

**SERMON: MARK 10. 17-31; PSALM 22.1-15; HEBREWS 4.12-16; JOB 23.1-9,16-17 – WHY IS THERE SUFFERING?**

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and Redeemer” AMEN [Psalm 19:14].

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” These words of anger and frustration were lamented not only by the writer of Psalm 22 but, as we well know, also by Jesus on his cross. They reflect a fundamental human condition. When hard times hit us, so often we cry out: “Why?” It becomes even harder to bear when what we’re experiencing seems so grossly unfair. How could God allow such an injustice to occur? You may each be reflecting on your own past or current circumstances. Although it seems like yesterday, it was almost 40 yrs ago that I was screaming at God on Cottlesoe beach in WA. My 26yr old sister, Julie, had just died after a horrible car crash. Why did he let that happen? She was a devout Catholic and just about to be married. I angrily ranted and raved at God for a couple of hours. I didn’t get any answers then and I haven’t had any ever since.

But that and other events in my life have caused me to reflect much on this question: “Why is there suffering?” I do not for a second pretend to have the definitive answer. Indeed I suspect much is beyond our ken in this life. But I will share a few thoughts and look forward to hearing your own afterwards.

C S Lewis wrote in the “Problem of Pain”:

*“The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of God who loves is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word “love”, and limit His wisdom by what seems **to us** to be wise.”*

John Dickson takes this further in his book “If I were God, I’d end all pain”. In Chapter 1 he debunks the secular hypothesis that suffering proves that an All Knowing, All Loving God cannot exist. He rephrases the logical equation to read like this:

*Assumption 1: An all-powerful God exists*

*Assumption 2: An all-loving God exists*

*Fact: Suffering exists*

*Conclusion: God must have loving reasons (which he is able to achieve) for permitting suffering.*

### **Why would God allow it?**

Dickson suggests that the real question of suffering is not ‘Could a God co-exist with a suffering world?’ but ‘Why would God allow it?’ and “What has he done about it?”

And it is to those two questions I will now turn.

The first and most fundamental reason God may allow suffering, is free-will. A central element of the work of God the Creator is that humankind has been given something no other part of creation has. He has given each one of us the ability to choose or reject Him as our creating Father. He has made us in His image and longs for us to choose to be in intimate, loving relationship with Him. You have all heard this a million times before. But I invite you today to reflect once more on how this fact impacts on our experience of suffering. **God is love** and his first act of love towards humanity was to limit His own power by sharing it with us. And from His very essence **he needs us** to return that love. Any person who has felt the rejection of someone they love deeply knows what this means. They also know the unspeakable joy if the relationship is healed. When we turned away from our Father we broke His heart and opened the door to abuse the power He freely gave us. However much we have used that power wrongly, God has never stopped encouraging us to choose the right way.

A second loving reason why God permits pain is to encourage spiritual growth through testing us. Now this may be an uncomfortable thought but I suggest that our readings today give ample testimony to this. Mark 10.21 tells us that Jesus **showed his love** for the rich man by testing him. Through this challenge Jesus

gave the rich man an opportunity to let go of his pride and false sense of control. He lovingly offered him the sovereignty of God by following His Son. The reality of God's testing is also made plain to us in our Hebrew reading. In chapter 4.15, it states that Jesus **was himself tested just as we are.**

This message is amplified in the Job reading. The small section we read today comes after Job has been taunted and accused by his three supposedly good-meaning friends not once, not twice but three times! These accusations have become so unjust that in this Chapter Job ignores them and turns directly to God. In Chapter 23 verses 1-7 Job seems defiantly convinced that if only he can present his case directly to God he would learn all the causes of his pain (vs5) and be "acquitted forever by his judge" Yet it is in verse 10 that Job has a moment of deep insight when he says: *"But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold."*

Can you think of times in your life when God has tested you? For Job it ends well and is illustrative of a third loving reason why God may allow suffering. It is so that we may gain a proper perspective of our place before our creator Father. Job gets no answers to his questions seeking **a cause** for his pain BUT he is overwhelmed by his new-found sense of God's majesty. In Chapters 40 and 41 the gut wrenching challenges that God levels at Job cause him to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and at the last to "repent in dust and ashes." Again, as distressing as it may sometimes be, painful situations can cause us to humble ourselves before our Lord. I'm not suggesting for a moment that all pain is good. Far from it. Yet Phillip Yancey give us food for thought when he says: *"By definition, pain is unpleasant, enough so to force us to withdraw our fingers from the stove. Yet, that very quality saves us from destruction. Unless the warning signal demands response, we might not heed it."*

Another way of looking at this is the concept of the "Dark Night". Charles Swindoll quotes St John of the Cross, one of the fathers, who

*wrote "God perceives the imperfections within us, and because of his love for us, urges us to grow up. His love is not content to leave us in our weaknesses, and for this reason : He takes us into a dark night. He weans us from all the pleasures by giving us dry times and inward darkness."*

It is during times like that when we are forced to accept that God's reasoning is simply beyond our comprehension. Again, as bewildering as it may be, there are times when we are called to trust our Unfathomable God. And in that humble trusting, our pain can be relieved.

I don't know why my sister and, indeed later, my brother, both died early deaths but those and other Dark Night struggles have drawn me closer to God. They deepened my trust and faith in our loving God. How do you describe the sense of peace that comes from knowing in your heart of hearts that God is our loving Father? That even though it's impossible to understand why something bad has happened **it is possible** to jump across the chasm of confusion and hurt to land in His all-embracing gracious arms? To know that His love for each one of us transcends all the evil this world can throw at us.

Job did this. And when we as followers of Jesus share that experience it is a profound witness to our all-powerful and all-loving Father.

### **What has God done about suffering?**

But the story is not finished yet. The second question I posed at the beginning is of crucial importance: What has God done about suffering? At the end of November we will begin the season of Advent: a time that culminates with our All-powerful, All-loving God allowing His own Son to take on human form; to experience all that it means to be us- our joy, our achievements, our frustrations, our

sorrow, our pain. Even to the point of knowing his own Dark Night, crying out in despair on the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

My friends, the heart of the gospel Good News is that Jesus, Son of God, took all our pain, suffering and sin on His crucified body and, through His resurrection, claimed victory over it. Phillip Yancey describes it this way:

*“It is called the Resurrection, the moment of victory when the last enemy, death itself, was smashed. God, who invites Job and Corrie ten Boom and you and me to step into joy and victory, does not ask us to accept a Pollyannaish world. He simply adds a further, mysterious layer to human experience. He asks for hope in spite of hopeless surroundings. When suffering bleeds us, He asks us not to reject Him, but to respond to Him as children, trusting His wisdom and affirming, as Corrie said: ‘However deep the pit, God’s love is deeper still.’”*

God has not sat back and idly watched our mess – He has actively sought to establish a new heaven and a new earth. He has promised this will happen when Jesus returns. Until then, He longs for us to freely choose the path of Jesus, to cross the deep chasms of this world and follow Him.

Dear Brothers and sisters, I know there is so much more to this story and it is important that we explore together the many facets of this topic. For now, I pray that whenever we face a struggle, we may find the wisdom to trust in our Lord and the heart to leap into His loving embrace. **AMEN**