

Sermon Title: Why is there So Much Suffering and Evil in the World?

Sermon by Pastor Tom Harrington
Week of May 16, 2010

Sermon Based Small Group Discussion Guide

Big Idea: Christians can come to terms with the painful experience of suffering by acknowledging that sin plays a role in causing it and that God is present in the midst of it.

Icebreaker

Sermon Text: *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* John 16:33 (New International Version)

1. Was it challenging or easy for you to respond to the Icebreaker Question? Another way to ask this is, "Do you rarely think about the problem of suffering, or is it something you think about quite a bit?" Rate yourself on a 10 scale with 1 being "It never crosses my mind" and 10 being "I think about this all the time." What number did you choose, and why? Share with the group if you feel comfortable doing so.
2. Can you think of a person whose experience of suffering may have led them to question God's goodness and compassion? What might that person need?

Ask a group member to read this aloud: *"All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you."* - John 16:1-4

Jesus warns his disciples that they will face trouble in the world because of their allegiance to him. He repeats the warning in our text (John 16:33). Persecution is a brutal reality for Christians today in places such as China, North Korea, Indonesia and Pakistan. Have you personally experienced "trouble" as a result of your faith in Christ?

Jesus says in John 16:32, *"But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me."* Mark 14:50 says simply, *Then everyone deserted him (Jesus) and fled.*

In our text (John 16:33) Jesus offers his peace to the disciples *despite* the fact that he knew they would abandon him when the shadow of the Cross loomed overhead.

If Jesus had not foretold the weakness of the disciples, afterwards when they realized how they had failed him, they might well have been driven to utter despair. It is as if he said: 'I know what's going to happen; you must not think that your disloyalty came as a shock to me; I knew it was coming; and it does not make any difference to my love. When you think of it afterwards, don't despair.' " - William Barclay, *Gospel of John* vol. II, p. 203.

Think about a time when your sin and disloyalty to Jesus tempted you to despair. What if anything helped you experience peace?

Read Psalm 34:15-22

- ¹⁵ The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry;
- ¹⁶ the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.
- ¹⁷ The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.
- ¹⁸ The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
- ¹⁹ A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all;
- ²⁰ he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.
- ²¹ Evil will slay the wicked;

the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

²² The LORD redeems his servants;
no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him.

1. List below all the words or phrases that describe God's relationship with those who suffer. Circle the one(s) that seem especially significant to you.
2. *Psalms* is Israel's hymnbook. What hymns, choruses, or songs have brought you courage and comfort in the midst of suffering? Write the titles in the space below and share them with the group.

"It Is Well with My Soul" is a hymn written by Horatio G. Spafford, a lawyer living in Chicago. In November 1873, he went to Cardiff, Wales to join his grieving wife who had survived a shipwreck. Their four daughters drowned when the luxury ship on which they were sailing collided with another ship. Over 200 passengers lost their lives. When Spafford crossed the area where the *Ville du Havre* went down, he wrote the words to "It Is Well with My Soul" and read the words of this poem in his daughters' honor as a declaration of his faith. When you consider the sorrow and deep loss that Spafford and his wife experienced and how they responded, what are your thoughts?

From the 17th - 19th centuries Americans of African descent sang spirituals that became rallying points for slaves to triumph over their suffering. Songs such as "The Lord Is My Shepherd", "Lord's Been Here", and "Hard Trials" among others called on the slaves not to wither in the face of brutality. The slaves were to have the mind of Christ and bear the suffering, knowing that in the end their suffering, along with their hope, would connect them to heaven. These songs addressed the slaves' suffering with a message akin to that of Apostle Paul who encouraged young Timothy to endure hardship "with us" as a good soldier for Jesus Christ. "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. Endure hardship with us like

a good soldier of Christ Jesus." - 2 Timothy 2:1-3

3. What is the significance of the term "with us" in 2 Timothy 2:3? Has membership in a fellowship or supportive community ever given you strength to endure suffering? When and how? Write a note about it in the space below and share with the group.
4. For many years Mother Teresa served destitute and dying people in the slums of Calcutta, India. She also struggled with the mystery of suffering. Yet she wrote, "I try to give to the poor people for love what the rich could get for money. No, I wouldn't touch a leper for a thousand dollars; yet I willingly cure him for the love of God" (*A Gift for God*). Has your suffering given you sympathy and compassion for others? If so, how or in what way(s)?

Taking it Home

1. Pray that God will reveal to you the depth of your own sin and your desperate need for his grace. Confess your sins to God and claim the promise of his cleansing forgiveness (1 John 1:9).
2. This week mail a card or note of encouragement to someone who is struggling with doubt in the midst of suffering. If you think it may be helpful include in your note Psalm 34:18.
3. Buy or burn a CD of songs about God's presence in the midst of suffering for your own use or to give as a gift.
4. Pray with your group for wisdom to "give God the ice cube" and claim the promise of James 1:12, *Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

Prayer Requests and Praises: