

Title: Suffering and Sovereignty
Text: Luke 18.31-34
Theme: Suffering and the Plan of God
Series: Luke
Aim: I aim to call my people to trust in God in the midst of suffering because suffering is a means to glory.

You have heard the accusations and perhaps they have come from your lips. How could a good God allow so much suffering to happen? How could a God who says that he loves me, allow me to endure what I am facing? How could a God who claims to be sovereign over all things, who ordains the future and carries it out, will for me to experience such grief? If God is great and good, then why is there so much evil? Either God is not great, and cannot stop it, or God is not really good and really doesn't care, or maybe there is no God.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus commended the children because their faith is the kind of faith that his followers have. It is a very simple, pure and concrete faith. Therefore, there is a sense in which our faith, that is our believing and even our system of belief is simple. We believe what God has revealed. However, it is not simplistic or shallow. Little children often, not always, but often have simple lives. Food is provided for them. Clothes are provided for them. Shelter is provided for them. Rules, protection, comfort and essentials are all provided for them. If you tell them the world is round, they believe it. If they know that you love them and they are safe with you and you tell them that God made it, they believe you. But one day, these children will grow up and will learn firsthand, that this world is not a safe place. They will find out that they cannot protect their own hearts from being hurt, their own bodies from disease, or their lives from experiencing loss. This is often when the convenient and perhaps familial faith of a child is stretched and tested. To live in this world is to experience suffering. Can one accept the reality of suffering and a convictional and reasonable faith in a sovereign God?

I understand the hesitation that some may have to talk about this. The Christian faith, rightly understood, is so beautiful that, there is a sense in which you don't want anyone or anything to mess it up. For those of you who avoid conflict at all costs, you get nervous, fearing that there may be an argument out there somewhere for which Christianity has no answer. You so want this to be true that you fear, that deep down, something may be discovered that exposes it to be a fraud. And yet, if you are going to stake your life and soul on something, then it better be worth examining and better be able to handle any and all challenges, including God's claim to sovereignty and the reality of our suffering. In our text, Jesus embraces both.

Read Text:

Luke 9.22, *"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."*

Luke 9.44-45, *“Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.” But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.*

Luke 12.50, *“I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”*

Luke 13.33, *“Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.”*

Luke 17.25, *“But first he (the Son of Man) must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.”*

Our text is the 6th time that Luke records Jesus telling his disciples that he is going to die. He told them he was going to be rejected by the Jewish leaders and killed. This was going to happen in Jerusalem and he would suffer many things. But this time, Jesus gives more specifics plus he makes it clear that this death was written about and prophesied in the Old Testament. Therefore, what Jesus is doing is keeping the promises that God made hundreds of years before.

1. **The Suffering of Christ was predicted in detail in the Old Testament.** (31)

We can describe the life of Christ in a number of ways. He taught us about God. He taught us about ourselves. He taught about the Kingdom of God. He claimed to be God. He did wonderful things that authenticated those claims, like healing people, doing miracles and even raising people from the dead. He exposed the hypocrisy and failures of the religious leaders (Pharisees and Sadducees) in order to make clear that their “religion” was a fraud. He did good things. He loved people. All of these descriptions are true, but one way to summarize the life of Christ is simply to say, Jesus came to fulfill the promises of the word of God.

God had his word recorded so we would know what to believe and how to live. This was a beautiful gift from God for us our good pleasure and joy. His revealed what we were to love and pursue and what we were to reject and avoid. And God showed us in the lives of hundreds of people and the histories of Judah and Israel examples of how this played out. God gave us his Word so we could understand him, believe in Him and trust Him. He also gave us his Word so we would not follow our own laws, nor manmade religions and systems. God’s Word reveals God’s way to think and live and exposes man’s ways to think and live.

God could have revealed his law and said, follow this because I said so but God did more. God have us the capacity to make moral decisions and to reason. Therefore, God knew that when he said follow his law, that we would all say what every two-year-old says. “Why?” God gave us thousands of reasons why and many of those reasons have to do with God revealing things hundreds and even thousands of years ahead of time and then fulfilling them to prove that he knows what he is doing.

There's a gas station around here that I often use. Next to it is the house of a Psychic who advertises readings, consultations, tarot cards, etc. The house is in disrepair. Gutters are broken, soffit has fallen down, yard is overgrown, the property is a mess, the vehicles on the property are basically junk status. If you claim to know the future, then seriously, you could make a lot of money in the futures market. But the condition of the house makes it clear that this person has no idea what they are talking about.

The Old Testament covers several thousand years and includes over 300 prophecies about Christ. God put it in writing ahead of time to demonstrate his authority and believability. And those prophecies about Christ said that the Messiah was going to suffer and would die. Therefore, we need to grasp the fact that the suffering and death of Christ was not an accident. It was tragic. It was unjust. It was the ultimate injustice ever. But it was planned. The suffering of Christ was planned by God, and predicted by God. Jesus came to fulfill the promises and prophecies of God that said that the Messiah would suffer and die. What's more...

2. The Suffering of Christ was predicted in detail by Christ. (32-33a)

Note the details Jesus provides ahead of time. He said he would be delivered over to the Gentiles. That can only mean one thing. It means that the Jews would deliver him over to the Gentiles. That means that he would be taken captive in some sense by the Jews who would then turn him over to the Gentiles, which we know were the Romans. Jesus said that he would be mocked, shamefully treated, and spit upon, which happened. Then he would be flogged, which he was, as Jesus said. Then they will kill him, which they did. Jesus did not give a vague, general fortune-cookie kind of a prediction. He said that they were on their way to Jerusalem where these specific things were going to happen. Jesus knew it. Jesus said it. The disciples heard him. We will see, once again, that while the disciples heard Jesus say these words that they did not understand him and I think we can cut them some slack.

Think of this: Jesus is on the road to his own suffering and death and he keeps walking. Most people would go the other way. And yet, Jesus is reiterating this prediction, affirming that what he is doing is fulfilling the Scriptures, predicting in detail the kind of horrific suffering he would face and yet he keeps going toward it. Jesus said things at times that were in parables. The disciples may have thought that Jesus was once again using some figures of speech. After all, who predicts their own death like this and chooses to walk right to it? However...

By predicting it, Jesus is displaying his sovereignty over it all. By deliberately walking on this road to Jerusalem, Jesus is submitting himself to the very plan that would bring his suffering and death. This is where we need to stop, pull out a chair and have a seat. The Sovereign plan of God included suffering for Jesus. The fact that Jesus suffered and, in his case, suffered completely unjustly did not mean that God was not sovereign over the suffering. God was clearly sovereign over the suffering and Jesus embraced both the sovereignty of God and his own suffering. The Sovereign plan of God included suffering for the Son of God and the Son of God embraced this as the fulfilling of God's plan for his life. But there is more.

3. The Suffering of Christ to death leads to the Victory of Christ over death. (33b)

The suffering of Christ, while horrific and real, was not the end of the story. The suffering would be so severe that Christ would die from it. But his suffering and death would be the means by which he would be victorious over death. By means of his suffering and death, Jesus accomplished our salvation. 1 Timothy 1.15, Jesus saved sinners. He gave his life as our ransom, Matthew 20.28. He purchased our pardon. He paid our debt and redeemed us, Titus 2.14. He gave himself for our sin, Galatians 1.4. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, Ephesians 5.25. The payment made by Christ was infinite in its worth, and therefore paid in full the debt and forever satisfied the wrath of God's justice against the sins of the elect. The wages of sin is death and Jesus paid the wages, which means that death lost its power to condemn. The grave had no hold on Christ and its grip on those who are in Christ is forever broken.

The resurrection of Christ was the demonstration of God that the price for our sin was paid in full. Therefore, the suffering of Christ all the way to death was the very path that led Christ to victory over death. Jesus *"is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant."* Hebrews 9.15

The effect of this means that for every one who trusts in Christ alone for salvation, they are reconciled to God, forever. Death was not the final chapter for Christ, and neither is it the final chapter for any genuine follower of Christ, because all genuine followers of Christ are IN Christ.

4. The Relationship between the Plan of God and Suffering is impossible to grasp apart from the enablement of God. (34)

The disciples heard Jesus talk about this repeatedly and here, he said it clearly and they did not understand it. They knew what mocking, spitting, flogging and dying meant. They did not have a category for how this could happen to the Messiah. This made no sense to them. They did not understand what the Messiah had actually come to do, therefore, they did not know how what he just said was going to advance the Messiah's cause. They would not understand it until later. They would not understand it until after Jesus rose again and then explained to them how this had to be in order to accomplish our salvation. He did this, in part, on the day of his resurrection when he appeared to the two disciples on the road going to Emmaus and he explained how the Scriptures (Old Testament) all pointed to him and were fulfilled in him. The story of the Bible is also the story of how God, over time, has revealed more and more of himself. The Bible was not written all at once. It came over time. The faith and understanding of God's people became more informed over time. I am amazed at the faith of many of the Old Testament saints who had way less information than we did. We live on the other side of the life of Christ. The disciples, at this point in Luke 18, did yet experience the death and resurrection of Christ. They were going to see shortly how suffering and sovereignty were fused in Christ. It was the sovereign plan of God for Jesus to suffer. Jesus just said so. And instead of running from Jerusalem, he is going to it. It was written, predicted and planned. God ordained suffering to be the instrument that brings about our salvation, our good and the glory of his Son. Suffering and

Sovereignty are not incompatible, but are interwoven in the plan God and in the story of our lives in order to carry out God's plan for this world. In fact, God ordains suffering to be an instrument that brings about our sanctification, our good and in many cases, our death that brings us to glory. Jesus sets the mark, and we keep the pace. Let's unpack this in conclusion.

We all wonder about and try to answer 4 basic questions: 1) Where did we come from? 2) What went wrong? 3) What do we do about it? 4) What happens to us after we die? Question 2 is what I want to address. Here is my argument. The existence of pain is not an argument for why there is no God, but is actually an argument for why there is. In order for us to know what it means to be sick; we have to first know what it means to be healthy. In order to know that there is such a thing as evil, we have to know that there is such a thing as good. If there is no Creator God who defines good and evil, then we would have no such categories. Pain and evil prove the existence of goodness and goodness means that there is such a thing as good. Where does the very idea of good, or, while we are it, the idea of perfection, wholeness, beautiful, loving, holy, righteous, just and lovely, come from? It is all in our DNA from a perfect, whole, beautiful, loving, holy, righteous, just and lovely Creator. And we long for it, even though in this life, we never fully get it.

Why then do we think that pain and suffering are bad? Why do our bodies hurt, and worse, why do our inner beings grieve and sorrow? We grieve and sorrow because we experience loss of what we had or loss from what we long to have. Where does that longing to have come from? Where did the very idea come from that something is fundamentally wrong with our world? Why does murder bother us, if the survival of the fittest is really true? We all have a longing for, an expectation of goodness, wholeness, health and security. We all long for it. We all pursue it. We all want it. We all want a perfect world. Where did such a notion come from? It comes from our Creator God. Suffering is not the skeleton in the closet that we can't or don't want to talk about. It is actually evidence for a good God. But if God is so good and Creator, how should we understand the relationship between our suffering and God's Sovereignty? After all, there is no way that Christ could state with certainty that all of these events would take place unless he knew they would happen this way and in this order. It's not just that he knew it as one who could see the future, but the fact that he predicted it through his prophets and gave previews of it in the Old Testament sacrificial system revealed that he did more than know it, he ordained it. God ordained the suffering of his Son. His Sovereign plan ordained that his Son would suffer and die. It was the sovereign plan of God for his Son to suffer so his plan to redeem us would be accomplished. Suffering is not incompatible with Sovereignty.

Only by understanding and embracing the godness and greatness of God can we accept the fact that our suffering and His Sovereignty are harmonious and not at odds. By the godness of God, I mean the otherness of God, the massive distinction between the Creator and creation. And by the greatness of God, I mean how complex he is as an infinite being. As an infinitely good being, God loves us and he grieves over sin and evil. As an infinitely great being, God overrules evil so that it carries out a role in his plan. For example, when Jesus was informed that Lazarus, his friend was sick, Jesus did not immediately leave for Bethany, but waited. He knew that the sickness of Lazarus would lead to Lazarus dying and he knew this would cause deep grief to

Martha and Mary. He also knew that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead and that the resurrection of Lazarus was a preview of his own resurrection. Think of immediate and ultimate.

So, Jesus waits to go to Bethany and when he gets there, Lazarus has already been in the tomb for several days. Jesus goes to the tomb with Mary and Martha. And there, Jesus weeps. This was not a little tear that managed to sneak out of the corner of his eye, this was a whole-body consuming, cry. Beloved, God sees evil for what it is. He sees it for what it is more than we do. He feels the loss with us. He is in the moment. In the immediate and personal sense, he is able to look at sin and evil for what they are. He has no pleasure in the death of anyone (Ezekiel 18.32). Jesus was able to be completely in tune in the little and personal world of Martha and Mary and feel their loss and grieve with them and for them. At the same time, he was able raise Lazarus from the dead, and a few minutes later, he did. That act of power was way more than merely giving joy and security to Martha and Mary. There was a greater and ultimate plan at work that was way more than just the happiness of the sisters and others. God is able in the immediate sense to be moved with our pain, present in our sorrow, comforting in our grief, not only because he knows it, but in the ultimate sense the sins that affect us and the evil that we experience is on a leash and will not win.

So, in the narrow and immediate sense, Jesus is going to be betrayed, delivered over, mocked, shamefully treated, denied, spit upon, flogged and crucified. He will experience it completely. The Father will abhor what it is happening to his Son because the Father hates sin and is repulsed by the suffering of the innocent. But in the wide and ultimate sense, it pleased the Lord to bruise him. In the ultimate sense, Jesus for the joy that was set before him, despised the shame. In the ultimate sense, Jesus died in order to rise again, that he might accomplish our salvation and guarantee our resurrection. That is why he is going to Jerusalem.

No other religion or philosophy in the world can answer the questions of life like Jesus. Nothing else comes close. Instead of giving you reasons not believe, suffering gives you evidence to believe. And only Jesus can promise an end to suffering because only Jesus can take our suffering in our place and do it in order to pay the final price for the sin that caused the suffering in the first place. And he did, like he said. And then rose again, like he said. And will return, like he said. And rule over all, just like he said.