

Why do we suffer?

Okay, let me grab your attention for a few moments, and we're going to try and answer our big question of the week, which I think is perhaps the most popular question of our generation, and I think it is certainly the most emotional question of our generation. It's certainly that question that really gets your emotional juices rushing through. It really does grab your attention, and really does kind of pull the heartstrings. And that is the question: why do we suffer?

Now, before I even begin to answer that question, I thought I would remind us of four key things that we have learned so far on this Identity course. What are they? Four things. We've learned so far that God exists. We've learned so far that God cares for this world. We've learned so far that God really does love this world of rebels like you and me. And we've learned so far that God is really powerful.

Now, how have we learned this? Well, very simply, we've learned it by looking to the person of Jesus and by listening to what he said, and by looking at what he did. Think about this. We've looked at the identity of Jesus, and he is claiming not simply to be a man, but claiming to be the eternal Son of God. As we look at him, we understand that God does exist.

We also know that our God loves the world that we inhabit, a world of rebellion. Rebels like you and me. How do we know it? Well, we've not just looked at the identity of Jesus; we've looked at his mission. That great rescue mission to save us from the great judgment at the end of the world.

We also know that our God cares about what is happening in this world. How do we know that? Well, just think about what we learned tonight. Jesus gets outside the tomb of Lazarus... Shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." There is the Son of God with a human face, and he weeps. We know that God is bothered about what He sees in our world.

And we also know that God is powerful. How do we know that? Well, many different places, but even just think about tonight. Think about Lazarus, and Jesus physically raised him from the dead.

Now, those are four key things to remember as we try and encounter that question of suffering. Because as we encounter suffering, we cannot forget where the evidence of the identity and mission of Jesus has led us. We know that God exists. We know that God cares. We know that He loves the world, and we know that He is powerful.

So whatever we say to the question of suffering, you can't say that God doesn't exist, He doesn't care, He doesn't love and He's not powerful, because the identity and mission of Jesus have already persuaded us of these things.

So, bearing that in mind, what about that question: why do we suffer? Well, two things I want to say tonight. The first is that suffering should not surprise us. But secondly, one day that suffering will stop for the followers of Jesus.

The first one is that suffering should not surprise us, and to try and help us understand that, I do need to pick on someone again. Who's tonight? Matt, you are going to be picked on for tonight's illustration, is that all right?

MATT: That's fine.

LEE: Okay, so just imagine we are out and about. We're on the ocean again, so [we're on an,] we're on another ship. Very exciting. And it's great so far. We've had a fun time and we think the Captain is great. The Captain's name is Matt, and we think he's doing a great job so far.

But during the trip, someone else... Dave. Dave from the front. Dave's been looking, listening, and he just thinks the Captain doesn't have our best interests at heart at all. So what Dave does is, he calls a big meeting, we all get in the ballroom and we have a chat about it, and we are concluded

that Matt is not nice and kind and loving, he does not have our interests at heart, and it's about time that we did something about him. So what Dave organises is, he gets a couple of strapping lads together and we get Matt, we tie him up, and we chuck him over the side. And we think, 'Fantastic! We've got rid of this nasty Captain, and let's just get on with our life on the boat.'

And we live for a little bit on the boat, and then someone just says, 'Does anyone know how to steer this thing?' Ah! Well, that's the Captain's job, and where's the Captain when you want him? He's not around. Well, who's to blame for that? Think about that. If we lived on that ship and we chucked the Captain overboard, there are going to be consequences for living like that.

Well, there are going to be consequences if we live as rebels in God's world. And that is the picture the Bible gives to us of the world that we inhabit. Because of the way we do live and treat God and other people, suffering should be expected. Now, the Bible says that we are so interconnected with each other and the world...

Sometimes it is of course true that our rebellion in a certain way leads to specific suffering, and sometimes we can trace the suffering caused by our actions. But so often that's not the case at all, is it? So often it's the suffering that we experience from the rebellion of somebody else. And sometimes not even from our current generation. Sometimes it's a generation before us, or a generation before them.

And sometimes it's just not a straight connection like that. Sometimes we just affect the world we inhabit, and that causes something as well. The Bible has this view of us and the planet as so interconnected, and it says that we should expect suffering because of how we live in God's world and treat God.

Now, that helps us get our expectations right. Because the Bible never promises us that we will have 75 years of pain-free existence on this planet. God never promises that at all. God is very kind and gracious to us, and yet we live in a world that is affected by suffering and rebellion. We've got to get our expectations right. It doesn't mean that we should be glib or we shouldn't cry. The Lord Jesus shows the legitimacy of shedding tears as he stands outside the grave of Lazarus. Yes, we should weep. It is bad, it is wrong, but we've got to get our expectations right. Because the Bible says that this will be a feature of the world until God puts it to a stop.

And that's the second great thing to know. That one day suffering will stop for the followers of Jesus. Now, it's really important to know that suffering will not stop for those who do not submit their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. There is eternal suffering that Jesus speaks about. That is so important to realise when you're trying to weigh up the cost of following Jesus. What is the cost of not following Jesus? Well, Jesus speaks about eternity. But he does promise that for the followers of the Lord Jesus, one day suffering will come to an end.

And what a thing that will be. Can you imagine that? A day when there are no final farewells. A day when there are no funerals. A day when the faces of you and me will never have any tears on them. Because in the world that we inhabit, the suffering will be taken away when Jesus finally comes back. That is the plan of God, that one day, when He sends His Son again into this world, the world will be changed, renewed, and it will be a beautiful, wonderful place to live.

Now, you might think to yourself, 'Well, why doesn't God stop it now? You know, why doesn't God send His Son back now and stop all the pain?' Do you know the answer to that question? I really don't know. Because God has so many different plans and purposes that a tiny brain like mine just cannot work out. There are so many things that God has not revealed in terms of His intricate plans and purposes.

But here's my question for you: are you glad that the world is not going to stop in a minute's time? Would you want God to stop the world in a minute's time? I guess the question is, would we be

ready to face the Lord Jesus in a minute's time? But he has delayed that day. Yes, it will happen, but right now God wants us to be prepared for that day and to live in expectancy of that day.

So how do you get prepared for that wonderful day when suffering will end? Well, you come to Jesus as you are, you put him in charge, and he will rescue you from that final judgment to come. And as believers in Jesus, how do we prepare? Well, we get our expectations right as well. We are not immune from living in this world. We're not immune from suffering. And yet we are encouraged to trust that God is good and powerful, and is working out His plans and purposes.

A very helpful illustration that I find is to think like this: if there was no heavenly control tower, that would be a scary place, wouldn't it? If there was a heavenly control tower, and you saw all the screens, but there was nothing on them, that would be a scary prospect. But that is not the Bible's picture. There is a heavenly control tower, there are the screens, and there is someone in charge. And there are plans on the screens. But, here's the thing, we can't see them. From our perspective we cannot see all the details, and yet we are asked to trust, on the basis of the identity and mission of Jesus, that God is good and God is working out His plans.

And here's the thing about the God who created us: he is so powerful that He can even use evil for His good plans and purposes. Think about the death of Jesus. A wicked action, and yet in that action by wicked men, God has achieved the ultimate good, which is the salvation of rebels like you and me. He is so powerful that He can use evil for His good purposes.

So we're expected to wait, to trust God, to be prepared, to follow Jesus, to keep on living and keep on longing for the day when suffering will end. And that is what the Bible would encourage us to do. The day when there are no more final farewells, no more funerals, but a day when for ever and ever, in a physical new universe, with physical new bodies, we will be in the presence of God and all the followers of Jesus for ever and ever and ever.

Well, there's a few things to think about. Why don't you go on your tables and think and chat about those things?

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

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