

I. Review

a. The Biblical Narrative of Evil

We looked at what the Bible says about the state of the world in creation, God saw that it was very good. Sin entered the world, and through sin; death, evil, and suffering. The end of the Bible brings about restoration and we saw that in Revelation 21:3-4. In the middle, the Bible acknowledges the existence of evil, we reviewed Romans 3:10-18 and Eph 2 verse 3. The Bible is also clear that God is good.

This sets the framework of how we must consider evil. We must see evil through the lens of what the price of sin is in the Bible and the goodness of God in sending His Son pay the price that sin deserves on behalf of all those who would place their faith and trust in Him. After we considered what happened to the world God created, we looked at three broad categories of suffering.

b. Three Broad Categories

i. Social Evils

First, we looked at social evils, and while not listing them out, we looked at the role of government from Romans 13:1-5 with God both standing behind government to check evils in society and holding governments to account when it acts wickedly.

ii. Poverty

Secondly, we looked at considerations from Scripture about poverty. We did not list out types of poverty but went through several passages to frame how we should think about poverty. To continue to build our foundation from Scripture.

iii. Natural Disasters

Finally, we looked at Luke 13:1-5 to see how Jesus treated a report of disasters in His day. We saw that Jesus used the context of a disaster to call His hearers to repentance.

II. War and Holy Wars

This morning, we continue with the broad category of war and look at the topic of Holy Wars in the Bible in the broader context of suffering. What does the Bible have to say about war in general?

a. War

Matthew 24:6-7a - “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom...”

Jesus is not surprised or shocked by war. In a minute, we will consider what the Bible has to say about how Old Covenant Israel was a nation called by God to war and the time in history in which Jesus lived when he said to his hearers they would hear of wars and rumors of wars was marked by a Roman Empire seeking to conquer the world. But while the bible is not shocked nor does it treat war as a good thing, we should not use that as an excuse to become complacent when we hear about war. We also should not appeal to the sword to defend the Christian cause. There are many verses in Scripture that call for the pursuit of peace; Hebrews 12:14; Ps 34:14; and 1 Peter 3:11 to name a few. And so, what should the news of wars cause us to do? It should cause us again to repent. Like last week, Luke 13:1-5 is our example of what Christ said when He received news of something tragic and yet distant from the people He was speaking to. We need to repent while we still have the opportunity to.

But some will ask, “but what about when God directed Israel to go wage war against other nations and completely wipe them out?” What are we supposed to do with suffering when, in

Scripture, it looks like it is directly caused by God through an act of war? For one example of this, let's turn to **I Samuel 15**. Let's read verses 1-3 together. **"And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."** That is severe language. God told Saul, through his prophet Samuel, to wipe out an entire people group. But in verse 9, we see that Saul did not do this. Of his own decision, he spared the king and the best of the calves and the lambs. Note, it doesn't look like he spared any of the people other than the king, but kept the best animals and, "all that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction." The fact that Saul kept the animals but killed all the people tells us a bit about the state of Saul's heart. Then in verse 16, Samuel seemingly interrupts Saul's excuse and is not shocked by the fact that the Amalekites were wiped out but rather that Saul disobeyed God's command. Why was Samuel not surprised by the command of God? Because he had a right view of the God who punishes wickedness. This is the same God that told Abram back in Genesis 15:12-16 that his offspring would go into a land that is not theirs, Egypt, and not come back to the place where Abram was until the 4th generation because the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet complete. God was giving the Amorites 400 years of having the witness of creation (Romans 1) to be a witness against them as they continued in their wickedness of idolatry and child sacrifice.

The people of Israel were a theocracy. And being a theocracy, a nation that was constituted by God with laws given by God, when the nation handed out judicial punishment in alignment with the laws and commands of God it was acting as God's representative here on earth. Israel went to war when God told them to go to war. And when they went to war without God telling them

to, the results were not good. In Numbers 14 after the spies who brought the bad report had died of a plague for not trusting in the provision of God, the people who had complained and then were condemned to walk in the wilderness until they died, decided on their own to go into the land they refused to go into at first and fight the battle they had refused to fight in the first place, on their own. Moses tells them in Numbers 14:42 - "Do not go up, for the Lord is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies." Then in verse 44 and 45 they go up anyway and those that lived in that country came down and defeated them. The God who commanded Israel to go to war in His name, is the same God who sent the flood to wipe the entirety of humanity from the face of the earth for their wickedness except for Noah's family. So, does God operate in the same way today? On the one hand, the answer is no. In the New Covenant, God's people are not made up as a theocracy here on earth but people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. We are not called by God to take up the sword as Israel was called to take up the sword, with a direct command from God to go and wage war against a people group. On the other hand, wars still occur, and God uses means in the world to act sovereignly. God holds all to account, individuals and nations. However, when we hear of wars and rumors of wars is it not our place to pass judgement on the reasons and try to read into God's sovereignty. Instead, we should heed Jesus' words in Luke 13 to repent.

These are difficult things to consider, and we can be thankful that we who have repented have been saved by our merciful God. But even though we have been saved, we are not exempt from suffering. And to close this morning, we will look at three areas briefly of the suffering people of God.

III. The Suffering People of God

Christians experience many sufferings that are common to living in a fallen world. Illness, pain, aging, and death. We experience evil and suffering in certain ways just like anyone else on the earth. But there are a few ways in which Christian suffering is unique to the Christian experience. We will look briefly at discipline, opposition and persecution, and suffering peculiar to leaders.

a. Discipline

Let's turn to **Hebrews 12:5-11**. "And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.' It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Notice in this passage, the writer of Hebrews does not list out the ways God disciplines His children. The writer just says that God disciplines like earthly fathers. The discipline that is being written about in the passage, in the moment, is painful but brings about fruit in the believer's life. We see also here that the discipline described is loving, helps us combat sin, and is for our ultimate good. And so, when we experience things our lives that are painful experiences, should we view them as God's discipline? I think the best we can say is maybe. Discipline can be formative, punitive, or both. An example of this is 2 Cor. 12:7 where Paul describes the thorn in

his flesh as a messenger of Satan sent from God to keep him from becoming conceited. This was clearly something that Paul wanted to get rid of as he asked three times for it be removed and it wasn't. One thing we know for certain, is that we can never escape God's sovereignty. And while we may not know the reason we are experiencing something in the moment, whatever we are going through can be used of by God for His purposes in our lives to conform us to the image of His Son. Every occasion of suffering should be a time when we examine our own hearts and continue to turn to our Father. Does this make the experience in the moment any less painful? No, not necessarily. We can read through the Psalms to see that the Bible does not ignore the anguish of the people of God when they are going through suffering. But when we put the suffering we endure as the people of God, no matter the source, in the perspective of salvation, we can remember Romans 5: 3-4, "...Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..." This is part of the foundation that we have been seeking to build. That when we put suffering in the view of the overall discipline of our Father to yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness and the hope that does not put us to shame, even though it may be painful, we are better able by the grace of God to experience suffering well when it comes to us.

b. Opposition and Persecution

The second category, opposition and persecution, is sometimes difficult to separate from discipline and sometimes may not be different. But the Bible does make clear that there is a suffering that the people of God experience just because they are the people of God. 2 Tim 3:12, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Hebrews 11:36-38; "Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and

goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.” Jesus told His disciples to expect opposition. Matthew 10:16-18; “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.”

Persecution like is described in Hebrews, is not today the experience of those of us in the West. But it is the experience of our brothers and sisters around the world. We have been blessed to live to relative comfort and ease with our Christianity here in the West for a very long time. But that is not the expectation of Scripture. And while we do not have the difficulty of suffering through the persecution today that some of our fellow believers around the world have had, we should be aware unless we are lulled to sleep because of our relative ease. We are called to go out and make disciples and we need to take seriously the words of Jesus that He spoke to His disciples as He was sending them out. We must count the cost of following Jesus and we don't know if or when we will experience persecution like our fellow believers in other parts of the world. But if we are not laying the foundation with a Biblical expectation for opposition, and we are not living lives that are speaking of and displaying Christ to a world that is opposed to our crucified and risen Savior, we need to seriously consider if we will be prepared when persecution comes. But we can take comfort from the words of Paul in Romans 8:38-39, “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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.”

c. Leaders

Finally, there is a suffering that is the Biblical expectation of those called to lead the people of God. This should not be unexpected since we all serve a Savior who was crucified. We can look through Scripture and find examples of those God called to serve His people who suffered. Jeremiah lived a life of suffering; Moses led God's people and was then sent back into the wilderness for another 40 years and never entered the promised land, Paul lists out all his sufferings in 2 Corinthians, tradition tells us that 11 of the 12 apostles were martyred, Foxes book of Martyrs has numerous examples of those who were called to serve that gave the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of the kingdom. And what is true for those that are called to serve through leading the church is true for all of us. The more we are afflicted the more it should be apparent that our strength comes from nothing other than the life of Jesus. And when we have a solid foundation to stand on, because of the strength coming from Him, we grow closer to Jesus while we experience suffering.