

## **“Why Would a Loving God Allow Suffering? (Genesis 3:1-7 Revelation 21:3-4)**

*A sermon for the people of Grace UMC – Alamogordo & Tularosa (August 2, 2020)*

Have you ever had one of those moments when you found yourself in a conversation and all of a sudden everyone is talking about something that you really should know about, but all your life you just find yourself drawing a complete blank. I mean you have no idea what’s going on, but you just keep nodding your head and say, “yep,” “oh yeah!,” “right,” “I know.” And you just keep going and going, and never contributing anything substantial at all, but of course you don’t want to give away that you really have no idea what’s going on.

For me one of those things is cars... I’m supposed to know about cars, right? Or at least I think I am so when I get in a conversation about some make or model of care, I just nod my head, heck half the time I don’t even remember what kind of car I drive, I just know it has four wheels, and it’s the blue SUV in the parking lot.

We do this because we don’t want to look silly, right? We do this because we think we should know the answer. I mean everyone else is acting like they know the answer so I should too. There’s no way I’m going to ask a question about this because I don’t want to look ignorant or silly or uneducated. And believe it or not we do this with our faith as well. There are SO MANY things about our Christian faith that we’ve always wanted to know, but because everyone else seems to either know the answer, or not even have the question in the first place, we’ve been keeping the question to ourselves.

Now, I’ve always heard that there are no stupid questions, only stupid answers, so if you come away with anything stupid during this sermon series just blame it on my answers. But your questions are beautiful. They’re great! And they will bring us closer to God, I firmly believe that! Now, we put out a poll of about 15-20 questions and we had you vote on the one that was bugging you the most. We also solicited individual questions from you. Then we took

all that information, put it all together, and came up with our top 4 questions that we'll spend the next month wrestling through. And we're starting off with a big one—probably the biggest question in all of human history, and it was most definitely the top question from you... But first, a little story...

A couple years ago Shannon was picking me up from the airport, and we were just about ten minutes from home when a car coming the opposite direction drifted over into our lane. Trying to avoid a head-on collision I veered to the right, but I wasn't quick enough and she side-swiped us... setting off all the airbags and completely totaling our car. The brunt of the impact was on Edie's door, and thankfully we all came out of the wreck relatively unharmed... August and Edie were in a little bit of shock, but other than that and a little whip-lash, we were fine,

Later that day I posted some pics on Facebook of what happened and on more than one occasion several people said this. "It's a good thing you're ok, thankfully God was in control!"

God was in control...

Really?

Was God really in control of that moment? Now, I understand the sentiment, I really do. I do indeed thank God that all four of us came out of that wreck unharmed... but what about all those wrecks that happen on a daily basis. Wrecks just like ours, wrecks that happen to perfectly good families and people, but those wrecks don't end in a mild-case of whip-lash... those wrecks end in four funerals a week later. Is God not in control then? If the God of grace and peace and comfort and unconditional love and abundant life is in control in our wreck, was he not for the others that don't turn out the same? If God is in control, then why did the wreck happen in the first place? If God is in control, then why did we have to suffer that shock, that

loss of a vehicle. If God is in control then why does so much suffering happen in this world... suffering much, MUCH more substantial and devastating than our little wreck. Simply put, why is there suffering in the first place, and why does God allow it? That's your most asked question, and that's how we're launching this sermon series today.

I want to take just a quick moment to remind you once again that we're going to end the service today with me addressing some of your questions and comments that this sermon brings up in you. You have three ways to submit your questions, you can type them directly into the live stream feed that you're watching (either Facebook or YouTube), or you can text them directly and privately to (575) 489-5949. We have someone compiling those questions and will be giving them to me later on in the service. Now, I can already tell you that I won't be able to address all your questions and comments, but hopefully I can address a few and we'll all be made better for it! So please, please don't hesitate. If you have the question, I promise someone else does too!

Now, we're going to do something a little counter-intuitive today... here with the Bible we actually have an entire story about suffering, and about God's response to suffering, but instead of starting at the beginning we're actually going to start at the end and work our way backwards. So first I want us to look at the very end of this Bible, at Revelation: **"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'" (Rev. 21:3-4).**

I don't know about you, but this sounds like the end of suffering to me... This sounds

like the end of all tears, all death, all mourning, all pain. Right? That's what it says, and why does it say this? Why is it that all of these terrible things, all of this suffering, just goes away?

The answer right in front of us. **"He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." (Rev 21:3b).**

God, walking among us, dwelling among us here. That's what brings all suffering and pain to an end. And this image of God in our midst should ring a bell. This image of God dwelling with his created people in a place of perfect peace, that should sound familiar: It's what we just spent seven whole weeks on as we discovered more of what it means to follow Jesus as Lord of our lives here, now, today, and *his* promise to us that Best of all, God is with us! This has always been the plan of God, going all the way back to the beginning of humanity's creation where God and humanity walked together, and that's always been what God is saving us back to: a place of perfect peace, no pain, no suffering, God with his created people, looking on it and saying. "it is very Good!" We're promised no suffering at the end, and we see at the beginning of our Christian story in the book of Genesis 1-2 that there's definitely no suffering at the beginning. So what happened? Why do we live in such a world when everywhere we look we see pain and grief and heartache?

I've sat with you in my office when you've asked, "Why did God take her away from me!?" I've had coffee with you when you've pondered with me why there is so much evil in this world. I've read your prayer requests week after week after week as they come to me through text or email. Prayers of healing for those in our lives who are hurting so much. I've hugged your necks as you've mourned the loss of your loved ones. There was no suffering in the beginning of this book, and there's no suffering at the end, but there sure is now, isn't

there!

I think a more important question than “Why does God allow suffering?” is “What is God going to do about it?” Because it’s here, it’s a reality, and we need God to do something about it. We as humans have tried throughout all of history to do something, and we just keep messing things up. What is GOD going to do about it, because in the end it is God and God alone who can do something about it. And I’ve got a secret for you... God already has! God has already done something once and for all about suffering. And What God did was this... He came to us!

God himself, the creator of the cosmos, saw the great suffering that you have, and he came to you! It’s what we celebrate at Christmastime when we rejoice that Jesus Christ, whom Mary named Emmanuel... which means *GOD WITH US!* And almost every Sunday I say with the you, and I’ve already said them to you today, that Best of all... *GOD IS WITH US!*

We’re able to read in Revelation that mourning, crying, pain, or death are no more precisely because God is With Us through Christ our Lord. And we need God with us, not because God allows suffering, as our question presumes, but because of what we’ve done, and continue to do, to ourselves. Let’s look really closely at what really happened in the beginning; **“Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will**

**be like God, knowing good and evil.” 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. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.” (Genesis 3:1-7).**

This is the moment that suffering came into the world. This is the moment when it all fell apart, when all God’s perfect plan came crashing down, and there’s one thing very important to realize... God’s not in this passage AT ALL. God is not the subject of this story. This is the very moment when all those things that God will end in revelation come into existence. All those things that Revelation promises to end: mourning, crying, pain, and death, all of those things were birthed in this moment, and God had absolutely nothing to do with it!

Church, You asked “Why Does God allow suffering?” and here’s your answer. **God doesn’t allow suffering... WE DO! The only thing God has to do with suffering is this: he defeats it!** We're the ones who bring suffering into this world, and we’re the ones, that despite Christ’s immense sacrifice on the cross, we still allow so much suffering in this world. In Christ’s life, death, and resurrection we not only have hope that ultimately God has in fact dis-allowed suffering, and defeated it once-and-for all, but in Jesus same life, death, and resurrection we see how we, today, are to act and live in a way that works to eliminate suffering from our own lives. How much grief would we eliminate if we actively lived like Christ, how much pain would be eliminated if we walked as Jesus walked, how much pain would cease to exist if we cared and comforted and love and Jesus loved, how much abundant life would we bring into this world if we truly believed in God’s call for us to be holy as he is holy?

Church, when you experience suffering, don't bottle it up, do what Christ did when he suffered... CRY OUT! Christ was there on the cross and he yelled out to God, "My God My God why have you forsaken me!" Yelling out to God doesn't decrease your faith, it increases it. Church when you suffer do what Christ did... find solidarity with others who suffer. Don't isolate yourself away from this suffering world. Seek out those who suffer. Interact with those who mourn, who grieve, who are in pain, who are lost and broken. Just as God used Christ's suffering to bring hope to your life, he can use your suffering to bring hope to others. And finally, when you suffer, ask yourself if your causing your own suffering. We've seen today that all suffering eventually is on our hands, so when we face hardships we should humbly and carefully examine ourselves to see if our own suffering is the result of our own sin, and then we must repent.

And then, at the end of the day, when you've encountered suffering, when you've earnestly prayed for it to be removed from your life, when you've grieved over and over and over, we must realize that at the end of the day, the way God promises to defeat such suffering in our lives may very well be different than what we want. Paul, one of Jesus' earliest followers, had such an experience in his own life. Once such suffering he called his "thorn in his side." We don't know what this suffering was, but we know he longed for it to be removed from him, just like many of us long for our own sufferings to be taken away from us. And Paul did indeed experience God's victory over his suffering, but it isn't in the way he, or we, would have wanted initially. Check out what Paul wrote about his own suffering: **"Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so**

**that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).** God’s promise to defeat your suffering and the suffering the world is going to happen, period! But the way we will experience that in our lives isn’t according to the logic of the world, but the logic, the amazing, beautiful, mysteries logic of the Kingdom of God, that in suffering there is victory, that in death there is life, that in sorrow, there is joy. That in the weakness of our suffering, there lies the strength of Christ’s victory!

Entire libraries have been written on this subject and no 20 minutes sermon, or any sermon for that matter could ever do it justice, but I can leave you with one last thing. Today we get to come to the table. Today we get to see and experience first-hand God’s response to our own, self-inflicted suffering. When we’re the ones who turned our backs on God. When we’re the ones who allowed suffering to enter into this world. When we’re the ones to say “we know better,” and thus live in such a way that brings so much suffering to this world, God still comes to us. He doesn’t abandon us. He doesn’t chastise us. He doesn’t disregard us... he comes to us, and HE SUFFERS! HE SUFFERS so that we would not have to. He suffers. And in his suffering all pain and grief, and mourning, and death is defeated. And as we take part in this meal of bread and cup we are invited to walk with Christ in his own suffering... to not only remember his life, death, and resurrection, but to actually LIVE IT OUT! No, God does not allow suffering... God defeats suffering, so will you continue to allow suffering in this world, or will you walk with God, and hand-in-hand with him, will you do your part to bring an end to suffering once and for all? Let us pray...