

When Life Goes Horribly Wrong

In the early morning hours this past Tuesday, my wife and I woke up to Melanie Williamson beating on the door to our house to try and wake us up. Once we let her in she told us that Sean Brereton, a good friend of mine and one of our members Sean Brereton had collapsed on his driveway and had been rushed to the hospital, and that they weren't letting anybody in to see him. So I immediately called Marcus, who was already at the hospital with them, just to find out what hospital they were at and how to find them. And as soon as he answered, he told me that Sean was gone. And my brain wouldn't even register what that *meant*. I probably asked Marcus to repeat what he said about four times. *Gone?* How is that even possible? I was just texting with Sean a few days ago. We were just texting about how he was doing as a new dad, how much sleep he was getting, when we could bring them dinner—what do you mean he's *gone*? That was how my Tuesday began.

In many ways, that's how *all* of our Tuesdays began. I think probably about half of our church had a friendship with Sean or Paige Brereton in some way. ~~And so an awful lot of our church has sort of just been reeling since Tuesday morning.~~ So this Sunday, we wanted to press pause on our Vision Series and instead just talk a little about what to do in the moments like these when life goes horribly wrong. Because the reality is that whether we knew *about* Sean or not, whether we *knew* Sean or not, these moments are coming for all of us. **One of the horrible things about suffering is that it happens to pretty much everybody, eventually.** For some of us more than others, but for *all* of us in some way. I realize that is probably not what any of us *want* to hear, but we probably all *need* to hear it. And we need to know what to do when that all happens.

So today in light of that, **I'm gonna basically just do a modified version of the teaching I did at Sean's memorial yesterday.** So if you were there yesterday, a lot of this will probably sound familiar to you. But my guess is that because of the sudden and devastating nature of Sean's death, we probably all still need to be reminded of these realities. I know *I* do. But the other reason for repeating this teaching is just, if I'm completely honest, I didn't have it in me this week to write two different teachings on suffering. I didn't have enough emotional energy or enough tears in me to write a second one. So my prayer is that even if this teaching is repetitive to you, it can be still be helpful in some way.

So I think the question that most of us ask in moments like these is the question, *why?* That's the question we've all been asking here since the early hours of Tuesday morning. That's the question that all of us ask when suffering hits, is *why*. *Why* in the world would something like this happen?

Why *Sean*? So many of you know Sean so well. You know the incredible man that he was. The incredible follower of Jesus that he was. You know the unbelievable friend he was to so many people. Sean was an incredible friend to me personally. **I think in every single conversation I had with Sean over the past year, he would never—I repeat, never, end the conversation without asking me how I was doing and how he could pray for me.** He was an incredible friend to many of you too.

Sean was a part of City Church since the very beginning. He was one of the original 25 people who volunteered to uproot their lives to move from Columbia to Knoxville and help us start the church. Sean and Paige had a regular habit of taking first-time guests at the Gathering out to lunch afterwards to get to know them. I didn't even know this was happening until two days ago, but apparently he was meeting

with another guy in our church family regularly on Sunday mornings to pray for our Gatherings and people who would attend them. I don't think it is any exaggeration to say that **anyone who has been blessed in any way by City Church owes that in no small part to Sean Brereton.**

Sean was integral to the life of our community. He often sat in on our pastoral planning days, where we get together to ask and answer the question, *how can we help you guys as our church family love Jesus more?* But one of my *favorite things* about having him there with us was that when we would get done meeting and all go out to eat, Sean would refuse to let us keep talking about City Church stuff. He would force both me and Jeff to tell him how we were doing, and he wouldn't let us *not* answer the question. **He would never let us be pastors first and human beings second. He always pointed us back to the fact that *who we were* was more important than *what we do*.** In fact, I wanted you guys to see this. So Sean passed away on Tuesday morning. On Thursday, when people were just sitting around Sean and Paige's house, this alarm went off on Sean's phone. Me and Jeff are both really gonna miss that.

Sean was such an incredible guy, and such an incredible follower of Jesus. I'm sure a lot of us in this room have countless *more* stories about Sean. But no doubt, in some ways, **I think all of those stories just add to the question and makes me ask even *more*, *why Sean?***

And at the same time, why *Sean's family*? Sean has a newborn son and a wife trying to figure out life as a mom. *Why* would this happen to *them*? Like, in what way does it make sense for Paige to have to go through this? And *why now*? No one should *ever* have to lose a family member like this, but why less than a *month* after his son is born? How is it okay that Benjamin won't get any more chances to interact with his dad? The question we're all asking, in a dozen different ways, is the question, *why?*

And that's really a part of the *bigger* question we all ask: *why does anything like this ever happen?* Things like this make us ask *why do we live in a world where these things happen at all? Why does evil and suffering exist in the first place?* I'm not aware of *anybody* who hasn't asked a version of that question at some point in their life.

Now, you guys know me—I *love* the bible, I love the *God* of the bible—all of that. One of the greatest joys of my life is to get to stand up here most weeks and just be amazed at the incredible wisdom and hope found in this book. But **one of the most frustrating things about the bible for me personally has always been that the bible never attempts to answer that question about suffering.** The bible never claims to give a reason, an *explanation* for the presence of evil and suffering in our world. It says some things about the *source* of evil and suffering, it says some things about what suffering can *accomplish*, but it never gives us an explanation for *why they're there in the first place*, why God chose to give us a world where they're even possible.

So, for example, in the opening pages of the bible, it explains the origin of *so many things*, explains the purpose behind so many things—human beings, nature, animals. And then it gets to the part about the serpent. For those unfamiliar with the bible, the serpent is the source and representative of everything that is evil and chaotic about the world. But in that story, *it never tells us why the serpent is there.* It never explains *why he exists* in the first place. It just says that there's a snake in the garden. There is somehow evil in God's good world. But *why is it there?* We simply don't find out.

I can't tell you how maddening that is as a pastor: to not have a clear answer to that question. How frustrating it is to not have a cut-and-dry answer to the one thing that I've been asked more than any other question. How painful it is to not have a passage to point people to when they want to know why horrible things happen in our world. To sit in hospital waiting rooms like the one we were in early Tuesday morning, and have someone ask me why, and not have a concrete answer to give them. It's awful.

And I don't ultimately know *why* we aren't given that answer. I think one reason might be that ultimately, *suffering and evil don't make any sense*. Why would a serpent choose to unleash chaos and havoc into paradise? Why would Adam & Eve choose a serpent in a garden over the God who created them and gave them everything to enjoy? Those aren't rational, *logical* choices. They don't make sense. So maybe one reason God chooses not to make sense of evil is because evil doesn't make sense.

And maybe another reason is because even if it *did* make sense, even if someone made sense of it for us, it wouldn't help all that much. I couldn't help but think this week as I was sitting with Paige and Benjamin: even if they got to sit down with God himself and God could explain exactly why everything happened with Sean, I don't know that that would make any of the coming years of their life any easier. Right? Like I don't know that that would actually be all that functionally helpful for them. At best it would explain the void he left, but it wouldn't make the void he left any more easier.

In the Scriptures there's actually a time where a guy named Job loses almost his entire family—they all die in the same day. And once they die, some of Job's friends show up and try to use logic and reason to explain why all that happened. They do that for almost forty full chapters. And all of it just feels so incredibly empty and futile. So maybe another reason is that even if we could make sense of evil, it wouldn't help us process the reality of it all that much. So maybe it's that we don't get an answer because an answer actually wouldn't help us all that much.

But all that being said, here's what I've come to learn. **While the bible may not give us the answer for why suffering exists, it does tell us some very important things that *can't* be the reason.** It does tell us some very important things we can *rule out*. And I've found that while those answers might not be as emotionally satisfying as the reason *why*, they're often *exactly* what we need in the midst of suffering. So while there may be a lot we *don't know* about suffering, there are some very important things we *do know*. So here are some things we *do* know. Things that *can't* be the reasons for suffering in the world. First...

1. It can't be that God is indifferent to it.

One of the most emotionally charged moments in Jesus' life is when his dear friend Lazarus dies. In John 11, Jesus comes to visit Lazarus and his family. Here's what happens, in John 11:33-35:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. [34] And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." [35] Jesus wept.

They take Jesus' to Lazarus' tomb and it says Jesus just begins to weep. Now here's what's interesting about that story that many of you may know: Jesus ends up bringing Lazarus right back from the dead

almost immediately. So Jesus is about to undo everything *tragic* about that story. **And yet, when he sees that his friend has died, he begins to weep.** ~~Jesus doesn't respond with "let's be joyful guys! He's with the Lord now! Don't be sad!" Quite the opposite: he begins to weep. He's devastated by it.~~

I think in that response we discover a lot about God's emotional posture towards evil and suffering. To everything in our world that isn't as it should be. We see that he's not unaffected by it. We see that he's not distant from it, disconnected from it. **He is *deeply impacted by it* and hates it every bit as much as we do.** So while it may seem at times to us as if God is indifferent to it all, nothing could be further from the truth. **God is not indifferent to suffering.**

Second, we also know...

2. It can't be that God doesn't love us.

One of the most consistent temptations in my life is to measure God's love for me based on my circumstances. The temptation is to look at what I have, or what I don't have, or things that happen to me or don't happen to me—and then decide that those things are evidence of how much or how little God cares for me. And how incredibly easy it is to do that in the midst of suffering. Suffering often feels like a full-scale assault on our confidence in God's love for us. **It is so easy to think when we suffer, that we're suffering because God doesn't care about us.**

But what the biblical authors urge us to do over and over again is to measure God's love for us not by *circumstances*, not by our suffering—but rather through what was accomplished for us on the cross. 1 John 4:9 says this:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

When we are tempted to doubt God's love for us, we are invited to look first to the cross. To remember when and where God gave everything up for us. That's how we measure God's affections for us. **Not through our circumstances, not by our suffering, not by the presence of evil in the world—but through the cross.** That enables us to say along with Paul in Romans 8, "if God did not spare his own son, but graciously gave him up for us, how will he not along with him also give us all things?" How will he not also give us what we need in the midst of our pain, in the midst of our despair? If he can be trusted through the cross, he can be trusted now.

Which leads us to the *third* reason we can rule out...

3. It can't be that God is above it. (Can't be that he hasn't experienced it)

The book of Isaiah describes Jesus as a "man of sorrows." A man "*acquainted* with grief." When describing God in the flesh, Isaiah says "one of the first things you need to know is how familiar he will be with suffering." That's significant. In most other world religions I know of, God or the gods remain *distant* from suffering. They remain in heaven, or the heavens, or the comforts of another realm while humans suffer.

When it comes to the God of the bible, he suffers *alongside* humanity. God chooses, out of all the ways he *could have* interacted with human beings, to become *one of them*. **God, who created the world, chooses to make himself a victim of the brokenness of the world.** Makes himself vulnerable to hurt, to pain, to loss, even to *death*. And ultimately allows himself to *experience* death well before his time—at 33 years old, just two years older than Sean. Here’s the way Hebrews puts it:

*For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make **the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.***

That tells us something about the heart of God, does it not? If we say that a God who *can’t* stop suffering isn’t all-powerful, and that a God who *won’t* stop suffering isn’t all-good, what does it say that we serve a God who *chose* to suffer *himself*? What does it say that God elected to endure the evil of the world when he didn’t have to? I think at bare minimum, **it tells us that suffering isn’t pointless, that it isn’t purposeless, and that God can still work through it.**

So for each one of us in the room today hurting tremendously right now: if there’s one person who knows how we feel, it’s God himself. He has experienced the hurt we are experiencing, millions and millions time over. So **for followers of Jesus, we know that suffering is not something we have to “get through” to get to God. Suffering is something that God is *with us in the midst of*.**

And one last thing we know it *can’t be*...

4. It can’t be that God is doing nothing about it.

One of the most consistent promises in the bible is that God is doing something about the brokenness of our world. While we may not get an answer to why it’s there in the first place, we *do*, from the very opening pages of the bible, get a promise that God will eventually make all of it right. God’s promise is that he will send Jesus to deal a devastating blow to the very source of evil in our world. And that then, one day, he will *remake* our world in a way that *excludes* everything we currently grieve about it.

Isaiah 65 says specifically that in that new world there will no longer be people who die too young. No one will die at 31 years old—no one will die at all. **There is a world coming where everything that we grieve, everything that we hate, everything we wish wasn’t true about our world will not be true any longer.** Where God will return everything in the world to the way it was supposed to be all along. Where he, in the bible’s language will “reconcile all things.” **God will do something about suffering.**

And he’s not just doing something about it *then*, in the *future*—but here and now as well. Scripture tells us that followers of Jesus are called to be *agents* of that reconciliation in every way we can. That we would give people pictures of that new world *now*. Including reflecting the *nearness* and *presence* of God in the midst of suffering like we’re all experiencing now. Being an agent of reconciliation was what Sean was so unbelievably good at, and now we get to pick up where he left off. I have seen so many of you in this room be concrete representatives of Jesus in how you have rallied around Paige and the family this week. My prayer is that continues in the months and years to come. We are called, as followers of Jesus, not just to sit around and *bide time* until God *eventually* reconciles all things, but to be pictures of that reconciliation here and now in a thousand different ways.

So though we may not know why God allows suffering and evil to exist—while we may not know *why* Sean left us so early—we know some very important things it *can't* be. We know that it *can't be* that God's indifferent to it, it *can't be* that he doesn't love us, it *can't be* that he is *above* it, and it *can't be* that he's not doing anything about it. And though we might prefer to have more of a *direct* answer to suffering than that, I still think those truths are worth remembering. I think they give us *tremendous* ground to stand on in the midst of suffering and evil in our world. I can't tell you how much of a comfort it has been this past week for me to know that there's ground to stand on there. To know that even though life will look substantially different for us without Sean from here on out, there is ground we can lean on even when life goes horribly, tragically wrong.

So I want you to know that as followers of Jesus, we're not claiming to be people with all the answers. We don't *follow Jesus* because Jesus gives us all the answers we would want, or even because all of it makes perfect sense to us. We follow Jesus because it gives us ground to stand on when *life doesn't* make any sense at all. So instead, we hold to truths that we couldn't endure *any* of this *without*. And I pray that we would all find those realities to be an enduring, lasting comfort for us in the years to come to come.

So *whenever* suffering hits: know that you have the freedom to weep, like Jesus did. Know that you have the freedom to love and to hurt, just like Jesus did. And when suffering hits *others*, know that you have the opportunity to enter into their suffering with comfort, just like Jesus did for us. **Scripture tells us that followers of Jesus get to mourn, but that we get to mourn *and hope*. Because things aren't as they should be, we *mourn*. But because we know how this whole story ends, we *hope*. As followers of Jesus, we live in this constant tension between mourning the world as it is and hoping for the world as it one day will be.** So practically, **let's all remember that hoping doesn't mean we can't mourn, and mourning doesn't mean we can't hope.**

That right there, was where I ended the sermon at Sean's memorial. But as I was praying through this morning, there was one more thing I felt like the Spirit might want to do in all of this. As I was thinking through it, I think there might be at least three things God wants to do in us, in *our community*, in the aftermath of Sean's death.

Now I want to be very clear on this. This is not me saying “see—there's a *reason* all this happened. There's a reason God took Sean, so we can just focus on that instead on the loss itself.” That's not what I'm saying at all. Sean is gone and that is devastating for us, will be devastating to us for a long time. **But one of the things about who God is, is that he can work even *through* the most horrible of circumstances.** So *none* of these things I'm about to say make Sean's death *okay* to us. But at the same time, I do think they help us know how to *respond to it*. I thought it might be good to ask as a church: *what might God want to show us even in these tragic circumstances?*

So here are three things that came to mind. I think God wants to show us...

That our days are numbered.

Sean was 31 years old. *None* of us think that we are going to die at 31 years old. Part of the thing about having a fairly young church is that *hardly any of us* think that death is right around the corner. We all think we've got *years, decades* before we even have to think about any of that. But I can tell you this—I've

been thinking about death *a lot* over the past week. Not like in a morbid, fearful, anxiety-ridden way. But just thinking about the reality of it. That it is entirely possible that death is not as far off as I want to believe it is.

Psalm 90:12 says, “*teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom.*” *Teach us to number our days*, because out of the ability to do that, comes *wisdom*. The more you understand the preciousness of life, that our time is limited here, the more wisdom you gain about what exactly to do *with* your life. I can’t tell you how empty things like Netflix have seemed this week. On Wednesday night when I got home, I tried to turn on a show to sort of give my brain and emotions a break from everything that was happening. And I got like five minutes in and it just felt so very empty. And y’all know my heart in that, I’m not trying to say you were wrong if you watch Netflix, or if you needed something like that to decompress over these past few days. I’m just saying there’s something about Sean’s passing that made me realize how trivial all that is.

My point is that I don’t think a church with a lot of 20- and 30-somethings comes out of something like this thinking that we’re going to live forever. I think we come out of this learning how to number our days. Learning that every day counts, that we’re not guaranteed tomorrow—I know those are cliches but they have become so very real for so many of us this week. So one thing I’d love for us to consider: things like meaningful relationships, things like telling people about Jesus, things like radical generosity and hospitality—**none of those are things for us to do in a decade, once we’ve figured out our life and our career and all that—they’re things we’re called to do now.** I think God wants to show us that our days are numbered.

That every relationship we have matters.

I think God wants to show us that **every relationship we have is an opportunity to show the love and compassion of Jesus.** This is what Sean was so incredibly good at. He saw every relationship he had as an opportunity to love and care for people. If you were at the memorial yesterday, you heard me talk about Sean’s fantasy football league. Sean was in a fantasy football league with guys from all over, most of whom he had never met face-to-face. And yet, when the news broke to them of Sean’s passing, there was this outpouring of stories from guys in that league. Many of them saying that Sean was the most meaningful friendship they had, that he cared for every person he interacted with, that he wasn’t just a member of their league—he was their *friend*. That he cared about what was happening in their life. **Sean saw every single relationship he had as an opportunity to represent the compassion of Jesus.** We always knew that Sean did that, but as often happens, when someone passes away, the stories come out of the woodwork and you realize you didn’t even know the half of it. That was how Sean did relationships.

And let’s be very clear: Sean didn’t do any of that because he was an *extrovert*. Quite the opposite: if Sean could do anything for the rest of his life, it would be to sit on a couch with his Kindle and read book after book after book and not talk to anybody unless he had to. Sean was introverted *to his core*. But he didn’t see any of that as a reason not to constantly, sacrificially love people. Those are very big shoes for us to fill. But I think God wants to show us through Sean’s life and through his absence, the importance of seeing every single relationship as an opportunity to love and serve people, to show them pictures of Jesus.

That church is a family.

If you have been around City Church for *any length of time*, you know that phrase very well. We believe that church at its core is a family. Sean believed this with everything in him. It's what he experienced in Columbia, and it's precisely why he wanted to move to Knoxville to help start City Church: he believed that church is a family.

And there is no time where that becomes more crucial to know than when part of our family suffers. The way that you guys have rallied around Paige, the way you've rallied around Sean's family, the way you've rallied around *one another* in the days since Tuesday has been absolutely breathtaking to watch. Sean and Paige's families have commented multiple times on how strikingly beautiful you guys have responded to everything.

But I'll admit, because I do feel like that is something that our church family is strong in already, I had this sense when everything happened of "we're good on that—why do we need another example to show that off, couldn't we just leave well enough alone?" And then I remembered John 15, where it says that "every branch that does bear fruit, Jesus prunes, that *it may bear more fruit.*" **It is possible that while God has created something special and incredible in how our church family responds to tangible needs, he may want to create even more of that in us.**

So I mainly say all that to say, "keep doing what you're doing." Allow God to continue to stretch and grow us in the ability to function like a family. Continue ministering to Paige and Ben, continue ministering to one another. Continue mourning, continue mourning for and *with each other*. You guys help people around us see how incredibly glorious God is when you do *all of that*. So whatever you do, don't stop.

So those are just a few things I think God might want to show us and teach us in the time to come. I pray that some of those are helpful to us. I think one of the incredible things about God is that he can bring beauty out of tragedy. Not that that makes the tragedy go away, or that it makes it any less devastating. But he can give it purpose.

I'd love to pray for us all as we close.