



BelPres Church

The God Who Suffers For Me

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Good to see you guys here, those of you in the room, those of you online. Thank you for joining us. Thank you for being here on Time Change Sunday. That's commitment, that's dedication. Like you guys are the real Christians, so your crowns are gonna be brighter in heaven, your mansion a little bit bigger. That's like the worst theology you're ever gonna hear.

How many of you think this is just so stupid that we do this twice a year? Like, yeah, man, lock the clock. Let's get rid of it.

You can search through all of human history, all of human philosophy, and every religion there is in the world, and you will not find one God who loves you enough to suffer and die for you, except one. And his name is Jesus. And while other religions have things of beauty and wisdom that we can learn from, from those other religions, and obviously we treat people of different faiths with faiths with love and dignity and respect, but one of the things that makes Jesus unique is he is the one true God, the one being in the universe who did not have to suffer, but willingly chose to suffer and die for you and for me, to pay the price for our sins that we know deep down needs to be paid, or there's no justice in the world. And that is just one of many ways that Jesus is good news in our lives.

But if you've been around church a lot, you've heard that a lot of times, right? Like you've heard, yeah, yeah, Jesus suffered and died for you and then rose from the dead. You've heard that so many times. I've heard that sometimes. I think we get immune to it. Sort of like, yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. I've heard that.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you know. And I've also heard I should floss my teeth. And that kind of almost goes in the same bucket.

But man, back when I was an atheist and this truth finally sunk into me, the first time it did, I started to cry. Because like this is amazing. This is astounding. It should never grow old.

And every philosophy or religion has to deal with the question of why is there suffering? Why do bad things happen? You know, atheism's answer is basically, well, there is no God, so there's no reason. Stuff happens, bummer if it happens to you. Not super satisfying. It's sort of like going to a therapist and pouring out your heart about all your problems to them. And then the therapist says, well, there is no God, life is meaningless, and then you die. That'll be \$200, right?

Then every other religion, in one way or another, says, well, if you're suffering, it means you must have done something in this life or some other life, previous life, to deserve it.

But interestingly, when Jesus is asked about the problem of suffering, he does not answer the question. I mean, there are intellectual reasons for explanations, theological explanations of suffering, right? God gave us free will because otherwise we would be robots, and robots can't love, and in our free will, we hurt other people, we cause suffering. Also, God is the source of all life, and when we rebelled, we separated ourselves from the source of life, so now our bodies get sick, and they age, and they die.

There are sort of philosophical answers and reasons in Christianity, but Jesus never answers the question, because he knows that if you're suffering, even if you know the theological why, it doesn't help, it still hurts, it's still painful. So he doesn't answer the question. Instead, he gives us three promises.

In suffering, I will be with you in it. You will not be alone.

Second, I will bring good out of it, just like he used his death on the cross to pay the price for our sins. A bad thing, he brought good out of it.

And then third, I will put an end to suffering one day when I return and remake this earth to be the perfect place I always intended it to be.

It is not perfectly satisfying from a philosophical perspective, but experientially, it speaks to our deepest pain.

Now, that doesn't mean that we check our brains at the door, the life of the mind matters, but ultimately, we cannot logic our way through this question of suffering and pain. Faith plays a role, and the only thing that really helps is a relationship with Jesus through faith where we experience his supernatural presence. That's the only thing that really gives us real hope, real courage, real joy, even in the middle of suffering, in ways that logic never can. As the philosopher Blaise Pascal said, the heart has its reasons which reason cannot know.

So if we want the peace that passes understanding that the Bible talks about, we have to give up trying to understand it all the time. And instead, just live by faith.

So if you have a Bible, turn to Hebrews chapter 11, which is in the New Testament, kind of at the back of the book. Or you can use the table of contents to find it, or you can follow along on the screens.

And also, we now have Bibles in this room, in the back and up here, kind of by the front, and if you forget your Bible one Sunday, just grab it and you can use it. And you know what? If you take it home, yeah, that's fine. Especially if you don't have a Bible at home, go ahead, take it. We don't consider that stealing from a church because you don't want to steal from a church, right? That'd be bad. But we would love for these to go missing if you don't have a Bible. And if you don't forget it, you can get it when you come in.

And this written, Hebrews 11, is written to Christians who were being persecuted and suffering for their faith. And if life doesn't bring you suffering, which it almost certainly will, but if it doesn't, following Jesus will bring some suffering. Because if we're following him, we're going to be healers of injustice. We're going to tell other people about him. We won't cooperate with things that are unethical or immoral, you know, with our friends or at work or at school. Folks don't like that, so there's probably going to be some backlash and suffering. And if right now you're not suffering, great. Listen to this sermon to know how to help someone else who is suffering.

But more importantly, I think for all of us, suffering or not, use this sermon as a chance to reflect on and be more amazed by the fact that the God of the universe who did not have to suffer, willingly chose to suffer for you.

In the words of an old hymn, how marvelous, how wonderful, and my song shall ever be, how marvelous, how wonderful is my Savior's love for me, and that

should never grow old. And my prayer as we walk out here, a little more amazed by the God who suffers for us.

And Hebrews 11 is kind of a long, long chapter about Old Testament heroes of the faith, like Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Rahab and people like that. Long chapter about the heroes of the faith. We're gonna pick it up in verse 32.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Sampson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and about the prophets. Okay, this is such a preacher thing to do. Like I don't have time to talk about all the things I'm about to talk about anyway. I mean, it's like when the preacher says in conclusion, everyone knows it's gonna be 20 more minutes.

I don't have time to talk about these people that I'm gonna talk about, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised, who shut the mouth of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was churned to strength and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

Women received back their dead, raised to new life again. That's really cool stuff, right? Quenched the flames, conquered kingdoms. I'm lucky if I can just conquer my inbox in a day.

Really cool stuff, but it came at a cost. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging and even chains in imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning. They were sawed in two. They were killed by the sword. They went about in sheep skins and goat skins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

Other than that, it was great.

Move down to chapter 12.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance, the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame and set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So this passage is about suffering. People of faith who have suffered, including Jesus, and it links suffering with joy. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the suffering of the cross, for you and for me.

Buddha didn't suffer for me. Muhammad didn't suffer for me. Moses didn't suffer for me. All the other false gods we go to for security, my job doesn't suffer for me. My money doesn't suffer for me. My grades don't suffer for me. My reputation doesn't suffer for me. Republicans don't suffer for me. Democrats don't suffer for me. Nobody love you the way Jesus does.

And because he is the God who suffers for me, he's the only God I want to follow because he's brave.

Theologian John Stott talks about being in a Buddhist temple looking at a statue of Buddha, and he acknowledges that there are things of wisdom and beauty in that tradition, but he goes on to say, what am I to do with this Buddha, legs crossed, eyes closed, detached from the agonies of this world?

And then he compares that to a picture of Jesus on the cross, twisted, tortured, nails through his hands, and he says, that's the God for me.

And this is one of the reasons I could be nothing other than a follower of Jesus, because the gods in other religions, all of them stay up there safe, immune from the pain, from the suffering of this world. What am I who suffer to do with gods like that?

Only the God who comes to us in the person of Jesus has the courage, has the backbone to play by the same harsh rules that we play by.

Born into poverty, in a country oppressed by a foreign colonial power, had to become a refugee in Egypt, saw friends of his die, suffered hunger and thirst and sickness, worked at back breaking labor most of his life only to fail by the world's standards at his chosen career of ministry. Unjustly accused of crimes he did not commit and then died on a cross, one of the most painful ways to die ever invented while most of the people he loved completely abandoned him.

What got left off that list? What human suffering got left off of that list? Nobody has that kind of courage. Nobody has that kind of love except the God who comes to us in the person of Jesus.

And the fact that he went through all of that for you and for me means that when I suffer, I am not alone. He understands me. He gets my pain because he's had it too.

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About a week after Christina and I had our first child, we were stressed out, exhausted, you know, not sleeping, first baby, all that stuff. And a friend of mine came with his girlfriend to visit. And I was really glad to see them for the first hour. But then they just stayed. And they just kept staying and staying. And I didn't want to be rude and kick them out. And they just kept staying. We ended up cooking dinner for them, and still they stayed. And we were exhausted. We had this newborn baby. And so we were like, oh, wow, look at the time. Really flies when you're having fun. Which is universal code for get out now. And they still stay. So I finally had to say, you need to leave. You need to go home.

Now, I don't really fault them, right? Because they were single. They didn't have any kids. So they didn't know what we were going through. They didn't know what it was like. They didn't get us.

Ever try to tell someone about some huge painful thing that's going on in your life, some deep pain, and they don't get it at all? They don't connect? Or they turn it back to themselves and say something like, yeah, man, I know what you mean. One time on vacation, the towel warmer in our hotel room broke. Where's God when it hurts, man? They just don't understand.

When I'm going through something hard and connect with Jesus in prayer or scripture or worship, I'll hear him say things like, they lied about me too, Scott, or I got rejected too, or I faced physical pain. I know how it feels, and I'm not going to let you be alone in this. I am with you.

Jesus didn't just come to get us into heaven. Yeah, yeah, yeah, that too. But he also came to enter the hospital room, the funeral procession, and the lonely apartment. And when we go through some kind of suffering, we do not need a philosophical lecture. We need a savior who says, I know, I get it, I'm with you.

It's like Job in the Bible, right? His kids all die, he loses all his money, he gets sores all over his body. His friends say to him, you must have done something terrible to deserve this. His wife says to him, why don't you just curse God and die? Supportive, right?

And in the middle of all that pain, Job says to God, do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a human sees? In other words, God, do you get how hard this life can be? Or are you just watching us up there from above? Are we just your reality TV show? Is that what's going on here, God?

And the answer that Jesus and only Jesus can give is, I do, I get it. I know how painful this fallen world can be. So if you're gonna suffer, I'm gonna suffer too. I'm gonna suffer with you. And I will give you strength to get through it. Don't nobody love you the way Jesus does.

And what this also means is that Jesus uses suffering for sanctification. Suffering is the process by which we become more like Jesus.

And I heard a pastor not too long ago talk about how his young son died of a rare birth defect, and he was furious at God. Understandably so, his son died. And he said, I got back at God the only way I could think of, I just stopped talking to him all together, as if that would, that'll show him. Ever play games like that with God? I know I sometimes do.

His anger was understandable, but it was driving a wedge between him and his wife, and between him and the people in his church. And finally, after over a year of this, a friend gently kind of confronted him and said, your anger, can't you see that your anger is destroying you, your family, and your ministry?

The pastor said that night he yelled at God all night long, because our God can handle that. Until he was finally exhausted, and toward morning he said, Lord, I am sorry, please forgive me. And he said he then felt God's presence, and an inexplicable peace that he never had before come over him, and he said, I heard God say, I lost a son too, on the cross.

And the pastor said, in that moment, I realized God understood my pain, because he'd experienced it too. And I knew that he was with me.

And then he heard God say, but my son didn't stay dead, and neither will yours, and neither will you, if you follow me. And he said, that night, God began to heal my heart. And now he has a way closer connection to Jesus.

Now he and his wife share their common grief, and it brings them closer together, not further apart. And it's made him a way better pastor, because it's given him deep empathy for people in pain. And he says, it is so rewarding to be able to share my pain in ways that comforts other people. God is using my pain to set others free.

That's called redemptive suffering. When Jesus uses your suffering for good to shape you and grow you and change you and make you able to help other people. And also to give us what this pastor experienced, which is closeness with Jesus. Because Jesus suffered, our suffering becomes a point of connection with him.

The Apostle Paul in the Book of Philippians said, I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his suffering. That's an interesting verse. Paul says, I want to participate with Jesus, not just in his resurrection, yes, that, and I'll get to that in a minute, but I also want to experience suffering with Jesus.

Jesus is the only God who suffers, and we suffer. Which means our suffering is a shared experience between us and Jesus. And like any shared experience, it brings you closer to the person you share it with.

And, and, as this verse says, our suffering is not the end of the story. Jesus' suffering was not the end of his story. His resurrection was. And our suffering will end some way, somehow, some day, in a resurrection. New hope, new life, new possibilities coming out of old and dead things.

Jesus never promises that we will have a suffering free life, but he does promise that suffering will not have the last word.

I remember one time when our kids were really young, my wife and I were talking about a woman that we knew who died peacefully at the age of 92, and we were saying how this woman's family surrounded her hospital bed and sang hymns, and as they were singing, she died. At which point our daughter, who was about six at the time, said, how did their singing kill her?

So, if someone's singing doesn't kill you, something's going to kill you. Something's going to make us suffer. We will suffer, but with Jesus, suffering isn't the end. Resurrection is.

Jesus is God in human form, brave enough to suffer for us, for you and for me, which means that he is with us in our suffering, uses it for our sanctification, to bring us closer to him, and give us a resurrection somehow, someday, someday.

And what all of this adds up to is, you are unfathomably loved. You are unfathomably loved. And if you doubt that you are loved, don't look at your circumstances, look at the cross.

Even if you don't feel loved, you are. The cross is objective proof that God would step in front of a bus for you, that he would die a thousand deaths for you, that he would rather die than lose you so he did. That's how deeply loved you are.

And he said it as dramatically as he possibly could on the cross. He didn't just say he loves us, he didn't send a text, he didn't post it on TikTok, he wrote it in red. So we get the point.

So action steps for this week. First, do this week's exercise in the journal. The journal's on our app, it's on our website. Think of some times that you felt loved by Jesus, and then complete this sentence, Jesus loved me even when? And that makes me feel what? And to prove it, he suffered for you, he died for you.

And then second, tell someone your story. A lot of people are in pain right now, and they don't know that Jesus is their pain bearer. They don't know that Jesus can help them through it. And the whole point of this sermon series is to equip all of us to share the good news of Jesus.

So this week, ask God to give you an opportunity to share with someone how Jesus has been good news to you, maybe even how he's helped you through times of suffering before.

And then third, write down the name of someone you're going to invite to church or a church event and start to pray for the opportunity to do that. Invite them to Easter, to our Easter party, invite them to Alpha, which is the class designed for people who don't know Jesus, and it's fantastic. So invite them to that and then attend that class with them.

Write the name down of that person and start praying for the opportunity to invite them to something.

A friend of mine has been going through a really hard time. There's a lot of hurt and disappointment in his marriage. He also hates his job, so he's just going through a super painful time, kind of on all fronts.

And one time he's having a bad day at work, so he started looking for another job while he was at work. But then he just kind of stopped in the middle of that and decided to pray. And pray about the pain in his marriage, the pain of his career disappointments and all of that.

And in his mind, as he was praying, in his mind he heard Jesus say to him, your trials are sacred between me and you. Which is a beautiful phrase. Your trials are sacred between me and you.

And he heard Jesus say, this is where I'm gonna meet you and help you experience me, because when you can feel my love, even in the hard, then you can feel my love anywhere.

And then my friend thought about all the different ways Jesus suffered throughout his life, including dying on a cross. And that his suffering was a bond between him and Jesus, a shared experience, something sacred between them that was connecting him to Jesus.

And so then he said out loud, Jesus, don't fix this. Just don't fix this. Because if I only feel like you love me when things are good, that is a flimsy hope. So Jesus, don't take this trial away. Help me love you in the hard.

Help me feel loved by you in my suffering.

And in that moment, he knew Jesus understood him because Jesus suffered too. And their shared experience of suffering was bringing them closer together.

And at some point, he knew, didn't know how, didn't know when. Some point, some way, somehow, some day, there would be some kind of resurrection, new hope, new life. But in the meantime, he was content to just experience Jesus in the hard.

And when you can pray, don't fix this problem, just help me experience you through it, now you are free. Now you are invincible.

Now nothing can get in your way because not even suffering can take away your courage, your hope and your joy because it's grounded in Jesus, not in circumstances. And that is not a consolation prize. That is not second best. That is not the bronze medal. That is the gold medal. That is everything.

The text we read today says that for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the suffering of the cross. So what was that joy set before him that motivated him to be able to do that? Well, that joy was you. That joy was me.

Jesus didn't have to suffer and die for you. He wanted to.

Let that sink in. He wanted to. This is how much you mattered to him. This is how much he loves you.

And every time you doubt your worth, look at his hands and the holes in his hands are the permanent record of how much he loves you.

How marvelous, how wonderful, and my song shall ever be, how marvelous, how wonderful is my Savior's love for me.

Jesus, nobody loves us the way you do. And so Lord, we get immune to that because we hear it a lot. But Lord, this week, help us to experience your love, that you would suffer for us. You are the God who suffers for us.

Help that to be fresh, help that to be new, help that to sink in, in new ways that begin to change us and shape us and transform us and make us people who can share your love with others. We can't do that, Holy Spirit, you can. So we ask that you do it. In Jesus' name, amen.

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures)

- What do we learn about God's story in this passage?
- What do we learn about our story in this passage?

Talk:

- When you picture Jesus choosing the cross, what do you feel? Relief, awe, worthiness, discomfort?
- Where are you still trying to earn His love by performing, behaving, impressing?
- Who in your world right now needs to hear, "You matter, even when you can't pay love back"?

Action Plan:

Review the action prompt below, share any initial ideas of how you might pursue this practice this week.

- Identify one person who may not be able to return a favor or respond with emotional energy right now.
- Offer a concrete, sacrificial kindness: run their errand, cover their shift, pay their bill or meal quietly, babysit for free, drop groceries, or show up and sit, without fixing.

The point is no repayment. Just love that looks like Jesus.

Closing Group Prayer:

Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement for the week ahead.