

Luke 13:1-5

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[0 : 00] The question that I want to talk about tonight is why does God let us suffer?! I'm aware tonight that there are people in this room that this is a deeply personal question! This is not a teenager in their school classroom throwing out objections.

And for some tonight that is a daily question that you live with. And I think we have to be very very careful in how we answer this question.

And because after all I have said tonight you might still be left asking the question why? In fact I expect some of you will. And the answer that we come back to again and again in so much of the study of the Bible is this.

God is God. God is God. God is God. And that is an easy thing to accept at times. And we are going to sing a hymn before we come to the table.

Which is a great hymn written by a man that struggled terribly with depression and mental health. And it says God moves in a mysterious way. His wonders to perform. Let me read you verse 6. The blind unbelief is true to err and scam his working brain.

[1 : 22] There are times when we don't know. God is his home interpreter and he will make it plain. And so with that having said that I want to say that when it comes to the question of suffering.

It is a question every single one of us faces. All you have got to do is live long enough. And if you have lived a life so far that has been free from suffering. I can assure you all you have to do is live a little bit longer.

And you will face this question. In fact the best statistics of what life is like for so many in our world. Tell us something this question is so very very relevant.

I was reading this week about the earthquake in Haiti. That came so suddenly a number of years ago. The death toll was over 300,000 people. But there is also the grim reality of normal life. Three billion people live on less than one dollar a day. In the time it takes me to give this talk. Which I think will be about half an hour. 150 people from around the world will die from AIDS related diseases.

[2 : 33] 75 people will die from drinking dirty water. And a further 300 people will die from starvation. The stats are overwhelming. And suffering is an enormous problem.

But it is not just a global problem. It is in our streets. It is in our homes. And as many of you know it is in our hearts. I went to see a couple who had waited 11 years for a child.

They are expecting their first child. And were told that the child has severe spina bifida. And may not live more than a few hours. That is painful. But not exceptional.

Is it? And so today and tonight there will be broken bodies and broken hearts here. And you will know that. There are times in your life and in my life.

When you realise life is too good to be true. You know those moments. You want to take those moments and you want to bottle them. And you think if life is like this forever.

[3 : 36] I want it. But before long we are again asking why, why, why. Why does God let us suffer? Where was God on September 11th dot dot dot.

Where was God during that Haiti earthquake? Where was God during the tsunami? More personally, where was God when I needed him most? Was he not watching my pain? Was God too weak to stop what I went through?

Was God too callous to care? And so for many of our friends, human suffering is the decisive argument, isn't it? It is the decisive argument that they launch against even considering the claims of Jesus Christ.

There is a Dutch novelist called Henry Moolitz. And he wrote, anyone who believes in God after Auschwitz should be executed. Now in the face of that challenge, and it is a massive challenge, I

think it should be a great relief to you and I that the Bible tackles the question of suffering head on. It tells us of Jesus crying when a friend of his died. It tells us of people murdered without cause. It tells us of people suffering from terminal disease.

[4 : 49] The Bible is a very honest book. And it records the suffering of honest, ordinary people. And they ask, why do bad things happen to relatively good people? And why is it that the wicked seem to get away with murder?

And of course they are complicated questions, aren't they? They are very complicated questions. And I don't expect to nail it in 25 minutes. Now let me just say, if I start, those questions need to be faced by everybody.

Every belief system in the world needs to face the question of suffering, not just Christianity. So I don't know what you would say if I asked you, could you give me your explanation of suffering? What would you say? What would you say? A Buddhist would say that pain is an illusion of the mind experienced by those who have yet to free themselves from their desires.

Let me say that again. Pain is an illusion of the mind that is experienced by those who have yet to free themselves from their desires.

[5 : 57] So if you cry a funeral, I think it's fair to Buddhism to say it's because we've yet to free ourselves from a desire for love and relationship with the departed.

But that's not the way it works, is it, in life? Pain is not an illusion. And even if it is an illusion, the illusion of pain is pretty painful, isn't it?

At the graveside, I have never once thought, if only I'd love this person a little bit less. I've never thought that. If only I'd love them a little bit less, I'd be okay.

I've only ever thought at the graveside in the crematorium, death is grim. So let's go to Islam. Allah is the direct cause of human suffering.

So that if a plane falls from the sky, you can say, Allah will be so. In atheism, you and I are just bags of DNA. We're just here.

[7 : 05] We're here. And because we're here, and when I'm suffering, by definition, I'm not allowed to ask why, because there's no one to ask the question to. So Richard Dawkins can write, in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt and others are going to get lucky.

And we won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. Nor any justice. So let me say, that is the only position of consistent atheism.

I think you've got to give Dawkins credit there. Suffering is not a problem for atheism, it's just a fact.

And so one of atheism's great unreported tragedies is that it's got very few words of comfort.

The lady whose child has died in childbirth. There can be lots of sympathy from atheism, but no hope. By contrast, God understands.

And God, in the person of his son, shares our pain. And over time, when that lady who has lost her child is ready to listen, God has actually got a great deal for say to her.

[8 : 23] I want to make four really simple observations. And it may be that this hope raises lots of questions. I'm really happy to talk to you afterwards. Email me, write to me. Write to one of the elders, talk to one of the elders.

There'll be lots of questions. Number one, I want to say to you, God explains the origin of suffering. God explains the origin of suffering. So when you go right back to the start of the Bible, back to Genesis 1 and 2, Life is the good life.

Life is better than good in Genesis 1 and 2. In fact, when God created the world, life was perfect. No one lost their friends.

No one walked out on their wife or children. It's a perfect world. It is life as it was meant to be. And right in the middle of it is God.

And the people know God. And God knows them. And they have a relationship with God. And they follow his word and his command. And as long as they walk in his ways, the world remains perfect.

[9 : 32] And so when we see pictures, like we see on TV of great suffering, When we hear of suffering, When we stand at the crematorium, When we hear of a young person capped down in life, We feel deep inside of us, That is not the way the world should be.

Isn't it? You might be an atheist here tonight, but that's how you feel. It's not right. This is not how it should be. And God says to you tonight, that is a right reaction.

It is right when you go to a funeral, I think not to celebrate the life of the person who's departed. I think it's right to go to a funeral and feel angry. Because God has made a perfect world. And suffering is not normal. Suffering is a deeply alien intruder in our world. And so the question is, where did the mess come from? Where did it come from? What went wrong with the world? And the answer that the Bible gives you is we did. And so the start of the Bible is Genesis 1 and 2, The world is perfect. And Genesis 4 is a story of jealousy and murder. [10:48] And in between Genesis 2 and Genesis 4 comes Genesis 3, Which is where everything goes wrong. It's one page of the Bible. And yet it changes the world forever.

What happens in Genesis 3, it's so brief, Is that mankind, human beings, decide to go alone from God. Up until then they have trusted God.

We've done as he said, we've walked in his ways. And the world stayed perfect and we were happy. But in Genesis 3 we said to God, we want to make the rules.

And so in the name of freedom, we push God out of the picture. And we've left ourselves center stage where we love to be.

It's an act of personal rebellion. Against our making it didn't work. And so instead of freedom, we thought we were getting freedom. What we brought into the world is carnage and slavery.

[11:51] Submission to God has been replaced by selfishness. And so protection has been replaced by pain. So when we turn our backs on God, it's like a goldfish.

The goldfish lives in the bowl, doesn't he? In the water. But he wants to enjoy the wide open spaces of the living room. He says to himself, I'm so constrained and constricted in this bowl.

If only I can get out onto the carpet. That's where the fun really is. The freedom sounds great, doesn't it? But it ends in death for the goldfish. The origin of human suffering is human rebellion against God.

And as we look at the world, we see that very obviously to be true. So a huge proportion of our world's suffering is caused directly by human sinfulness.

So God tells us to be generous, but we choose to be greedy. Even though there's enough food in the world for everyone, 800 million people today will be hungry.

[12:57] God tells us to be loving, but we choose to be violent. And so wars happen. People get mugged and attacked. And we feel unsafe sometimes, so we walk the streets at night.

The origin of human suffering is human rebellion against God. Some fight with guns and bullets. Often we fight with words. But the crime is the same.

The majority of human suffering we cause. Well you've got to ask, haven't you? And you are asking, what about the rest of it?

What about things like tsunamis? What about earthquakes? What about cancer? What about child deaths? Where does that come from? And God explains that as well.

So let's say you're walking past the shop and there's a smashed window. Somebody's picked up a brick. And they put it through the window. And the glass has splintered out from that, isn't it?

[14:04] Those huge shop windows and the evening border. The glass has completely splintered out from that little stone that went through the window. It splintered in every direction. And God says our rebellion, our sin is equally far reaching.

And his judgement is far reaching for the whole of humanity in the world. So the Bible teaches that the whole world is warped. And fractured.

Or frustrated. The whole world has been knocked off centre in some way by that original act of human rebellion against God.

So that in a general way, do you hear me? In a general way, we can say that sin has brought disease and disaster, even death, into the world.

Which means, doesn't it, if God was here tonight and he was asking us the question rather than the other way round. I think the first would be, when we talk about suffering, do you admit that you are part of the problem?

[15:14] Do you admit that? That you are part of the problem of the things that you say. And the things that you do. The good things that you fail to do. Are you willing to take that first, maybe really small step tonight of admitting, I'm part of the problem?

I'm part of the problem. It must be a great irony for God that so many people ask God, why don't you stop the suffering while we deliberately cause some?

There are things that you and I could do to eliminate some of the suffering of the world. And the fact that we don't means that I think we need a little bit of humility before we start firing accusations against God.

So first of all, God explains the origins of suffering. Secondly, God explains the reason for suffering. God explains the reason for suffering.

It's important to say that because suffering, tonight, you have to realise is not something beyond God's control. It's not like Star Trek or Star Wars. I can never tell the difference really.

[16:23] It's not like there's a big force in the world between good and bad. There's a big force of good in the world fighting an evil force in the world. Some days when they're fighting against each other, some days evil just wins.

And so bad stuff happens. It's not like God falls asleep on the job and bad things happen when he's not looking. We have to say, the Bible teaches God allows suffering in his world.

God is in complete control over everything in it. Over you and over me. And the Bible tells us why. There are three things. First of all, the law of cause and effect.

The law of cause and effect. The law of cause and effect. You, as a human being, are morally responsible. You are morally responsible.

Our actions have consequences. So if I get drunk tomorrow morning and I drive through a primary school playground at playtime, then I'm going to cause some suffering.

[17:30] And that is grim. But the alternative is even more desperate. Think about it.

Think about it. We'd soon be living in a world that would be utterly devoid of any significance at all. So if you were going to slap me, because you don't know what I've been saying, or you're offended by something, God would have to reach down from heaven and block your hands so you didn't cause me pain.

Or if you were about to say something that was hurtful, you would have to reach down and zip up your lips again, so that you didn't hurt me. And God couldn't let you fall in love, because every relationship carries with it the risk of getting hurt.

You could never take a risk in life, or in business, or in sport even, because failure hurts, doesn't it? And so pretty soon you would be a robot living in a cosmetically sealed environment with no personal freedom at all, no potential for human interaction of any kind.

So can you see that suffering is a vital part of cause and effect, which protects and it preserves human dignity? There's more to it than that.

[18:51] God never enjoys our pain. God never enjoys our pain, but he does actively allow us to suffer. Many people think, don't they, that God is nothing but a kind of nice, favourite, gentle uncle.

But God is not just loving, he is perfectly just. And when we reject God, when we hurt each other, God's anger burns against us.

I want to say that it's not so much a kind of fly off the handle rage. That's like so much of our human anger.

It is his control and just punishment. That's the second thing. It's his control and just punishment of the evil within us. That's what the Bible calls judgment. The Bible teaches that most of God's judgment will come at the end of time.

But it does come in part in this life. As God lets you and I experience the consequences of rebellion against him.

[20:05] Now I want to stress to you that that doesn't work out in some disproportionate way. So if I crack a harsh joke, I end up stubbing my toe. That's not how it works, alright? That if you see someone who is painfully suffering in the world, that you're meant to wag your finger at them and say, well you must have been a really naughty boy.

You can't, that's not how it works. There are some religions out there that work like that. Karma. You have that kind of idea that you do something in a past life which results in pain in this life.

But that's nothing to do with Christianity. Collectively, God does give the human race over to a world that is spoilt and fallen and suffering.

Because collectively, we have rejected him. And in that sense, he brings suffering on us. And you may never have thought of this, but our rejection of God is so serious that we deserve to suffer for it.

It's actually only God's extraordinary patience which prevents us from suffering more than we do.

[21 : 21] So why does God let us suffer? It's partly cause and effect. It's partly to punish us, but it's partly to wake us up. C.S. Lewis uses this great line. He says, God whispers to us in our pleasure.

He speaks to us in our difficulty. And he shouts to us in our pain. Suffering is God's megaphone to rouse the deaf world. God whispers to us in our pleasure.

He speaks to us in our difficulties. And he shouts to us in our pain. And suffering is God's megaphone to rouse the deaf world. Luke's Gospel. We read it from Luke 13. It speaks of an incident where a tower has collapsed and killed a load of people.

And the first thing Jesus says is that those victims were no more guilty than anyone else. The victims of tragedy, they were no more guilty than anyone else.

But if you look at the next two verses, he says twice, he wants you to learn from the deaths of those who've gone. And he says, unless you repent, you too also will perish. He's not saying, unless you repent, a tower is going to fall on you.

[22 : 30] He's not saying that. But he is saying to you and I, we will meet God as our judge. And that tower should be a reminder with them and us that God is angry with us.

And that there is a fate that is worse than death, which is coming soon. And what we need more than anything else is to be reconciled and to be brought back into friendship with God before it's too late.

So God lets us suffer in one sense to wake us up. And so we can give examples of that, couldn't we? Of people, lots of people who have suffered terribly, who wouldn't change their pain for all the world.

Johnny Erickson has probably written the best little book, kind of autobiography on suffering. She became a paraplegic in a diving accident at 17. But she says it was that that woke her up to her need for Jesus.

She says incredibly gladly she would go through it all again. So grateful to God. For all she has in Jesus. One of the reasons God lets us suffer is to wake us up.

[23 : 48] To what is important, not only in this life, of course it does that. But to what is important in the next. And the next. So again if Jesus was here tonight, he would look each of us in the eye, knowing everything that you've suffered.

More so than I do. And knowing everything you will suffer. And eventually full of love he would ask you, Have you learned the lesson of your suffering?

Has it humbled you? And has it brought you to your senses? God explains the origin of suffering. God gives the reason for suffering. Thirdly, God promises an end to suffering. People often ask, why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't God put an end to it?

And the Bible says he will. The first two chapters of the Bible are about a perfect world. And the last two chapters are about a perfect world. Let's just go there.

[24 : 50] Revelation 21. It's on page 1041. Revelation 21. It's on page 1041. So the first two chapters are a perfect world.

The last two chapters are a perfect world. And this is what it says. Revelation 21 in verse 3. There's a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, stop, shut up and listen.

Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He's going to live with man again. And he will dwell with them. And they will be his people.

And God himself will be with them as their God. He says it three times just in case you didn't get it. The dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them. God himself will be with them.

And what will he do with those four? He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. Most days on the news, the world does not look good.

[26 : 00] But God says one day it will look very good. And suffering and tears and crying and death will be no more. And we will be restored to life with God.

So when someone cannot stop crying because they've been broken into by the pain that they've suffered. It helps you to know that evil will not have the last word.

It will not have the last word. So one of the loudest clamors in our society is for justice. And God says it will be done.

There will be a perfect world again and every wrong will be righted. And so you ask, well why won't he do it now? Why won't he stop the suffering?

Well let's think about that. If Jesus were to weed out every evil from the world, well who would he start with? I think he'd probably start with terrorists.

[27 : 07] And murderers. And rapists. And pedophiles. And would likely be better if we got rid of that group of people. Well yes it would. And then he would get rid of people who attack others.

Who hold up banks. Pickpockets. Con artists. And then I guess he would get rid of people who's adultery. Destroys families.

He could go on. Anyone who's stolen anything. Anyone who's ever told a lie. And the numbers would be shrinking pretty rapidly wouldn't they?

For people. But it still wouldn't be a perfect place to live. So who would be the next person to go? The greedy. The selfish.

You. Me. I would have gone by then. But I'm not so sure that you would be long after me would you?

[28 : 12] You see it is true isn't it? That we get caught in the crossfire of suffering. But we actually fire a lot of bullets ourselves. We are the ones who might have the world.

So when we ask. Ask God. Get rid of all the evil in the world. We're actually asking for him to get rid of us. So can you see tonight.

That it is very very loving of God. To delay the day. When he's going to do that. Because it gives. You an opportunity to be in heaven with him.

And that is because. Well this final brief thing. That is why the cross. Of the Lord Jesus Christ is so important.

Because on the cross. The son of God. Suffered. The question is. How can an imperfect rebel like me.

[29 : 15] Get a place in God's perfect world. And the answer was nailed to a tree. Outside Jerusalem. A couple of thousand years ago. So little as I deserve it.

God loves me. God in the person of his son. Took on flesh. And gave up his. His immunity to pain. And he came to earth as Jesus. People question his birth. Lots of people thought he was mad. He was abandoned by his friends. He was wrongly convicted.

He was sentenced to death. His back was lacerated. And thorns pierced his skull. Nails were driven through his wrists. And he died a slow and agonizing death.

And that is important tonight. That is important because even at the moment. Of my deepest pain. There is a point of contact. Between me and God.

[30 : 19] My God. Because the God man. Jesus Christ. On the cross knows my pain. The God man.

He has been there. He has been a victim. At the right hand of God in heaven tonight. The right. Is not.

Some out of touch God. Who sits in a house beyond the stars. Detached from all pain. Jesus the son of God. Bled and died. He has been there.

He has suffered in his humanity. But the Christian can say more than that. Not only has he bled and died. He bled and died for me.

Son of God loved me. And gave himself for me. Me a rebel against him. The only thing that I deserve from God.

[31 : 21] Is a death. I deserve to be separated from God. Forever on the cross. To be forsaken by God.

But Jesus Christ cried out. My God. My God. Why have you forsaken me? And he bled. And the Bible's explanation of that death. Is the death that he died.

He was dying. That you and I deserved. He died for me. And so as my substitute. He swapped places with me.

And so I can look at the cross tonight. And I can see that the cross means. That the price has been paid. And it means I don't need to face eternal death. I can have eternal life.

And I can know the God who made me starting now. And lasting forever. And lasting forever. Now let me say this. Having the hope of heaven.

[32 : 23] Does not stop me from crying. When people I love die. Having the hope of heaven. Does not stop me crying.

When people I love die. But it does keep me going. It does keep me going. The great kindness of God. To a world that has turned its back on him.

Is that God tonight. Extends the offer of the hope of heaven. To anyone. And to everyone. To come to Jesus. And so God's final question for you tonight.
Is will you do not? Will you do not? Will you come back to Jesus? Will you come back to Jesus?
Let's pray. Thank you.