

Matthew 26:36-46

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[0 : 00] I just want to spend 15-20 minutes with you delving into this short paragraph of Matthew's account of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

If you're unfamiliar with the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, they're actually quite unusual as writers. Because they write, don't they, about the person of the Lord Jesus, but they write something that is unlike every other biography that's ever been written.

And you might expect, might you, a mention of the death of the person that is being written about in a biography, maybe on the last page or something like that.

But all four New Testament Gospel writers differ in that they spend almost one third of their content, one third of their words, on the last few days of Jesus' life.

On his passion, on his suffering. And what I want to do in this short time is to ask why. Why is that?

[1 : 10] Why the skewing in the Gospels towards the painful end? Why are Christians so obsessed with Jesus' painful suffering?

There are endless paintings of the passion of Jesus Christ, aren't there? Carabaggio and Rembrandt and Raphael. Church icons and stained glass windows.

You can look at them all, couldn't you? You could listen to a piece of music, Sebastian Bach. To try and work out the answer to that question. But actually the best place to go to, to find out what happened at the end of Jesus' life, is to look at and ask Jesus himself.

And Matthew invites us into this garden, where Jesus prays to God his Father. And in this prayer we learn from Jesus himself, what his suffering and what his death is all about.

So let me show you three observations here. First of all we see here that Jesus Christ suffers pain like us.

[2 : 29] He suffers pain like us, like you and me. If you look down at where the number 37 is there, verse 37. Matthew tells us that Jesus began to be sorrowful and troubled.

We see leading up to Easter, straight away, that the God of the Bible knows about pain and suffering.

It's quite surprising, isn't it? The God of the Bible is maybe not the God that we expect him or imagine him to be. The famous atheist Richard Dawkins said that God is arguably the most unpleasant character in all literature.

Jealous, petty, unjust, unforgiving, control freak, vindictive, and malevolent bully, he calls him. But we'd want to say to Richard Dawkins, wouldn't we?

Would you say that to the God who is on his hands and on his knees in this garden? Could you say that? An Old Testament speaker in the Bible, Isaiah, has a very different description of Jesus.

[3 : 46] Jesus Christ knows the whole spectrum of human pain. Betrayal and temptation, torture, humiliation, and death.

We had a lady coming to these lunchtime talks a while ago and she had to move and do another job somewhere else. And she really struggled with the whole issue of pain and suffering in her life and in the world.

It's a really difficult subject. We're told in the Bible that even though we don't understand why or how, God, whilst still being good and powerful, is in charge of all suffering and all pain in the world. And if we can't see a good reason for suffering, it doesn't mean that in God's wisdom that there isn't one. But this lady, she wasn't convinced by that.

But she was convinced when she realised the truth that Jesus Christ reveals to us here. That God is not just sovereign over all of our pain, but God is subject to our pain in Jesus Christ.

[5 : 06] That he becomes vulnerable to the whole spectrum of human suffering. He was sorrowful and troubled, Matthew tells us.

And that lady was all she needed to trust in Jesus with her suffering. She could no longer say to God, You don't understand what I'm going through.

You don't know the suffering that I'm enduring. As we see God here in this garden, in Gethsemane, we realise that we just can't say that to God.

We can't say that to Jesus. The lead up to the first Easter tells us Jesus suffers pain like us. He suffers pain like us. Secondly though, Jesus Christ suffers pain unlike us.

He suffers pain unlike us. Notice the words that we read earlier. Jesus began to be sorrowful and troubled.

[6 : 15] What's implied there in the whole story of Matthew's Gospel is that this is the beginning of a suffering for Jesus Christ unlike anything he has experienced before.

We know that Jesus has felt immense pain all throughout the Gospels. Jesus Christ has suffered like us.

He's been hungry. He's been homeless. He's been rejected. Jesus wept. He's felt pain like any of us have felt. But starting now is a suffering much more distressing.

Something extraordinarily painful is happening to Jesus now. He says in verse 38, My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.

Now we kind of say that, don't we? We say, oh, this day has just about killed me. Or, these problems are just about finishing me off. But he's not using that for rhetorical effect here.

[7 : 23] The stress that Jesus feels overwhelms him. And it's so heavy it is enough to kill him. And for the first time ever, Jesus Christ prays to God his Father, verse 39, If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

For the first time ever, Father, can I avoid this pain? He's never prayed that before.

The question is, why does the man of sorrows pray that now? Jesus has got an extremely high pain threshold. He'd been aware of his own death.

He'd predicted it. He'd gone towards his death voluntarily. He hasn't flinched in the face of death. And of torture. And of false accusations.

He's told his disciples all of this is going to happen. So why does he flinch now? Lots of people have died horrific deaths in calm, heroic ways, haven't they?

[8 : 34] It's amazing how people can do that. How they can go to their deaths knowing they're going to die with great calm. Philosopher Plato tells the story of Socrates who was sentenced to death by drinking poison from a cup.

And rather than running and fighting and arguing, he sipped it calmly to teach his accusers a lesson. In the 16th century, bishops Latimer and Ridley were burnt at the stake under the rule of Bloody Mary.

And as the flames rose around them, Latimer turned to Ridley and said, Be of good comfort, Master Ridley. Lots of people have died in horrific ways, haven't they?

In heroic ways. Even Jesus' own followers have managed to die without the ordeal and the suffering that Jesus seems to anticipate here.

So why does Jesus, the man of sorrows, do that here now? The physical, emotional, mental suffering was similar to all those other people.

[9 : 41] But we learn, don't we, that that is where the similarity ends. Listen again to the words of Jesus himself. Let this cup pass from me, he says.

Now Matthew's readers would have been far more familiar with the Old Testament, as you or I are. And that word cup would have sent alarm bells ringing in their minds.

The cup in the Bible is a euphemism for God's holy, just anger against evil. It symbolises God's wrath against human rebellion away from him.

And God promises that one day there will be a great judgement over all evil, past and present and future, all wrongdoing. And it will be done by serving this cup.

Of his wrath. If you look at the death of Jesus in artwork, and even in that film by Mel Gibson, The Passion of the Christ, we can see the gore and the torture, even the emotional pain.

[10 : 54] You can portray that on the silver screen. And if that was the most important thing, you'd expect Matthew to give us all the gory details, wouldn't you? We'd hear as the nails are hammered in.

We'd hear about the feeling of the whip shredding his back. But remarkably, Matthew just gives us one sentence about the crucifixion itself.

It comes in chapter 27. He says, After they crucified him, they divided up his garments. That's it. It's as if Matthew wants to pull us away from the suffering that Jesus has that is like ours, And highlight a pain that is absolutely unlike ours.

He wants to focus our minds on this cup that Jesus drinks. Because what overwhelms Jesus in the garden is the thought that judgment day is coming.

And that he is about to face the crushing anger of a holy God judging human evil. So whilst Jesus can say to us, I know what it's like to suffer.

[12:10] I feel your pain. I know what it's like to suffer as you do. We can never ever say the same back to him. Jesus didn't just die.

He drank this cup. He faces the damnation of God. So his suffering is like ours. But in a way that we can't even begin to grasp this afternoon.

It was absolutely unlike ours. He faces the anger of God. He that the one man willingly receives the retributive justice due to many men and women.

Jesus Christ suffers pain unlike us. Thirdly, Jesus Christ suffers pain that cures. He suffers pain that cures.

As we are in this garden, seeing Jesus here. I want to say that this garden is not like Kew Gardens or Sion Park Gardens.

[13:20] You can't be a tourist in the Garden of Gethsemane. You can't be here today and then just leave it and walk away. You can't simply pass through here, watch what happens and then go about your big business and not be affected by it.

Because the Garden of Gethsemane forces us to face a profound pain, doesn't it? Three times Jesus prays, Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me.

And the silence of God the Father's response is as much a message to us as it is to Jesus in this moment. It tells us that even for God, whom the Bible tells us anything is possible and nothing is impossible, even in God's infinite wisdom, this one thing is not possible.

It is not possible for God to forgive you and me and at the same time rescue his Son from this pain.

The prayer reflects the appropriate displeasure of Jesus towards God's wrath, doesn't it? He recoils from that. But it's clear that he is set on this course of action as well.

[14:46] Three times he prays, Not my will, but yours be done, Father. Jesus isn't being forced or coerced into doing this. He knows himself that this is the only way.

This is the only way that a just God can forgive unjust, selfish, proud people like you and me. This is the only way our pain can be healed.

I don't know if you saw it in the news earlier this year, there was an RAF flyby over the skies of Sheffield, which commemorated the moment when 75 years ago, a US bomber was returning to England after being seriously damaged in battle.

But as the plane approached to land, the pilot realised he was losing control of the aircraft and he just wasn't going to make the runway.

And the only chance of survival for him and his crew was to land in a nearby park. In that park stood an eight-year-old boy who witnessed the plane crash and explode as in the end the pilot opted to avoid him and his friends playing.

[16:08] And they died as a result. And that little boy joined the crowds this year to watch the flyby. He was visibly moved. Because it was evidently, 75 years ago, the only way.

Their pain was the only way of preventing his. It is a poor illustration, isn't it, of what we're seeing here. But Jesus' mission is to rescue his people from the pain he is about to endure.

And your suffering now and in eternity can only end through his suffering. This city of London that cries out in all kinds of pain and this world and your broken humanity and the pain of hell will only be stopped in his pain.

You know, being a Christian doesn't mean spending one day a year thinking about this on Maundy Thursday, although it's good that we do. We don't take a trip to this garden just once a year.

But actually we live in the light of this garden all the year, every day. And unashamedly with the Gospel writers we are obsessed actually with the end of Jesus' life.

[17:40] Because it marks the beginning of ours. Because he has endured the pain of God's wrath so that we can know the healing of God's love and his welcome forever.

Jesus Christ who suffers like us. He says to you, I know how you feel. He is a sympathetic friend and a compassionate God to those who come to him.

But he suffers pain unlike us. For there is no other way for you and I to be healed. So will you worship him?

Will you acknowledge, as you see the Gospel writers explain and as you see from Jesus' own lips, that there is something absolutely unique in Jesus' suffering here.

As you see the man of sorrows. Can I encourage you this week to stay with me in this garden for a little bit longer. Maybe go back and read the Gospel accounts.

[18 : 51] Think on these things. We worship a suffering servant, Jesus Christ, who died and who was buried and who rose again.

And none of this means anything without the resurrection. And so next week we're going to think about that a little bit more. But do chat with us at the end if this is new to you. For now let me invite you to join with me in prayer.

Let's pray.