

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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God Hurts Too

Mark 15:15-20, 33-39 (NIV)

15 Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

16 The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. 17 They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. 18 And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" 19 Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. 20 And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

33 At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34 And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

36 Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.

37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Hebrews 2:5-18 (NIV)

5 It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. 6 But there is a place where someone has testified:

*"What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?*

*7 You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor*

8 and put everything under their feet."

In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. 9 But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

10 In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. 11 Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. 12 He says,

*“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.”*

13 And again, “I will put my trust in him.”

And again he says, “Here am I, and the children God has given me.”

14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. 16 For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. 17 For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

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[Slide 2] *Opening*

Good morning church! We’re nearing the end of our exploration of the answer of Christian faith to the problem of suffering and evil in the world. We’ve seen that the question, “*If God is good, then why do terrible things happen?*” is a legitimate question, when asked honestly. But it’s a complex question, based on a paradox, with a complicated answer. And we like simple answers, slogans that we can remember easily. But that isn’t what God has given us.

[Slide 3] *Review*

Let’s review all of the parts of the answer we’ve already discovered and pull them together. (To save time, I’m not mentioning the specific passages that offer Scriptural support for various points. If you would like to see them, you can download the text for my sermon from the church website after it is posted.)

First, the foundation: By his own sovereign plan, God created a real world, in which cause and effect occur as one of the constants throughout the universe. The universe he made includes sentient, self-aware beings—humans and angels—who possess genuine freedom, the ability to choose whether to act in accordance with God’s will or contrary to God’s will.

With this foundation we developed the following pieces of our answer.

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(1) *God made a real world*, not a fantasy world. Some pain and suffering, therefore, is due simply to the fact that the world is real.

(2) *The world is broken*. All humans have sinned, bringing corruption, pain, and suffering into the world as a result. Some pain and suffering, therefore, is due to the choices of sinful people and the subsequent corruption of human societies.

(3) *There is an enemy*. Satan leads a group of angels who rebelled against God, forming a kingdom of darkness that is engaged in a war against God. Some pain and suffering, therefore, is due to the activity and influence of Satan and his demons, who seek to destroy that which God made and loves.

(4) *Not everything that happens is God’s will*. Instead of determining everything that occurred in the universe, God determined to create a world in which humans and angels had the capacity to make freely chosen, self-determined decisions. Their choices impact what occurs in the world. Much of the pain and suffering in the world, therefore, does not reflect the will of God.

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(5) *There is a test coming*. God brings judgment on people which can cause pain and suffering. God also allows pain and suffering which he uses to test us, to discipline and teach us, and to bring about greater good for individuals, families, nations, and the entire human race.

(6) *Heaven and hell are real*. Last week we saw that this present world is insufficient for righting all wrongs, punishing evil, or rewarding good. It is only the preliminary stage designed for “soul-making”: the preparation of people for life in the next age, in which God will remediate the effects of evil and suffering and will reward or punish people and angels for their actions.

[Slide 6] *Introduction*

But the promise of future relief or recompense, while helpful, still leaves many with the nagging question of today: Why doesn’t God do something about all of the present suffering, especially that which is due to the sins of others? We can understand suffering and pain that is simply a function of the nature of creation or which is due to his direct testing or discipline. But what about the rest?

This question brings us to the most crucial portion of the answer, which is unique to Christian faith, and which is bound up with the essential message of the gospel. Other religions include some of the explanations that we have examined in the previous weeks of this series. And each of the preceding portions of our answer can be found in some form in other religions. But the seventh part of the answer (to my knowledge) has no parallel in any other religious or philosophical system.

The crucial element that is unique to Christian faith is this: *God hurts too. God himself suffers with and for us. He has entered into our pain in order to heal us from our pain.*

[Slide 7] *The impassible God*

Honesty, however, requires an admission: the church has not always grasped this well. We have always held it to be a foundational truth of Christian faith, but we have not thought through the implications of this truth very well.

In the first few centuries of the church's existence, Greek philosophical ideas and categories dominated the thinking of the leaders of the church. As a result, most Christian teachers held the view that since God was perfect, he could not suffer and did not experience emotions. Their underlying assumption, based on Greek philosophy, was that having emotions, or suffering, implied that the nature of God could change. But God, being perfect, was incapable of changing. For many centuries, therefore, this notion that God could not experience pain or suffering (that he was *impassible*) was held to be an essential aspect of the nature of God (and some still hold to it today).

The problem is that this idea, that God was incapable of experiencing emotions or suffering, conflicts with the biblical picture of God. Despite their good intentions, Christian theologians and church leaders who sought to explain Christian teaching through the lenses of Greek philosophy ended up distorting the biblical message. I'm glad that more and more of the leading thinkers in the church today are recognizing the need to hold fast to the biblical picture of God and to let go of philosophical assumptions and categories that don't represent God rightly, and thus don't help us understand who God is.

[Slide 8] *The suffering God*

We start with the person of God. Christians understand that God is not an idea, not an inscrutable force, not another name for the cosmos. God is not a philosophical abstraction or a necessary aspect of a system of beliefs. God is a divine person, and as a person, has suffered himself. The God of the Bible is not some distant deity who is incapable of emotions and impervious to pain. He is

rather the creator of all who is intimately and personally involved with every aspect of his creation. He is responsive to us; he interacts with individuals within our history, enters into relationships with people, and knows the pain of suffering and loss.

God's knowledge of suffering and pain is not simply a function of his infinite knowledge and wisdom. That is, his knowledge is not limited to his intellectual comprehension of the concepts of suffering or pain. As a divine person, God has *personally experienced* pain and emotional suffering.

[Slide 9] *God's experience of pain in the Old Testament*

This understanding of God as a person capable of actually experiencing and feeling pain is evident throughout the Old Testament. We see there a number of ways in which God experienced emotional pain, particularly due to Israel's rejection of his love and his covenant. The intensity of God's emotional pain is especially evident in those places where God speaks of being provoked to wrath by the idolatry of his people, as in this passage from Deuteronomy 9.

“Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people. Remember, do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord. Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with you that He would have destroyed you.” (Deuteronomy 9:6-8)

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There are other significant moments that similarly point out God's emotional responses to Israel's unbelief. 1 Samuel 8:7-8 records God's disappointment that Israel has rejected him as king over them in order to have a human king. The prophet Hosea conveys God's deep affection for his people as well as God's deep anguish by picturing God as experiencing gut-wrenching emotional distress over having to bring judgment on Israel (Hosea 11:1-9). We even read of God's regret and grief: he laments his decision to create people who have filled the earth with violence prior to the Flood (Genesis 6:5-7), and tells Samuel that he regrets making Saul king (1 Samuel 15:10-11, 35).

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But someone might say, *“These expressions are really just metaphors. They don't mean that God has actual emotions any more than the expression ‘the hand of God’ means that God has physical hands.”*

However, even if these passages are examples of metaphorical language, the metaphorical significance must mean *something*—there must be something in God which corresponds to the feature of human emotions which is being used as a point of comparison. We understand that God is a spirit. So expressions that refer to physical body parts must clearly be metaphorical, since God does not have a physical body to which his spirit is bound. But these expressions depict emotional states or expressions that are not incompatible with spiritual existence. They correspond to analogous capacities in both divine and human persons.

[Slide 12] *God's experience of suffering through Jesus' life and death*

God's experience of suffering in his relationship with Israel is not the only thing we find in the Bible. Most importantly, we see that God has also experienced suffering firsthand through the life and death of Jesus.

God was fully present in the person of Jesus, the Son of God (Colossians 2:9). Christian faith has always understood that Jesus was fully divine and simultaneously fully human—even though we cannot adequately explain how that can be so. We hold as a fundamental article of faith the mystery of the incarnation—that God became human through being miraculously conceived in the womb of Mary, born in the ordinary way, and growing up as her son, the man Jesus of Nazareth. The doctrine of the incarnation—that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself—means that during Jesus' earthly life, in the person of Jesus, God experienced firsthand every kind of suffering that ordinary people experience. Consider, for a moment, a few facts about the life of Jesus.

[Slide 13] *Jesus' life experience*

(1) He grew up in poverty and suffered the pain of deprivation. We know that Jesus' parents were poor from the fact that they brought the minimum offering for his dedication (Luke 2:22-24). He knew what it was like to not have enough, to go hungry, to be cold, to be in need.

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(2) He lived under the oppressive rule of a foreign power that occupied his land and subjected the people to cruel punishment, burdensome taxation, and continual humiliation. The Roman legions occupying Galilee may not have spent much time, if any, in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. But their presence in the region affected everyone. And as an adult Jesus would have encountered the Romans frequently, especially in nearby Sepphoris and Capernaum. He would have been very familiar with being despised by the Romans, mocked and ridiculed for his Jewish faith. He was subject to the overt racism and elitism that came with working in a city built by Jewish labor for the benefit of the Romans and other

Gentiles, as well as the wealthy Jews who curried favor with their overlords. For that matter, Galilee was a hotbed of revolutionary fever. There were many who wanted to overthrow the Romans, and many who were captured and punished for trying to do so. Jesus had seen many a cross in his lifetime, knew what it signified, and felt the pain of empathy for the crucified.

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(3) Jesus worked as a builder, a mason working with stone and wood. Like many men in Galilee, Jesus was a day-laborer who sought work where it could be found. The most likely place he could have found work would have been in the nearby city of Sepphoris, a Roman city about an hour's walk from Nazareth, which was undergoing an extensive boom in public building projects during Jesus' lifetime. In the course of doing his normal work, he would have experienced minor cuts and bruises, physical exertion, and exhaustion, all of the normal kinds of pain that come from working in the building trades.

Then there were the encounters with people of all sorts—other laborers, bosses, onlookers, shopkeepers, soldiers, tax collectors, slaves, beggars, and rulers. Jesus would have experienced all of the ordinary stresses and problems that come with personal interactions, social relations, and business/work engagements.

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(4) He endured all the “normal” painful experiences of life, including the tension of a large family living in small quarters, the challenges of living in a small village, the tedium of a daily “commute” (walking to and from Sepphoris), and dealing with limited resources.

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(5) He suffered the grief of the death of at least one family member, his earthly father, Joseph. After the mention of Jesus' trip to the Temple when he was twelve years old, whenever the gospels refer to Jesus' family, they never mention Joseph, only Jesus' mother and siblings (e.g., Mark 3:31-35). Presumably, therefore, we are meant to understand that Joseph died at some point prior to Jesus' entrance into ministry. As the oldest son, Jesus would then have had to assume the responsibility of providing for the family, with all of the problems and burdens that come with that role. Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would be “acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3), therefore, does not refer solely to his death on the cross, but includes his entire lifetime of experiences of grieving.

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(6) Jesus also knew the unusual sufferings and painful experiences that came with his Messianic task. He lived with the constant rumors of a questionable

birth and suggestions that he was illegitimate. When the Jews in Jerusalem demanded that Jesus identify his father (John 8:19), they were probably making a pointed challenge to his ancestry, indicating that there were rumors or doubts about his birth. Later Jewish sources include various scurrilous accusations that Jesus was the illegitimate offspring born from the union of his mother Mary and a Roman soldier named “Panthera,” a pun on the Greek word for a virgin (*parthenos*). These later rumors arose as counterpropaganda against Christian preaching of the virgin birth.

He was deemed insane by both his enemies and his family and accused of being a sorcerer and demon-possessed by the religious leaders who were frightened by his displays of power over demonic spirits (Mark 3:20-22; John 10:20). He was rejected by those he came to save; he was despised by those whose hearts were hardened by their spiritual blindness and pride. He had followers who quit following, who were glad when they thought he would use his power to defeat the Romans but incensed when he insisted that they must love their enemies. He was betrayed by a close friend and abandoned by his closest disciples in his hour of greatest need.

[Slide 19] *The God who weeps*

Let me point out two more significant examples from the life of Jesus, two episodes from the gospels that show God’s emotional response to us in our pain.

First, when Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), he was not only saddened by their unbelief and for their failure to recognize what God had offered to them. He was grieved for the suffering and pain which they would undergo, the awful consequences that would come upon them as a result of their unbelief. He grieved for what he knew would happen—that in only a few short decades, the Roman legions would surround the city and besiege it, with devastating cruelty that meant horrific suffering for people he loved.

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Second, in John 11:35, Jesus has come to the tomb of his friend, Lazarus. This verse is famous for being the shortest verse in the Bible: it says, simply, “*Jesus wept.*” It ought to be famous for what it shows us about God.

This powerful declaration that Jesus wept has often been misinterpreted and preached in a way that dismisses Jesus’ emotional pain and his empathy with those of Lazarus’ family and friends who were grieving at the grave site. I’ve heard preachers say that Jesus was simply weeping over the unbelief of those gathered there (since he knew that he was going to raise Lazarus from the grave). But they miss the mark entirely. The narrative of John 11 stresses Jesus’ love for Lazarus. It

notes that when Jesus raised him from the dead, he acted out of deep compassion and empathy with those who were grieving. Certainly Jesus was affected by the unbelief of those around him. But this passage emphasizes Jesus' identification with the sorrows and griefs of people whom he loved. He wept because the sufferings of people touched his emotions and his heart. He wept because he felt their pain, and hurt with them. In Lazarus' death, all of the pain and suffering and death of human history were represented, and Jesus wept for all of it.

I remember hearing a powerful testimony about this verse. An Asian man who had never heard of Jesus Christ, who had grown up as a Buddhist and did not know Christian teachings, was given a Bible by a Christian. When he read this passage (John 11), and read the words that "Jesus wept," he came back to the man who had given him the Bible and told him that he wanted to become a Christian. When asked why he wanted to convert, his reply was this: "*We do not have a god like this. We do not have a god who weeps for us.*" He understood what so many have not—that when Jesus wept for Lazarus, God was weeping for us.

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Here's another bit of evidence to show us God's experience of sharing in our suffering. When Jesus told his disciples that he and the Father were "one," he wanted them to understand that because the Father was in him, his life revealed the Father to them (John 10:30; 14:10-11). He also let them know that "*I am in the Father and the Father is in me,*" meaning that in the Trinity, Father and Son were so united that they were inseparable, one from the other. They were not identical—who they were did not merge into something else. Jesus was the Son and the Father was the Father. But each one experienced what the other experienced. That means that all that Jesus experienced was also experienced or felt somehow by the Father (and the Spirit). So the Father did not suffer death on the cross. But somehow the Father shared in the experience of the pain of rejection, mocking, beating, scourging, crucifixion, and death that the Son experienced. The Father, and not just the Son, felt the pain of Jesus' death—and experienced a pain greater than, but still very much like that felt by any human parent who has ever lost a child. God knows exactly what it feels like to watch your beloved Son die.

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God's suffering has actually exceeded that of any human person, indeed, it has exceeded that of all humankind combined, for only God has borne in his own person the punishment for the sins of all people (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; 3:18).

No one else has faced the full force of Satan's temptation. Every other one of us has yielded to Satan's temptation; he hasn't had to use his full arsenal of weapons against us because we've all given way to lesser temptations. Only Jesus endured every possible temptation we have seen—and more, including the temptation to come down from the cross and save himself, something that Jesus had within his power to do. But he refused to save himself in order to save us.

No one else has become a sin offering despite having known no sin. When Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that “[*God*]made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf,” he is not referring to some mysterious action in which the Son of God was transformed into sin itself. Rather, it means that Jesus became a sin offering for all people through his death. Jesus took all of the sins of the world upon himself so that he became identified with all sin. (See Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:25; 4:25; 8:3; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24.)

No one else was perfectly innocent, yet suffered as if guilty of all sins of all time. Only Jesus has suffered in that way. Only God knows what that feels like.

[Slide 23] *Why God's suffering matters to us*

God's suffering is not offered to us so that we might sympathize with him, but so that we may know that he sympathizes with us. That is the importance of the passage that we read from the book of Hebrews this morning (2:14-18). God is neither immune to pain, nor removed from our suffering, nor indifferent to our pain. Because he has suffered as we have, he is able to sympathize with us. And not only is he sympathetic to our pain, he is willing to help.

Just as human parents feel the anguish and pain when their children suffer, so it is with God—what hurts us hurts him as well. God suffered so that he could take up our suffering into himself, thereby making it possible for us to be freed (ultimately) from the pain.

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The Christian gospel presents God as the one who has entered into time and space, lived as a man, and suffered both in life and in death, so that he is fully cognizant of suffering from his own experience of suffering. He is the God who has suffered with us. The Christian answer to the question, “*Why doesn't God do something?*”, is this: *God has already done something. He has done what no one else could do in order to eliminate suffering by absorbing in himself the consequences of the just judgment upon sinners for their sins.*

This is the unique part of the answer to the problem of suffering that Christian faith provides. Knowing this—that God weeps for us and has suffered for us gives us a way to see suffering differently. We may therefore embrace suffering

and allow it to be a means for the Spirit of God to transform us into his image, knowing that he has also suffered for us. (Our journey through 1 Peter last year emphasized this point.)

We can see that God's use of suffering in our lives is neither vindictive nor mechanistic nor sadistic. But he suffers with us, and offers us both his sympathy and his help, entering into our pain and taking it on himself.

Because God has suffered for us and with us, it is easier for me to trust him with my pain, and to yield to the working of his Spirit in my pain.

[Slide 25] *Conclusions for part 7*

Here is what we need to remember—the crucial part of the answer that reflects the uniquely Christian perspective on suffering:

(1) *God himself has suffered and understands what it is to hurt; he has endured even greater pain than any of us has experienced.*

(2) *God himself has borne in himself the suffering of the world and has entered into our suffering in order to free us from its pain.*

(3) *I am not alone in my pain; God himself understands my pain, and invites me to allow him to absorb my pain in order to relieve me of the pain.*

There's one more important part of the answer—be sure to come back next week to hear it.

[Slide 26]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]