

...that God would allow this much suffering

Intro

What's going on everyone. If I haven't had a chance to meet you yet, my name is Marcus Williamson and I'm one of the pastors here at City Church. Specifically, I'm one of the lay pastors here. Now I'm sure that's not a word you hear often, but basically what that means is that while I do help out in various areas here at City Church, my full-time job is actually working on UT's campus as one of their graphic designers. So, especially if you're a college student, I would love to meet you and hear your story some time in the future, either after church sometime or on campus.

So if you are new this week, we are in a series called *I Just Can't Believe*. If you're a follower of Jesus, the problem is all too familiar right? You've read the articles about how churches and Christians are "out of touch" with the world. You've heard the podcasts about how Christianity needs a facelift—how it needs to reinvent and remarket itself if it's going to survive. How it's a tool for manipulation and for holding people back from being happy.

And behind all of these perspectives is a common assumption: the assumption that there are just too many hang-ups and objections to Christianity as it stands. There are too many hoops to jump through, too many difficult ideas to swallow. Many of us have felt these objections in ourselves, whether we'd like to admit it or not. Others of us encounter people every day who have these types of objections, and don't know how to speak to them intelligently and helpfully. So our hope has been that here at City Church, we would be able to talk about these hang ups well amongst ourselves and with those who do not follow after Jesus. The past few weeks in our series we have talked about the Reasonableness of Christianity and the Authority of the Bible. And today we will be talking on lightest subject in the series, How God Could Allow This Much Suffering. I think I can speak for most of us in this room and say that suffering is everywhere we turn. In many ways it's unavoidable. CNN. FOX News. Twitter. Mashable. SnapChat.

Amber Alerts. Youtube. And yes, even Tik Tok. Whatever your form of media, chances are you've been made aware of the sufferings of life through its lens. It can be overwhelming at times. On a more personal note being black here in America and even more so in Tennessee has me dialed in for sure into the reality of suffering in this world. Whether you put much stock in it or not, racial tensions in our country continue to be an ongoing discussion and it's something that I constantly see on social media, on news outlets even in my day to day life. So with that light intro, I think we need some prayer before we begin. Would you agree? Because I believe we are going to need the Spirit to do some work this morning. Let's pray.

Prayer

Before we start, I want to say this, the sermon today will no doubt be for those of us in the room have suffered. Most def, but I want us to make some distinctions. We are all, to some degree or another, sufferers, or we will be. Now, If you're here and you have gone through a difficult season of suffering recently or presently are going through it, I pray that some of what we say is helpful for you today. But just as a heads up, today's sermon isn't so much geared towards those who *are* suffering, as much as it is wrestling with the intellectual question of how God could allow suffering. Does that make sense? Now if that is you today, if you are in a season of suffering and feel overwhelmed by it, know that we'd love to hear more about it and walk with you through it. So come talk to me or one of the other leaders in our church. Also there's other suffering sermons on our website that have more of a personal standpoint that could be helpful for you if you want to listen to one of those.

An Understanding Of Suffering

So with that being said, I would like to talk us through 3 common questions that people might have about suffering, whether they've been through it or have friends who have been through it and try and answer them through the lens of the Bible.

Questions #1

“Why Would God Create Suffering?”

In Genesis 1, it says that God created the heavens and the earth. And in the midst of all the chaos, he created order. And after each day, which is about a paragraph in your Bibles, it says “And God saw that it was good.”

So the Bible would say that God created a world that was actually good. And very good at that. So many who would ask the question or point to God as the one who *created* suffering, we would say that that’s not how it went down. But that still leaves the question of how did suffering enter the picture in the first place then right? I know for many of you that have grown up in the church or have heard of the story, Genesis 3 explains how suffering came to enter the world. In the process of creating the world, God creates various trees and tells the man and woman that they can eat the fruit of every tree in the garden but one. Let’s pause real quick. Now, some of you parents in the room, you know exactly what God is talking about right here. You tell your kids, you can play with all these toys right here, but just don’t touch this stove right here. It’s hot. Toys, good. Stove, hot. Or please don’t touch mommy’s bracelet. It’s very special to me. Your g-ma got it for me. Or whatever you don’t want them to touch. And ain’t it just like a kid to do the very thing you asked them not to do. Oh yall know. So after God says to not eat from the tree, the man and woman do just that. They are enticed by a serpent to eat from the tree they should not eat from. He only needs to ask the woman with a few quick questions, to nudge her in the direction of doubt about what the Lord did and did not say about the tree that they were not to eat of. Like, did God really say that? Are you sure? I mean, he just doesn’t want you to be happy. So after he convinces her, let’s check out what happens...Genesis 3:6

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, **and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.***

Now let’s pause right here. Church family, if you ever see someone in the family just casually making conversation with a talking snake I’m going to need you to politely interrupt their conversation. And then just start stomping the mess outta that snake. Like ask questions later. For the new people in the room, one thing

we as a church will commit to you is that we will protect you from talking snakes. Also, new people in the room, we don't have snakes here, we're not that type of church.

Alright back to it, so when the man and woman follow after their own desires and disregard what God has said, about eating from the tree, this is the beginning of sin entering the world. And God's good and beautiful design is corrupted. So as sin enters the picture, so does corruption, so does betrayal, murder, affairs, sinful anger, polygamy, abuse, backstabbing, suffering. So we, not God brought sin into the world. Let me say that again for the people in the back. We were the culprits that hijacked God's good and beautiful plan for the world. God created order out of chaos and we brought chaos back into the world. We brought sin into the picture, not God. And sadly one of the effects of sin is suffering.

Now, you might be thinking, wait, me?!? I thought that story was about Adam and Eve. And you would be right. But the way the story reads, it's point isn't just to say that Adam and Eve did this once upon a time in some garden. It's point is that we do it too. It happened back then, but it still happens today. In a million different ways in billions of us.

It's very easy to point the finger and say that suffering is caused by everyone else, but if we're honest we also cause suffering right. I mean, a few weeks ago, I blew up at my wife for something stupid and caused her to be sad. Now, we were able to reconcile pretty quickly but still, while small, it was still a moment where I sinned against her and caused a form of suffering. Now that's a small example from my life. And I know we each have similar examples from our own lives, big and small; where a selfish action on our part caused suffering in the life of someone else. **The point of the story of Adam and Eve is to say that this is the story of humanity.** We all do this constantly. We don't sin once and then go back to being the best versions of ourselves. Matter of fact, let's do this, quick show of hands, how many of you have been sinned against this week. Raise your hands high. Oh, so yall got perfect friends huh, look I need some of yall's friends if that's the case. Ok, now, think about this, those same people that sinned against you, you got them in mind? Alright, here's the even less fun part: there are probably plenty of people who, if they were here right now, would raise their hands at that, and they would be talking about you as the one who caused

their suffering. Who knows they might be in the room right now. Don't look around at who's raising their hand. You're good, you're good. Just know that we sin against one another constantly. And when you take even the tiniest selfish actions of one person, and you multiply that by say, 6 billion(?) people on the planet, what you get is a world filled with suffering. So the point is that God didn't cause suffering—we did.

“But that raises another question...”

Questions #2

“Why isn't God doing something about suffering then?”

It's very easy to look at suffering and wonder where God is in the midst of it all right. Like, I get the whole humanity brought sin into the world, sure, but why isn't he doing something about it now that it's here? Like there is a ton of suffering in the world, where is God? Does he not care? Well the Bible would actually say He is doing something. First he made himself a victim to suffering. Let's check out Isaiah 53:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

God himself is no stranger to the reality of suffering. Jesus came down from heaven in order to take on our sins so that the healing process would truly begin. Like Kent said last week, Jesus came down to earth to serve not to be served. Even though he had every right to be served. Even though he easily could have demanded it. Even though so many were anticipating him to come down and

reign like a King out the gate, Jesus flipped the script and was born into this world. Think about that. King Jesus. Creator of the world. Infinite power. And yet was born into the chaos we created and eventually would be crushed for our sins.

See there were definitely easier routes for someone with infinite power to take, but God didn't take any of those. He could have. Sure. But that's not how it went down. If Jesus had been all powerful and come down like expected, we would have never been able to relate to him. Instead he went through life with all the ups and downs that life consists of. There's a moment in Jesus' life where one of his friends dies. And even though he knew he was going to bring him back from the dead, he still felt the emotions of sorrow from losing a friend. The Bible says and I quote, "*Jesus wept*" for his friend. And there are various times throughout the gospels that give account to how Jesus had compassion on people because he knew that the world that the Father had created was in disarray. He knew he was the only one that could truly help. Jesus knew that this world would never start the healing process unless he took our sins upon himself so that we could be back in right relationship with the Father. See, Jesus suffered for our sake. He took on the weight of the world for our sake. He started the healing process even though he didn't have to. Jesus was in perfect company in heaven. Trust me he was good. But he came down for you and me. He came down to suffer for our sake.

In Jesus, God experienced the greatest depths of pain. He suffered both physically and mentally. Physically he went to the cross, in one of the most excruciating violent acts in the history of humanity. But he also suffered psychologically because through it all, Jesus experienced relational separation from the Father. A Father that he had a perfect relationship with since before the beginning of the world.

Jesus knew that in order to rescue humanity, he would need to take on the sins of the whole world, but he also knew that once he did, he would also be separated from the Father. So when Jesus' was on the cross and cries in Matthew 27:46, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" it gives us a window into how much pain Jesus was in. When Jesus came to earth, he knew he was going to die for our sins. He knew the end game.

Jesus came on a rescue mission for you and me. For his creation. He was not about to leave us in chaos. He wanted to restore order. And through Jesus he paid for our sins so that someday he could end evil and suffering once and for all. For followers of Jesus we look to the cross for hope. See, God is not immune to our suffering. He is not detached or indifferent to our condition like many would try and claim. God takes our suffering very seriously. And through Jesus, he actually relates to our suffering.

And you know what else? It doesn't stop with Jesus' death and resurrection. Because now, as followers of Jesus we have the ability through the power of the Holy Spirit, to help continue the healing process that Jesus started so long ago. We get to help alleviate suffering for others and also to live in such a way as to not regularly contribute to the suffering of others. For example, when Jesus told his followers that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. Can you even imagine how much suffering would decrease if everyone in the world lived by that one command? If we take this one command seriously, there would be less murdering, less abuse, less sinning against one another. See, God didn't stop with Jesus, he continues on through his Spirit in us to help work towards a time when there will be no more suffering and no more crying. There is no more poetic way to say this than how Revelation 21 says it:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

This for followers of Jesus is what we look forward to one day in the future. This is the hope for those who have been suffering. That it would one day end permanently. Now, I could be wrong but I believe anyone can get on board with not having to suffer or mourn ever again, even if it feels like a fairy tale. So, the

answer to our second question is that God is doing something about suffering. But still, this leads us to one last question...

Questions #3

“Why does God allow suffering to continue now”

Because if God says he’s got a plan to do away with all suffering completely in the new heavens and new earth, why doesn't he just go ahead and do that now? Why let people continue to suffer and hurt? Why not put an end to it right here and right now? Why is he doing all of this slowly? Turns out that is actually a question that 2 Peter answers for us directly. Let's check it out:

*The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise [Peter here is referring to God’s plan to alleviate suffering and bring about his kingdom that is suffering-free.] as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, **but that all should reach repentance.***

So the reason that God doesn’t go ahead and bring about the new heavens and new earth, is because he wants more and more people to come to know him. It says that he doesn’t wish anyone to perish. Instead, he wants all to turn from trying to do life their way, to doing life his way, the way he designed things to function in the beginning, before suffering existed. Remember what we said at the beginning: suffering exists because of sin. And sin is in each one of us. So if God were to put an end to suffering right now, that means he needs to put an end to us right now. That's the simplest solution. But God would rather provide people with the opportunity to repent: to cease trusting in themselves, to cease going about life selfishly, and to come to know and follow him. He wants more people to experience the life that is found in him. So while we may sometimes think it's cruel of God to allow suffering to go on, it's actually quite the opposite. It's the most compassionate response. It's him being patient, and wanting more and more people to repent.

Now, maybe that answers the question intellectually, but I realize it may sound a little cold at a personal level. So let me just wrap things up this way: Believer in the room, can I give you some medicine real quick. Jesus took away the only kind of suffering that will destroy you. He took on your sin so that you could be in

right relationship with the Father. Like I said before, he's telling us to have patience. Be patient because I'm coming back and I will wipe away every tear. You will not cry again because sin will be no more. There will be no more abuse, there will be no more catastrophe, there will be no more pain, there will be no more death, there will be no more cancer. For us, we can wrestle with suffering because we have a hope that the world will once again be in order. We have a God who cares for us. Because even though he knows the ending he is still near us during our lowest moments. Remember, Jesus knew that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, but the moment didn't escape him. He wept. I'll say it again, we have a God who cares.

And those in the room or listening on the podcast that are *not* Christians, I just want to ask a few simple questions. When suffering hits, how do *you* get through it? How will *you* explain it? Because I believe life, at some point, will force you to have some type of philosophy of suffering. And when it does, how will you find hope to sustain you through the worst moments of your life? My hope is that you will one day know the Lord for yourself. To glimpse at his Word and find the hope that many of us in this room look to. Like Kent said in Week 1, following after Jesus can be a leap, and we believe it's a leap worth taking.

The Bible also doesn't give any pat answers to suffering. Doesn't say something simple and foolish like "if you live a good life, you won't suffer" or "you're suffering because you're doing something wrong." Other religions teach that, but Christianity doesn't. But here's what Christianity does give us. It gives us a promise that, even when we do suffer, we won't suffer alone. That we have a God who suffers alongside of us and with us. And short of God removing suffering from the picture completely (which he will do one day), we believe that's the most incredible thing you could ask for.

Let's pray.