searching for answers to find some comfort and relief.

And before we get into this, let me just give you the words of a great Christian thinker of the 20th century. His name was C.S. Lewis. He actually wrote a great book on this subject. He says this. He opens his book this way.

[4 : 19] Nor have I anything to offer my readers except my conviction that when pain is to be born, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.

By the way, if you want to get like the better version of this sermon, go read that Lewis book. It's called *The Problem of Pain*. I'm not going to pretend to come close to how he deals it in that treatise.

I mean, he is so brilliant. He is so good with answering all the nuance and objections that people may have. And I just want to say from the outset, I got about 30-ish minutes here.

I mean, that book, like, you can read it slowly in about eight hours, and it'll give you a lot more than I'm going to be able to give you today. However, I am going to do my best.

Okay. That being said, let's begin. I think a great place to begin on this topic is to define what suffering is. What do we mean by suffering when we're talking about suffering? And I would say it's going to be helpful for us to distinguish it from discontent.

[5 : 26] What do I mean by that? Well, I might be discontent that my coffee is cold, right? Or I could be discontent that I don't own a boat, but that is not suffering. That is not.

Nor is it suffering to have a middle-class salary rather than an upper-middle class or wealthy one. Now, a smaller salary could lead to matters of discontent due to constraint of one's consumer spending capabilities, but, again, that is not suffering.

So let's speak to what suffering is. Suffering is loss. We suffer because we lose something important. Not like I lost a Lego piece, but the kind of loss that is on the level of catastrophic or traumatic or life-affecting.

The kinds of losses that we suffer, we think of good things like relationships that we lose due to any given set of circumstances, the loss of security or safety, the loss of dignity being robbed of us, the loss of joy.

These losses, they can happen for a host of reasons as well. I mean, it's just the very world that we live in, death and disease come. There are famines all around the world at any given time.

[6 : 43] There's hurricanes and typhoons and tornadoes and earthquakes that destroy. And these catastrophes, what they do is they bring loss with them. And here's the tough thing. They're unavoidable.

They're out of our control. And then there's another kind of suffering and another kind of loss that we incur by our very own hands as human beings. There is abuse. There is oppression.

There is greed. There is slavery and injustice. And there's wars. And there's trafficking. And there's terrorism. There's—and the list can go on and on and on. There's so much out there. And what is interesting isn't that so much that these are realities, and it's an unfortunate shared reality, but what is interesting to me and I want us to consider is how humanity relates to it, to all these things being what is.

Now, I want to argue that on this topic of coming to suffering, I would agree with Lewis in saying that for an atheist, it's a lot easier to deal with this topic of suffering.

There is nothing to reconcile. Suffering is just what is. We can no more change it than we could reverse the orbit of the earth around the sun. And seeing suffering in that narrow way and limiting to that, it makes sense when your only lens is kind of a scientific approach to the world.

[8 : 03] When you look at the whole of the universe and you consider it and weigh it up, very little of it is hospitable to life at all. The majority of our universe is empty, cold, dark space where nothing exists and nothing can't exist.

And on this rarest of planets where life does exist, a simple observation would rightly conclude that everything on this planet seems bent at killing you.

From diseases to disasters to predators to our own dysfunctioning bodies, suffering and death are simply what is.

There is nothing to try and reconcile for the atheist but to limit suffering. That is the natural response to it. Let's limit it and let's rise above it if it is in our power to do so.

And beyond that, the humanist or atheist perspective should have no better response to suffering than survival of the fittest. This explains how many people relate to suffering today and have related to it in the past.

[9 : 07] We live to avoid suffering as much as possible. And if we can't, we definitely find ways to inoculate ourselves and protect ourselves from feeling the pain of suffering. And there are myriad pursuits that we engage in to do this.

But I would say all those various pursuits kind of fit into three meta categories that the Bible calls lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. To say it another way, we pursue power, pleasure, and wealth because they promise us salvation from suffering in their own way. And I'm going to say that is an honest approach if suffering simply is just what is. But here's the thing.

That isn't what we really believe. And that's true for the Christian and that's true for the humanists and atheists alike. I would argue that most everyone sees suffering with a tinge of morality.

Here's what I mean. Let me prove my point. Have you met anyone in our modern moment who would not be repulsed by a culture or let's say a village who turns their backs on the weak and the poor and the destitute to just let them die and starve to death?

[10 : 16] Would we not be repulsed by that? Anybody? If survival of the fittest and limiting one's suffering is the only ethic you can have, would we have no moral outrage, say, toward a Jew in a Nazi concentration camp, helping to exterminate his fellow Jews in order to save his life or at least better his predicament?

But if survival of the fittest is right, why shouldn't he? Suddenly we see the problem. Suddenly we see the inconsistency and the contradiction that we all as human beings live with here.

So what does this shared instinctive moral response to suffering mean? See, there is what is, but there is also something inside of us that has a sense of what ought to be.

History and science is a study of what is. It tells us what is, and that's very helpful. We need that. But it is the realm of theology. It is the realm of religion that searches to find what is behind that instinct we have towards what ought to be.

If at any moment we feel something is not right here, then it stands to reason that we believe that there is a better right way for something to be. If our souls grieve and groan over death and loss, over when we see famines and people suffering from them, or wars and people suffering in them, and poverty and oppression and diseases, when we groan inwardly at those things, we need to listen to that and reckon why that is.

[11 : 50] Why should we groan if there is no what ought to be? But even if we arrive there, even if you concede that, okay, Jesse, you're making a good point.

Thank you. Even if we concede that, it still doesn't let the Christian escape from this difficult question. How can a good God allow suffering?

Here we have the great obstacle for so many to the faith, and to faith in God. And you know what? I just want to say this. If you're here, and this is you, and you're earnestly seeking this out, I don't begrudge you that question at all if you're asking it in earnest.

It is a both difficult one to understand. It's a difficult one for me to answer, but I want to say this. It's not an impossible one to answer. And again, I'm going to turn to Ecclesiastes.

It says this in chapter 7, verse 13 and 14. Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity, be joyful.

[12 : 57] And in the day of adversity, consider God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him. These verses invite us to look on life and suffering from a very specific reference point.

To look at it from God's reference point, not man's reference point. If we start with man being the reference point, we will easily come to the conclusion that man's happiness is the most important thing.

In fact, one might measure God's goodness according to how happy his creatures are at any given moment. And that, again, is a purely humanistic perspective of life, and one that is only actually a few centuries old.

It was one of the big perspective shifts of the Enlightenment. God, in the Enlightenment, what it introduced is God ceases to be the source and center of all life, and in his place, man becomes the source and center of all life.

And that's kind of the starting point of humanist philosophy, and it's the one that is pervasive today. That is the one that has informed our culture, and it's in the milieu of what we live in.

[14:08] Everywhere you go, and everything you do, and every message that you hear out there, that is underneath it all. Okay, but is that correct?

Which one is right? Which perspective is the right one here? And what makes one more right than the other? So let's approach our question again. How can a good God allow suffering?

And perhaps the best answer to that question is another question. Let me say it this way. Does God's goodness rise and fall according to the state of our happiness or our felt happiness?

And if it does, then that does limit God's goodness to what man desires. Okay, but what about what God desires? And let's just remove God from the equation for a moment there.

What if what makes one man happy doesn't make another man happy, and those two things are in contradiction? And are there not many contradictions among us for what brings us happiness? Let me use a simple yet not too far-fetched hypothetical here.

[15:15] In the same rural village of some poor nation, you have a farmer praying for rain to grow his crops to feed his family. And at the same time, down the hill from him, there is a peasant widow who is praying against rain so that the river doesn't rise and flood her crops, so that her family does not starve.

Here you have two competing desires and outcomes upon which their personal happiness depends. Now, in a humanist perspective, this is a gotcha argument. You can't win, God, in this one.

You're going to, someone's going to lose here. But that does not, that is just approaching it the wrong way. It's understanding this dilemma from man's perspective. It's not trying to see it from God's perspective at all.

And Ephesians 1 talks about God's plan, which he is working out according to the good pleasure of his will. There's something bigger that is going on that we are kind of caught up in.

And I bring this as a counter-argument because it draws us into an interesting juxtaposition here. See, there is the humanist perspective on this side, which weighs up every moment of life and categorizes them into good and bad moments.

[16:25] Let's call this micro-moment perspective. And then there is God's perspective, which looks upon all of history, past, present, future, all at once in his great plan of redemption.

Let's call this the macro-plan perspective. To see how different these two perspectives are, let's consider them and how we might understand David's writing of his own life experiences in Psalm 23, which is one of the famous psalms, right?

So we're going to show an image here, and you have David writing, and these are chronological events happening, you know, at any given moment in his life. Wow, we have this good shepherd, and he leads me to green pastures and still waters.

And, man, that's good. And he restores David's soul. That's good. He guides David into righteous paths. That's good. He leads David through the valley of death's shadow. Mm, that's not good. That may feel like a really bad moment at the time, right?

And then he anoints David as king. He favors David before his enemies, prepares a feast for him. That's good. And David says, I get to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[17:32] I get to dwell with God forever. That's good. And leave that slide up as I, again, make more sense of this. And I would say this, when you have the micro moment perspective on this side and the macro on that side, and we're like, okay, which one do we got to lean into?

And I say, actually, in a sense, both are right in their own way. The micro moment perspective is how you and I walk through life and experience life. It's in a chronological manner.

We move from moment to moment, and there are good moments and there are bad moments. But God sees all those things at the same time. All are written into his overarching plan, and you could even see it in David's life.

But in the end, that one plan of many micro moments is good. That's it. It is good. See, two things can be true at the same time.

Your sufferings, other sufferings, those bad moments, we don't have to say that they aren't. And yet, at the same time, we don't have to deny because of that that God is still good.

[18 : 36] Because his goodness is measured across generations and centuries, not in the micro moments of our lives of six billion people on earth. Now, keeping that in mind, you can make a rational argument that God's allowance of our sufferings has no bearing on his goodness.

So, then what makes God good? Well, nothing makes him good. Either he is or he isn't. And if he is, then everything he does is good.

And everything he allows is good. Even when he allows floods and famines and accidents and wars and cancer. The problem might be that we don't understand what good is.

We may have a concept of it, but we may not fully grasp it. C.S. Lewis, in that book I referenced earlier, puts it this way. Any consideration of the goodness of God at once threatens us with the following dilemma.

On the one hand, if God is wiser than we, his judgment must differ from ours on many things. And not the least as on good and evil.

[19 : 47] What seems to us good may therefore not be good in his eyes. And what seems to us evil may not be evil. Lewis makes a good point here. Our standard for what is good and evil might not be on par with God's.

Think of it this way. You may have been brought up in a home with certain virtues. We all might agree are good virtues, right? Work hard, uphold peaceful relations.

But suppose in your home this got worked out in a specific way. Suppose working hard also meant feeling ashamed for any kind of rest. And the good value of hard work was really idolatrous in its pursuit.

And any idleness was frowned upon. And suppose that for your family that you grew up in, your peaceful relations meant never addressing issues. And all conflicts got swept under the rug and ignored.

And you grew up that way. And let's say that you met a nice girl or you met a nice guy and got married. And then your in-laws, you met them and spent a lot of time with them. And they have some of those same values.

[20 : 50] Values of hard work and upholding peaceful relations. However, they also, in their hard work value, also value rhythms of rest. Not only is work praise, but rest is praise along with working diligently.

Taking a week of vacation. Or to sit idly with a book in hand on a Saturday as of no consequence. Or isn't considered some selfish indulgence to feel guilty about. And perhaps the way they uphold peace is by dealing with conflict through honest, tempered conversations.

With a desire to both understand one another, but also in the end to be reconciled. Now, you could say that growing up you had an understanding of good and evil.

But you could also say because of the new influence of your in-laws, your understanding of good and evil improved quite a bit. The virtues that you kind of understood might have been a little bit flawed.

And what you know you should be aiming at, you didn't quite get right growing up. But now you found something even better. In a true sense, you have found a better way, an improved way.

[21 : 53] And that's what the Christian life is all about. When God becomes our reference point and our influence to what his, we are influenced by what his goodness is. And the more we know him, the more we see things, there we go, got it, through his lens rather than ours.

And his standards become our standards. And in this way, we move from inferior to superior understanding of things. C.S. Lewis, he ties this argument up in a bow so beautifully.

I'm going to let him have the last word on this. It is in the light of such experiences that we must consider the goodness of God. Beyond all doubt, his idea of goodness differs from ours, but you need have no fear.

As you approach it, you will be asked simply to reverse, sorry, but you have no fear that as you approach it, you will be asked simply to reverse your moral standards.

When the relevant difference between the divine ethics and your own appears to you, you will not, in fact, be in any doubt that the change demanded of you is in the direction you already call better.

[23 : 04] The divine goodness differs from ours, but it is not sheerly different. It differs from ours not as white from black, but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel.

But when the child has learned to draw, it will know that the circle it then makes is what it was trying to make from the very beginning. Only C.S. Lewis, man.

This takes some humility, friends. But as we earnestly seek the truth of deep things like suffering and God's goodness, we start to realize how much we actually don't know.

And often base them on really undeveloped assumptions. At some point, we have to also have to see that these matters that we're talking about here, we can only go so far and at some point we just land in that it's shrouded in mystery, reconciling these two things.

It's what the preacher in Ecclesiastes has come to believe in all his searching for truth and wisdom. In chapter 8, 16 and 17, it says, When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and Solomon was considered the wisest man ever to walk on this earth.

[24 : 21] And to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day or night do one's eyes see sleep. And I saw all the work of God. That man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

However much man may toil in seeking, seeking the truth, seeking the understanding of all things, he will not find it out.

Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. So where does that leave you and me today? Maybe you need all your questions answered to the fullest in order to believe in God.

But I'll be the first to admit that I and nobody else will ever be able to win you over simply based on the evidence. There is enough mystery surrounding this that it can never be resolved.

I hope, however, that I've helped you to doubt your objections. And that is a good step toward faith.

But at some point, you have to believe that God is who he says he is.

[25 : 28] And perhaps the best help I can leave us is this. God who permits suffering also chose to suffer with us, and he chose to suffer for us.

For me, there is nothing more beautiful than a God who would love us enough to do that. He chose to leave a place that had zero suffering in it.

And he came and he immersed himself in ours. He drank the bitter cup of our pains and our woes, and he didn't have to. He chose to. He experienced the vulnerability of being a child.

He got sick. He got hungry, just like anybody else. He was hated by men. He was betrayed by friends. He was framed for crimes he didn't commit and was put to death for them.

And then he took our sin. He took your sin. He took my sin on himself so that he could endure God's punishment for sin in our place.

[26 : 26] Think about that. There is a suffering that all who believe on Jesus will not taste. Jesus tasted all of our sufferings, and then he tasted one more.

That is a beautiful and awful truth to reckon with and think about and dwell upon. And here's another one.

You can be angry at God over suffering, and God's okay with that. But you know what's better? He invites you to be angry with him over suffering. See, God grieves when bad things happen to people.

He does not delight in the suffering of men. He even grieves when we choose sin. Genesis 6, it says, just a few generations into him creating mankind, he looked down on them, and he's like, oh my goodness, these guys are a murderous, thieving, selfish bunch of crazies, and their hearts are intent on evil all the time.

And it says this, he grieved in his heart that he had made them. It grieved him. He looked down, and he said, man, this is, he looked and he saw, and he's like, this is not what I wanted. This is not what I intended.

[27 : 34] Ephesians 4, 30, it tells us that we can grieve the Holy Spirit by the words that we say and the ways that we mistreat one another. God grieves over those things.

God allows suffering for reasons beyond our understanding, but he never delights in them. Think about this. When King David raped Bathsheba and then murdered her husband, God did not delight in that.

He did not look on that moment and say like, well, David is a guy after my own heart, so let me give him a pass here. Well, how do we know God was so angry? Because we heard from Nathan the prophet.

He comes in, and he exposes David's evil secret. He brings it into the light, and you can hear in that exchange the anger of God over what David had done. You could hear his outrage.

You see it again when Jesus comes to the grave of his good friend Lazarus. It says he wept. He groaned with contempt at death who had taken his friend.

[28 : 37] God is grieved and angry at suffering. And then Jesus, it says we know that he joined Mary in her tears for her brother Lazarus' death.

He joined Martha in her anger over her brother's death. But in the end, he reminded us that every suffering is going to pass away at some point because he raised Lazarus from the dead as a sign pointing to his power.

What does an all-powerful God, why does he allow so much suffering? I don't fully understand it, friends. I really don't. But I do know this.

One day, all the bad, all the evil, all the untrue things are going to disappear. He has a plan that will be fulfilled one day when he brings the fullness of his kingdom and suffering will be no more.

And until then, let's remember the words that we started with. When pain is to be born, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.

[29 : 48] Amen. As the band comes and we seek to respond, I want to appeal to you if you're here today and you're not yet a follower of Jesus, man, that smallest drop of the love of God.

It may not answer and resolve all the questions you may have, but you will taste and see that he is good and he is worthy to be trusted despite how chaotic and crazy life can be, despite the loss you may have experienced, despite what you may have walked through and wondered, does he really care?

And come to him, the one who loved you enough to come and suffer a punishment that you and I deserve because of sin, and he chose to taste and drink of that of his own free will, a suffering that you don't have to taste and partake of.

And all you have to do is believe on him as Lord and Savior. That's what he calls you to, to trust that he is who he says he is. Come to him. Believe on him. There's going to be a moment you can do that.

There's going to be prayer on the screen for you to pray and you will be saved. And I want to say to all of us here who are all followers of Jesus. Suffering is tough.

[31 : 01] He knows that. Bring your suffering to him. We always think of, man, Lord, will you come and enter into my suffering? And he says, man, I'm already there. Will you join me in my grief and my comfort over the suffering that you are suffering?

He invites you into that. He really cares about you. He sees all those things. Nothing has escaped his eye. You can live with the hope that this light and momentary affliction will one day give way to a weight of glory that surpasses every pain we are going to experience here on earth.

And I invite you to dwell on that as you come to the communion table, which is the testimony of his sufferings for us so that we don't have to suffer. Come join in that communion with him.

Be angry with him over sin and its curse upon us and be full of faith and hope with him that one day he's going to come and take it all away. Pray with me. Lord, we thank you.

We thank you that you are a good God and help us to understand these things more deeply. Help us where we doubt to give doubt to our doubts.

[32 : 17] Help us to have faith. Help us to see. Help us to believe. But actually right now I want to pray as we participate in communion, as we come to the table and we eat and drink of you as my friends in the room that are earnestly seeking and they haven't put their faith in you yet as they come and say, okay, I'm going to try this.

That they, we all in the room would experience the same thing. A tincture of your love that is greater than all the waters of this earth.

It is so overwhelming and beautiful. Let us have one small taste, I pray. Amen. You can go ahead if you want to and you're ready to go to the table, get your communion, take it when you get back.

If you just want to take time to dwell on this a little bit more, sit in this a little bit more, that's okay too. Communion tables aren't running away. You can get to them, okay? But when you're ready, you can go.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.