

SERMON ROMANS 8 WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?

February 5, 2023

As we discussed two weeks ago, God has a plan and He is faithfully working it. But as we also noted, there are times when we don't understand what is happening or what's going on around us. Have you ever watched the news and asked why? When the planes hit the Twin Towers on 9-11; when innocent students are killed in their classrooms; when hurricanes and tornados destroy entire neighborhoods and cities, have you wondered why God would allow this to happen? Where was God during these horrible events? Do you ever get to the point that you don't even want to watch the news because of all the violence and suffering in the world today?

Now there are some pastors who will preach that if you believe in Jesus Christ and come to their church, you will not suffer or ever have any problems; run from these people; they are likely a cult. And then there were people, such as the religious authorities during the time that Jesus was here on earth, who believed that anyone who was sick, who had a disease or bad luck had sinned. Thus, your suffering was the direct result of your sins.

And unfortunately, some people still subscribe to this misconception today. For example, some even blamed the destruction in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina on the sins of the people living there at the time. One of the ways in which people have tried to make sense of the world's suffering in every generation has been by assuming that we deserve what we get, that somehow our misfortunes come as punishment for our sins. But I hope that most of us realize that this is not true, illness, suffering and bad luck are just part of life; things happen! Christians get it wrong when they begin to diagnose the suffering of others as acts of God's judgment.

This morning let's look at why there is suffering in this world. Now there are many references to suffering in the Bible. But let's see what the Apostle Paul has to say about suffering in the eighth chapter of Romans, verses 18-28.

Read Romans 8:18-28

A young woman's husband dies leaving her a single mother to care for two small children. Several Christian friends suggested that she should take comfort in the fact that "this must have been the will of God." Far from comforting her, this comment leaves her angry with God. Suffering, unanswered prayers and the unfairness of life naturally lead us to question God's goodness and sometimes to question the very existence of God. We ask: "If God is so powerful, loving and just, why does He allow evil, pain, and suffering in our world?"

Job of the Old Testament wrestled with these very same questions. Over the next two weeks we will consider questions related to why the innocent suffer, questions related to God's will, and finally, God's ultimate triumph over suffering and evil. Now let me state right up front that

we probably are not going to completely resolve these issues. But we are going to discuss them in some detail and hopefully gain a better insight into these questions.

Now one of the reasons as to why we might have trouble understanding the suffering in this world is that some of our assumptions may be incorrect. For example, you assume that if you believe in God and try to be a good person, then God will take care of you, bless you, and that nothing bad will happen to you. Thus, when something bad does happen to you, you automatically assume that you are being punished because you did something wrong. But if you study the Bible, you will find that there is no promise that if you believe and do good you will not suffer.

On the contrary, the Bible is the story of people who refused to let go of their faith even in times of suffering such as: Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers; King Saul trying to kill David; Daniel being thrown into the lion's den; and Paul being stoned and ship wrecked. The Bible does not teach that the life of a Christian will be a bed of roses with no suffering. Instead, as stated in Romans 5, we should "rejoice in our suffering because suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character hope." In other words, when we walk in faith and trust in God, we will find strength and hope in the face of suffering; God will help us persevere.

Now a second misguided assumption among Christians is when well-meaning friends try to offer words of encouragement by saying such things as: "God has a reason for your suffering," or "It must have been God's will." In other words, God has a plan. You cannot see the plan right now, but somehow your current suffering has a purpose; just trust God. That sounds really religious doesn't it, but does it make you feel any better? No way!

A loved one dies in a tragic accident, or a baby dies, and someone says: "It must have been God's will." Does that sound like the God we know; One who is just and loving? One who was even willing to sacrifice His own Son for our sins? Twenty to thirty thousand people die every day of diseases related to starvation and malnutrition. Is this God's will? Or is it God's will that those of us who have the resources work to help those who do not? The Bible teaches the latter. Like Father Antonio said last Sunday, when we reach out to the less fortunate, we find Jesus.

If we think that everything happens according to a preordained plan and that God wills everything that happens, then we are wrong. However, if by "everything happens for a reason" we simply mean that we live in a world of cause and effect, then this is correct. It is easy to see why some people are turned off by God when they assume that every tragedy and suffering is the will of God.

In his book *Why, Making Sense of God's Will*, Adam Hamilton provides some insight into reconciling God's goodness with the suffering we see in our daily lives. The first is that as human beings, God has given us the responsibility of managing His creation; we are His stewards. God set everything in motion and gave us the knowledge to know right from wrong. Then God sent His Son to show us how to serve Him and do His will. When God wants something done in this world, He calls on us to do it. When the poor need to be fed, He doesn't rain manna from heaven anymore, He sends us. When we accepted Jesus Christ into our hearts, we became His hands and feet to carry out His will.

Another critical insight is that God has given us free will, the ability to choose right from wrong. Without this amazing gift, we would be robots and Christianity would be just a cult. God does not micromanage our every thought or decision. However, with this freedom comes the possibility that we might choose a course of action that will lead not only to suffering in our own lives, but also in the lives of others. Look at what happened to the world because of Adam and Eve's decision to listen to the snake in the Garden of Eden and eat the forbidden fruit, sin abounds!

Then there's the fact that we as human beings have a predisposition or tendency to disobey God's will; in other words, to sin. The word sin comes from the Greek and Hebrew words which mean to "stray from the path," or "to miss the mark." The path is God's path. The mark is God's will for mankind. Adam and Eve's story is our story. Every day we are tempted by the devil to do those things that may bring us or others pain. So, what God intended as a gift, our freedom, when misused, can lead to suffering.

In his book Adam Hamilton identifies several categories of suffering; one is natural disasters and widespread human suffering. Each year there seems to be a new natural disaster such as Hurricane Ian. Prior to the scientific age, ancient people described these disasters as acts of God. But because of scientific advancements we understand that many of these disasters are natural occurrences within the complex functions of our planet. Knowing that we live on a planet where earthquakes and hurricanes are normal, our task as human beings is to adapt to these conditions, either by not living in the areas where danger exist or engineering our buildings to withstand these forces of nature.

And then there are people living in poverty, children dying of sickness because they don't have adequate drinking water, or of malnutrition because of famine. As many as 30,000 children die every day from preventable diseases related to poverty. This is tragic when you realize that we have enough food and water to meet these needs. Much of the suffering in our world is because God's people have yet to respond to His call to go and to be His hands to those in need. The natural disasters and widespread poverty that affect many are our call to action.

Then there is the suffering caused by human decisions, by the misuse of our gift of free will. With this freedom comes the consequences of our actions and the actions of others. Our decisions not only hurt us but may also hurt others. Here in New Mexico, we have all seen lives destroyed by one individual getting behind the wheel after having too much to drink. Sometimes people get angry with God because of their own poor decisions and the resulting consequences; they blame God for their own stupidity. Part of the risk God took in giving us free will is that we might and probably will misuse this freedom to do the very things that would break His heart.

The last category is the suffering caused by sickness. When we become ill, many of us ask, "Why me, Lord?" as if human sickness is a punishment. Sickness is not God's way. When Jesus walked amongst us, He devoted much of His time to healing the sick, not making people ill. Think about how amazing our bodies are. If a car lasts ten years and 200,000 miles, we think it is an amazing vehicle. But consider that the average human body will last eighty years or more. Our bodies also have an amazing capacity to repair themselves. Try that with your car!

Yet in spite of all this, our bodies are not indestructible. Disease and sickness, injury and death are all a part of life; some a direct result of our lifestyle, bad habits and bad decisions. This is not God's doing; it is simply part of having bodies like ours in a world like ours. Recognizing this then the question becomes how do we react when the doctor tells us that we have cancer or some other major disease. Do we blame God or are we like many of our fellowship who put their trust in God and know that no matter what happens, God will take care of them.

A few final thoughts; rejecting God does not change the situation that has caused our suffering; it only removes the greatest source of hope and strength that we have. Suffering never has the final word in the Christian faith. As we have discussed, Christianity does not promise that we will not suffer, but it does promise that God will be with us. A king once asked his wise men to come up with an inscription for his royal ring that summed up life. They came back with these five words: "And this too shall pass!" Remember no matter what suffering you are currently facing or will face; God walks with you and will carry you through it. As we have discussed before, continue to walk in faith and trust in God. Amen