

⇒ MY ⇒ PROBLEM *with God*

Message 3 | Why would a good God allow Suffering?

Intro

Welcome to Mercy Church! I know many of you are just being introduced to Mercy for the first time today. I want to say thank you for joining us. My name is Spence and I'm one of the pastors of Mercy.

We began as a church in September of 2015 so we are taking these two weekends to worship here in uptown, the center of the city we are here to serve, to celebrate all that God has done in bringing us to our 2nd birthday! This place is pretty nice!

We are in the middle of a sermon series called "my problem with God" where we are looking at some of the biggest objections people have to believing in God and Christianity. We are hoping to meet one of the big spiritual needs of our community by showing people that you don't have to check your brain at the door to believe in Christianity because there is a rational basis for belief in Jesus. We believe doubt & faith can co-exist and in fact what I've found is that it's been in moments of doubt

about God that have led to the greatest growth personally in my relationship with God.

It's because doubt creates that moment where cheesy spiritual platitudes you heard growing up just don't work anymore. Like "Too Blessed to be Stressed" or "Sister you gotta Let Go and Let God!"

That crisis, That's a critical moment. See I've heard doubt described as a foot poised. Poised to draw you deeper into a relationship to God or further away from it. Our hope is this series will offer some responses to common doubts about God that will help take barriers to belief down and help you see the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today our "problem" with God is personal. It's the problem of suffering. I imagine just about everyone in this room, at one point or another, Christian or not, has experienced something that has made them ask "WHY GOD!?" Maybe in anger, maybe in confusion. Last night while I was praying with my boys my son said "Dad, why doesn't God just stop the hurricane?" "I said son...you'll have to come to church tomorrow and find out." We all suffer and we all know people who suffer & we all deal with this question.

I believe God offers you a response to our suffering today that is so full of hope its going to set free some of you deep in your soul. It's a response that will speak to your mind as well as your heart. To do that, I want to take you to a scene in the bible where Jesus deals with suffering. If you are like "I don't trust the bible!" Well, last week's

message was all about why you can trust it and you can find it on our website. I want to encourage you to get in one of our community groups where you can dialogue with others who are listening to these sermons because I know I'm not hitting everything.

So, if you have a copy of the bible get it out and turn it on. Or open it up to John 11. Here's what is going to happen. I'm going to walk us through the story then show you how God relates to suffering and what he is doing in and through our suffering. By the way the story in John 11 is like 40+ verses so I'm hitting the highlights ok?

[1] Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. [2] It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. [3] So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

These are people Jesus knows well and they know that he has the power to help. That's important here. Mary and Martha believe Jesus **loves** Lazarus AND is **powerful** enough to help Lazarus. Jesus is Loving and Powerful. This is why we've come to this story. They hold the same assumption many of us do. If there is a God, it seems rational that this God would be all loving and all powerful.

But then watch what happens:

[5] Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. [6] So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Jesus gets the news and HE STAYS WHERE HE WAS! You catch that because we are going to come back to it again later. It's bizarre. He loved Mary & Martha and he loved Lazarus. And that love didn't compel him to GO, it compelled him to STAY AWAY two more days. God's love for them...in this moment...is existing alongside him withholding his aid. That will mess with you for a minute cause the situation appears to get worse.

During those two days, Lazarus dies. And Mary & Martha are hurt. When Jesus finally arrives Mary & Martha both weep.

"[21] Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Mary says the exact same thing in verse 32 and it says she's weeping as she says it. If you would have been here. Where were you God!?!

Can you hear your own frustration with God in her question. WHERE WERE YOU WHEN WE NEEDED YOU GOD? That's where Mary especially is. And you've been there. Maybe you are there now. Maybe you are carrying pain from a long time ago. 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys are the victims of sexual abuse as a child. Which means there are dozens of people with that pain sitting in here right now. Maybe your pain is more recent. I know we have some Irma evacuees worshipping with us today and you are wondering why God is letting a storm destroy so much. Where were you God? Where were you when I lost my job? When my spouse cheated? When my child got sick? When my dad left? IF YOU WOULD HAVE SHOWN UP...BUT YOU DIDN'T! I want you to watch what comes next:

[33] When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

Jesus didn't give Mary a spiritual platitude. He didn't give her any words. He was deeply moved and greatly troubled. This troubled implies angry. He got angry because like Mary, and maybe like you, Jesus also looks at his creation and says THIS IS NOT HOW ITS SUPPOSED TO BE. And then verse 35 is just two beautiful words: [35] Jesus wept.

Jesus knew what he was about to do, how he was about to flip this whole scene. Yet he weeps. It is real weeping & mourning death. The people standing around even saw how much he loved them [36] So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" He wasn't faking it. He had no motivation to fake it. He's angry that his friend has died. Then after crying and mourning with these two sisters he goes down to the tomb where Lazarus has been for 4 days.

[38] Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. [39] Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."

This is a pretty natural response from Martha. She's saying please don't defile and disrespect my dead brother. Let him rest in peace. Don't let the odor of his

dead body come out of the tomb. But Jesus has something else planned.

[40] Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

He is recalling a message we see him send to them in verse 4. He hears of Lazarus' sickness and he says:

[4] But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Yet the illness did lead to death right? So what's he talking about? Well now he's getting to that. Here now at Lazarus' tomb he's reminding her of his words and more importantly of the big picture. The reason he's about to do what he's about to do is so that Glory may be given to God. This is always Jesus' expressed motivation. That glory, which is the weight or importance we give something...that glory goes to God in all he does. And when God does get glory, it's like a light shining on him so that people will see how good and glorious he is and they will turn to him. So, he says you are about to see God's glory. Watch what happens:

[41] So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. [42] I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, **that they may believe that you sent me.**"

Jesus has a goal: when they see what he does they will know that it is God who is doing it. They will connect Jesus as sent by God carrying the power of God. So

everything else he says about their sin and need for salvation...they will believe him. His display of power isn't random, When he does these miraculous things he's doing it so people will believe he is the savior of the world.

John 20.31 says " [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

[43] When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." [44] The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

There it is. Jesus yells at a guy that's been dead for 4 days...and "the man who had died came out." the linen strips are his burial garments so Jesus says take those off of him because those are for dead people. And with 3 words Jesus has defeated the greatest enemy the human race has ever known. Lazarus, come out. This is what Jesus does. He defeats death with his words. There is always life in his words. That's what he wanted everyone to see and it's what he wants you to see today too. The point of this & any miracle is to point you to belief in the resurrecting power of the one who wants you resurrect you from death.

Let me show you 4 things God wants you to know about suffering from this story.

1. Suffering is evidence *for* God, not against God.

Remember Mary & Martha's cry? LORD IF ONLY YOU HAD BEEN HERE! If you had been here this wouldn't have happened! If you would have shown up...but you didn't. Mary wasn't the last person to ever feel this way. Many here today would say this is their biggest argument against the existence of God. The actual argument goes like this:

1. The Christian God is all powerful and all loving
2. If God were all powerful, he *could* stop suffering. If God were all-loving, he *would* stop suffering.
3. Suffering still exists
4. Therefore, the Christian God must not exist.

Some of you are like...are we in philosophy course? Are you giving multiple step truth propositions on Sunday morning!? Yes. I told you today is a call to your head and your heart. But fear not this is just a little 3 minute stroll in philosophy park.

The progression you see on the screen is a pretty logical argument and one that isn't just some academic exercise. It's Something all of us have experienced. I know I have. In 2012 my wife and I lost a child in miscarriage. Our daughter would be turning 7 next week. And I remember weeping in my car saying WHY GOD!? And there was a feeling...in our suffering...that maybe God had abandoned us. And maybe you've felt that. And you think since he's abandoned you, you feel justified in abandoning him. I get that.

I want to suggest to you that suffering is the experience that should lead you, instead, to turn towards belief in God not away from it. This is the story of one of my

favorite authors C.S. Lewis. (Guy that wrote chronicles of Narnia) He used to get so mad at what seemed like pointless evil and suffering. Athiest for many years. Until it dawned on him...

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of “just” and “unjust”? . . . What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? . .

Lewis recognized that our idea of God is based on a sense of fair play and justice. People, we believe, *ought* not to suffer, not be excluded, not die of hunger or oppression. But then he realized the theory of natural selection (strong live weak die off) wholeheartedly **DEPENDS** on death, destruction, and violence of the strong over the weak. He went on to say:

But if I did that (raged at the unjustness of suffering), then my argument against God collapsed too – for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies . . . Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple.¹

In other words: if you have ever felt sure that the world around you is unjust and filled with evil, you are assuming the reality of some extra-natural (or supernatural) standard by which you are making that judgment.² That you think it is wrong means you think there is a **RIGHT**. Where does that **RIGHT** come from?

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 31.

² Keller, *Reason for God*, 26.

Lewis called pain God's megaphone to a deaf & dying world. Whenever you say “THIS ISN'T HOW IT SHOULD BE!” That is the built in alarm bell calling you closer to God instead of further away from him. If you look at the world and call something unjust, you are suggesting something moral standard higher than survival of the fittest must exist.

That's true personally and its true socially. At the core of the civil rights movement was a call from Dr. King saying there were unjust laws built on racist ideology. A majority of americans agreed with those laws at the time. What made them unjust according to Dr. King was that they conflicted with a higher law. Racism was **WRONG** because there was a **UNIVERSAL RIGHT** that racism was violating. God's law that every human is created in his image and worthy of respect.

And I know that we haven't resolved everything yet about how God and suffering co-exist. But what I'm trying to show you for this moment is that it is even more difficult to explain evil and suffering if God does **NOT** exist. Remember what we said week 1 from our old friend the Russian novelist Dostoyevsky? “If God does not exist, everything is permitted.” You aren't going to fix your problem with Suffering by abandoning faith in God. You in fact logically need God in your suffering more than anywhere else. OK, Philosophy class over.

Let me show you a couple of other things I believe God wants us to see about suffering from this story with Jesus & Lazarus. Because while God doesn't always give us the pinpoint reasoning behind our suffering, the core

message of Christianity, the gospel, does offer incredible resources for facing suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair.

2. Your suffering does not mean Jesus doesn't love you³

There is a theme running vibrantly across this story and it's a message right to you. Jesus loves Mary & Martha. That's why he's so angry when they are grieving. When your friends are weeping, it moves you to weep because their pain is your pain. Jesus loved Lazarus. In fact he was so close to him the message from M&M just said "the one whom you love is ill."

If I get that message...and Courtney & the kids are standing there with me. I'm gonna be like...oooo. Sorry just got a New phone...can you tell me who this is?

He loved them and because of that love...he very intentionally DID NOT COME TO THEM IN TIME. The fact that Jesus didn't show up when & how they called for him had nothing to do with any lack of love for them. Do you see that? This is a very important step in understanding God's place in your suffering. Sometimes we will think "Did I do something wrong?" "Is that why God didn't answer my prayer here?"

I had a close friend, we grew up together, who called me sophomore year of college and said her boyfriend had

slept outside in the car two nights ago and left it running with the windows up and something happened and the fumes from the exhaust somehow leaked in and he died in his sleep. And she's crushed and she's saying to me "Do you think God is punishing me?" "Did I do something!?" And I'm screaming NO!!! He's not! He's kneeling over you as you crumble and he's got his arm wrapped around you and he's weeping! Because he loves you!

Christians worship a God who knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, and imprisonment. On the cross he went beyond even the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours. In his death, God suffers in love, identifying with those who feel abandoned and godforsaken.⁴

In the middle of a crisis the last thing you need to do is doubt God's love for you. But listen...if you think God's love for you is based on anything about you...you'll always wonder. You'll wonder if you are banking enough good points so that God will spare you from crisis since you are such a "good guy" after all. You'll always be wondering if you are good enough. The true confidence you need in crisis, and in suffering, comes from the gospel message.

See at the core of Christianity is a message that says God's love for you isn't dependent on you. It's like a father's love for his child. It's unconditional. And his

³ I am indebted to J.D. Greear for much of the ideas of 2,3, & 4. There was so much to cover in this message and of everything I read, I thought these helped progress the gospel narrative the best from John 11. His sermon "How could a good God allow suffering" preached during the *Why I'm Not a Christian* series at the Summit Church was very formative for me as a young pastor.

⁴ Tim Keller, Reason for God, 30.

acceptance of you...its based not on your performance but on Christ's performance on the cross. This is why Christians can walk through suffering with such peace, courage, and joy. Because they know God isn't some cold-hearted deity but a loving, caring father. This is the way my old pastor used to say it: You'll either judge Jesus' love through the filter of your circumstances, or you'll judge your circumstances through the filter of Jesus' love.

And I think that is spot on. So let me look at you and say it plainly. YES GOD EXISTS. Your objection to suffering tells you he's real. But more than that... GOD Loves You. And while you may not know why you are suffering, you know what the answer isn't. It can't be that he is indifferent or uncaring. He took our misery and suffering so seriously he took it on himself on the cross. *If I remember His love for me in His darkest hour, I won't doubt His love for me in my darkest hour.*

In other words, his darkest hour will carry you through your darkest hour.

3. For those in Christ, suffering does not end in death

Verse 4 - "this illness will not end in death." He knew what he was going to do. But before he did it he had a really important exchange with Martha that John includes for us.

[23] Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." [24] Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." [25] Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, [26] and everyone who

lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus is making a huge huge huge huge way bigger than Lazarus point here. Jesus sees that Martha is settling for some platitude to make her feel better and she might be missing the TONAGE of hope Jesus is giving to her. He says NO NO listen. I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. Take your eyes off of what will happen on the last day and fix them on the one in front of you. Jesus is taking an abstract belief and making it extremely personal. Which I hope happens for some of you today. See Jesus is announcing the defeat of death, our greatest enemy, in verse 25.

[25] Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. **Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,** [26] and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Here is the heart of the Christian message. And one that would have resonated with Martha. See the gospel, which is our word for the core belief of the Christian faith, is that we actually will be judged by God one day for what we've done with our lives. We will give an account. And God tells us that each of us when we get there, will fall short of the glory of God. In other words we cannot possibly do enough good to outweigh the bad. Romans 6.23 says the wages of sin is death. Our sin is rebellion against God and you must pay for it but you cannot. Yet when Jesus says I am the resurrection & the life...he is saying that for those who believe in him, on the day you stand before God, he will stand in your place. And he will take the pain of your sin, he will take your judgment and

he will suffer the finality of death. See God is a just God which means you must pay for your sin. And get this: He is all loving and all powerful. He IS powerful enough that he *could* die FOR your sins. And he is loving enough that he *did* die for your sins.

Which means, for those in Christ...death is not the end. Yes, as Jesus says “we die” but then in a moment we live. Death is but a moment. And we will spend eternity forever with one another and the Lord. So whatever your suffering is right now...You must not lose hope. Jesus died & rose. Jesus took the full impact of death so that I only have to feel it’s shadow.

You get the hope that gives you? The hope of heaven is perhaps the most powerful tool in the Christian belt. Because of the resurrection...one day every horrible thing that every happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater! To quote Samwise gamji from Lord of the Rings... “is everything sad going to come untrue?” the Christian answer is YES! Suffering does still exist...for now. But not forever.

The day one of my best friends lost his son to an illness one day after being born...we recited Romans 8.18 [18] For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Can I pause here and flip a bad assumption in our question today? Our question is: How could a good God allow suffering? And I want to say the bible takes the

complete opposite perspective. See the bible says the world is under the curse of death brought into it by our own sin and because the world is broken things aren’t the way they should be. And that every time we sin we confirm God’s righteous judgment on us. We shouldn’t stand offended that God allows suffering, we should stand amazed that he rescued us from judgment!

“See many skeptics believe too much in human virtue and doubt God’s goodness. Scripture says we should believe in God’s goodness and doubt human virtue.”⁵ He’s good! You are not worthy of his love but he you so much he died for you! The ONE QUESTION to you: is Jesus’ question to Martha: “Do you believe this?” Do you believe you are a sinner? Do you believe you need God’s forgiveness? Do you believe Jesus died for your sins? And that he rose again defeating death and offering you eternal life? To say you believe it is to call Jesus your Savior and also your God. He must be both. I implore you with everything I have: don’t wait. Believe it today.

4. For those in Christ, suffering is a part of the beautiful story God is telling in and through you

God exists, he loves you, he died for you and offers you forgiveness of your sin and eternity with him. What massive hope. I want to finish with how that hope works itself out in present suffering:

I’ve heard God’s work in our lives described like a Medieval Tapestry. Look at one side and its utter chaos, look at the other and these threads are woven into this beautiful pattern. God is the great weaver and we are often stuck only seeing one side of the tapestry. And it is

⁵ Greear – How could a good God allow suffering

the belief that he is both sovereign and good, that he weeps with us, that allows us to trust him when we can't see what he's doing.

Because if he really is God, we MUST make room for him to know more than we know. That he is going to use your suffering for his glory. Don't waste your suffering. Lean in to your dependence on God and ask him how he can use it for his glory. Lean in and let his darkest hour carry you through yours.

We have two members in our church fighting cancer right now. One is a young boy and the other is an empty nester. And we've called for Jesus to come and heal and he hasn't yet. He's waiting. And as they wait, they are letting his darkest hour carry them through their darkest hour. Will you?

The story doesn't stop with us either. See God's plan is to use your story to introduce others to his glory. To his love for them. See when a Christian worships Jesus in good times, nobody is surprised. In fact some are even skeptical. But when they worship him when their life is destroyed...when they thank him for his blessings when their home is blown away and all earthly possessions are under 40+ inches of water? Or lets get real personal. I've seen spouses come to faith in Christ because of how their spouse forgave them after they confessed an affair. And that forgiveness broke them. They knew they didn't deserve it. But the gospel says I've been forgiven of so much more.

For those of you that have been through suffering or maybe are in it right now. I want to offer you the words of

the apostle Paul in Romans 8. Words I have prayed, cried, & cheered. The words of a man beaten, mocked,; Romans 8:31-39

[31] What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. [35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? [36] As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

[37] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [38] For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ESV)

3 days ago I got a text that a good friend of mine, fishing buddy, was on vacation with his family. Late 30s 2 small kids...good health...he passed out...heart stopped and over the ensuing few hours his heart stopped 6 times. Had to be revived multiple times. One time his heart stopped for 20 seconds. Open heart surgery. He lived. Pacemaker put in & I Talked to him the next day. Just bizzare. If not for quick thinking of EMTs, he's gone. And we tend to think...He doesn't deserve that. And Todd would tell you...actually he deserves worse. We all do.