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GOD ENTERS INTO HUMAN SUFFERING—IN JESUS

What does God think of suffering? Well, he doesn't avoid it. He walked right into it.

So often we want to say it wasn't really the physical, but the spiritual aspect of Jesus' suffering that we focus on, but they are interconnected.

He literally died, not figuratively. And then rose on the third day. *So now our hope is based on his rising bodily, not just a promise that he will one day rise, but the fact that he literally rose.*

And we have the same Spirit of Jesus in us who promises to raise us, which allows us to be very honest about the brokenness and ache we experience. So, we can be honest about spiritual, physical, and emotional suffering that we experience and encounter in ways that are not easy to untangle.

And this hope allows us to speak honestly about the pain. And we can speak genuinely and truthfully about our hope that one day there will be no more tears, pain, or sorrow.

God has entered our suffering. He participates in our experience. God's power to overcome suffering is through the cross and resurrection. God is with us in our own personal darkness and suffering. He walks with us in darkness and he promised one day he will make all things new (**Revelation 21:5**). And there will be no more night. No more darkness. One day, the eternal morning will break, and all darkness will be gone.

In the Old Testament they prayed, "How long, O Lord?" In the New Testament the prayer is, "Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus."

And we turn to the crucified Jesus in the midst of pain. The one who went to the cross and endured agony and let it take his life, so he could defeat sin, death, Satan, sickness, evil, and darkness, so he could rise again victorious, with healing in his wings, to give us life, his resurrection life.

Before this series we spent two months looking at Jesus in the gospels, and we saw a Jesus who wept in the face of suffering, who healed it as he encountered suffering people. Jesus is like the creator of a beautiful gallery of fine, priceless art who sees that a vandal has broken in and has damaged everything. And Jesus weeps, but then goes to work putting everything back together.

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HEAVEN

There is meaning to be found in our suffering. The author and finisher of our faith is not finished with you yet. The Divine Potter is not yet finished shaping our lives and firing our souls in his great kiln.

And until then, we wait. And we encourage each other. And we can see heaven breaking through into our present in the person of Jesus. People coming to faith, people experiencing healing, people having their souls shaped. And heaven breaks through into our midst.

"And one day," Jesus tells us, "I will wipe away every tear. Every single tear. And I will make everything right." Every wrong made right. No more death, no more pain, no more cancer, heart disease, divorce, addiction. No more broken hearts. No more darkness.

And Paul in Philippians tries to describe heaven, and he says it will be "better by far" (Philippians 1:23). Better by far than anything we can imagine. And for Paul, heaven was all about one thing: being with Jesus.

And more than a question of geography, heaven is about a personality. It's about being in the presence of Jesus for eternity.

There was a Japanese theologian named **Kosuke Koyama** who wrote theology for poor Japanese peasants. And he imagined Jesus says to those who see Jesus upon death:

"You've had a difficult journey. You must be tired, and dirty. Let me wash your feet. The banquet's ready."

I love that. And that's what Jesus will do one day for each of us who believe. And today he wants heaven to come from the future and break into your present. The Suffering Savior is here for you.

Look to him. Let him, the Divine Artist, the Divine Potter, restore and redeem your life. And look to him in your darkness. And if you've never trusted him before today, perhaps this is the day you can say, *"Jesus, I see you. I look to you. I realize I can't save myself. I realize you are God. You died on the cross to save me and I trust you and receive you into my life. Here's my heart. I give my life to you. Amen."*

We are living in tough times. We will all encounter tough times. For some of us, much of our life will be lived in the midst of tough times. God is loving and compassionate. God is faithful. His ways are higher. And God enters into human suffering in Jesus, and he give us life and character and flourishing and hope and heaven.

Living
in tough
times

THE WAY FORWARD

MARCH 24 · PASTOR AARON KUNCE

1

GOD IS LOVING & COMPASSIONATE

How should we live in the midst of this pain-soaked world?

Physical suffering often affects how we relate to God and others. And we must understand that social, psychological, and physical suffering are woven together. Central to all of this is how pain and suffering can affect our view of God. We can be tempted to think badly about God.



John Owen (a Puritan theologian from the 17th century) called this having “**hard thoughts**” about God. He did not mean honest questions that naturally arise in suffering. We all have honest questions as we stand before God. “Why? How come? What does this mean? When will it end?” These questions are not only understandable, but healthy. Heartfelt cries and questions are at the heart of healthy theology and suppressing them is hurtful.

Owen means when we imagine God in deeply problematic ways, making him appear tyrannical or even demonic. Such “hard thoughts” can lead us to despair and away from communion with God.

Such “hard thoughts” are incorrect and only drive us into isolation from God. The wrong frame of mind can isolate us. But how can believers tossed and blown by the storms of life NOT succumb to false images and distortions of God? This requires that we deepen our view of how God actually is.

Zephaniah 3:17 is a beautiful picture of our God, who, in his delight, always keeps a near and tender presence. How do we develop a profound and affectionate trust of God, rather than a sense of alienation? Our hope is to learn to hear him singing over us, to trust his presence in the midst of pain. And to understand God and his relationship to our pain and suffering, we need to look closely at Jesus.

Only by listening to his words and by following the movement of his life, death, and resurrection might our very human struggle be seen in a different light.

2

GOD’S WAYS ARE HIGHER THAN OURS

We believe the gospel, the story of how those who know Jesus can live amid the rubble, the dark questions, the daunting fears. As followers of Jesus, we live with hope in a broken world. And only by looking to Jesus can we reorient our experience of suffering in a way that is truly Christian. *We must come to the foot of the cross.* Only from that location will all our questions about suffering be transformed. And only from that position might a truly Christian “explaining” of the ways of God occur.

Throughout history, people have attempted to write what are called **theodicies**, attempts to make sense of the apparent tension between human suffering and the existence of an all-powerful, wholly good, and wise God. But even if we had a good theodicy in hand, such dispassionate philosophical explanations leave us empty when we walk in the fire and ashes of genuine suffering. We must let the cross transform our understanding of suffering.



God has entered our suffering in the person of Jesus Christ. He participates in our experience. God’s power to overcome suffering is through the cross and resurrection. God is with us in our own personal darkness and suffering.

He walks with us in darkness and he promised one day, one day, he will make all things new. And there will be no more night. No more darkness. One day, the morning will break and all darkness will be gone.

Reflect: How has coming to the foot of the cross helped you in the midst of suffering?

3

GOD’S ANSWER TO QUESTIONS ABOUT SUFFERING

How do you reconcile God with undeserved suffering? Outspoken atheists rant all the time about the existence of pain and suffering, but this is not new in any way. In fact, the greatest rant against God’s apparent injustice ever recorded is written in the pages of Scripture. It’s in the book of Job.



Job, in one fell swoop, has to endure every type of suffering. In one moment, he is stripped of his health, wealth, livelihood, and family. All is gone. And we know that Job was actually considered an innocent man. So, Job’s friends find him in agony, probably a many-layered agony—physically suffering, mentally suffering, and spiritually suffering no doubt. And he wonders how God could allow this to happen. So, Job goes into some long and passionate rants: “God, you know I’m innocent. Why am I suffering like this?”

And what comes next, beginning in Job 38, *is the longest speech of God anywhere in the Bible.* What does he say? God says, “**Where were you, Job? Where were you when I made the heavens and the earth?**” And God talks about great whales and giant creatures and says, “I made them, too. Just as I made you.” What’s the point? God is not so much answering the problem of suffering as he is situating the problem of suffering in an ever-wider framework of reality and meaning.

The day Jesus was abandoned, denied, scourged, crucified, left to die... that day we call Good Friday. Why? Because that day is not the final day. It is not the ultimate word. Beyond the crucified suffering of Jesus is the resurrection. The reason we call that day “good” is the ultimate answer to Job’s questions. *And it is the real answer to the question, the great question of the ages, “What about suffering? What about evil? What about pain? What does God think about it? What is he doing?”*

The real answer is actually Jesus. The eternal son of God becomes man, takes on human flesh, becomes one of us, yet without sin.