

How Can a Good God Allow Evil?

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Date: 10 August 2025

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[0:00] Thank you, Ellen. Good morning, everyone. Well, before I start, the topic today is a little bit somber, but it's a good week. It's a good week. Those of you who are part of this community, you'll know that Alex and Joe welcomed in baby number two, Liliana Joy. Round of applause for Alex. No epidural, just powered through and managed to give birth to baby in record time. It was super fast.

Also, I guess round of applause for Joe. He also didn't need an epidural. He was okay. He managed to survive through all of it. I was reflecting. I was like, oh, I wonder whether I'll get to see Joe these next few weeks. I was counting. I was like, actually, he's the eighth most useful adult in his family right now in terms of looking after the baby. You've got his wife, you've got his mother-in-law and his father-in-law, and they've got an auntie and they've got a doula and then they've got someone else's. I'm just like, oh, Joe, you are, you know, I mean, nothing I didn't know, but really no contribution other than, but we're overjoyed. And today is a very special day because Eden Jane, EJ, it's her birthday today.

She's going through lots of emotions as a big sister, three years old. So shower her. Why don't we shower her with blessings when she comes out? And so just pour blessing out on this family. When we were in the hospital and actually Joe said something that was interesting, he said, well, what a special day that there's life here. But of course, in the hospital, whilst there's one room that has life just beginning, it's 20 seconds down the corridor and you see actually a life is ending as well. Such is life, right? That that's really what it is.

And I'm approaching a topic today that is a tricky one. And actually, even as we were singing and I was praying, I was like, God, I think there's something that I'm supposed to say that I haven't prepared yet. Because I look around the room and I look around the people that are in this room. This question will have come up for you at some point. I bumped into a dear friend yesterday and she came up to me and she said, James, you're still young. And I said, thank you. I know I am still. You've got people around you who are still giving births.

And having getting married and all these things. And my friends are now all dying one by one. And another one of my boss for young life was like, in this last two years, I've lost all of my mentors. They they all they've all moved on to be with the Lord. And if you live long enough, you will experience suffering. You will experience death. You will experience loss.

[2:38] I mean, it's just baffling for me. It sounds really morbid. But every single person in this room, as you look around, will pass. Christina and I, we were talking yesterday evening and she was reminding me her favorite book is Ecclesiastes, where just everything is just vanity, just meaningless. And there's moments where you're just like, what is the purpose of all this, especially when it comes to suffering? So we're talking about this topic, but I want to approach it as carefully and as cautiously as I possibly can, because I know for sure that there are people in this room who are going through suffering right now.

That you have sickness in your family with a loved one right now. And you're asking God, why aren't you helping that person? And you're asking God, do you even exist? Do you even care? Yeah. And I want to approach that. I'm not here just to tell you, hey, chin up, just suck it up. It's going to be fine. Everyone's going to die. Just get over it. That's not what I'm here to do. I'm here to try and unpack with you what God says about suffering, what God says about death and disease, what God says about all these things. And I want you to know that. I want you to know that I may not know exactly what you're going through, but I want you to know that I know that you're going through something. You know, the cheesy statement that behind every smile is someone standing with a pool of tears next to them. I know. If we look back, as I'm even looking around the room right now, I look at Kelly leading worship with a smile on her face, but I remember a time when she couldn't really even open her mouth and she was suffering through that. I remember a time

when we've gone through things that we just wish, God, would you help us get through that now already? And yet we look back now and we go, actually, there was good in that. There was things that he did through that.

And I hope today as we open up the word to talk about the issue of suffering, it'll be able to bless you because we are surrounded by it on a micro, just individual, personal level. There's things that you're going through. And of course, as you age and as the aging process continues, the body just starts to break down. That's just what it does. It was a few years ago when I started realizing I was getting injuries to my body and I didn't even realize where I was getting them.

[4:56] I would just wake up and my back would hurt. Right? Jay knows that as well. And then we look around and we see all these problems that are happening. Yesterday, I was preaching in the Chinese side and we were talking about actually so much of our faith often, whether we like to admit it or not, is about us being engrossed with basically, God, can you bless us with health and wealth? If we're super honest with ourselves, that's what we're really asking him. Can you give us a safe flight to this place? Can you give us nice weather there? Can you give us a smooth running to get the job that we want, to get the project that we want, so we can get the money that we want, so we can get the lifestyle that we want? We're always thinking about that. And then the moment something doesn't go our way, we say, why God? Are you even there? Do you even exist? I'm not going to embarrass you, but can I, can, if you've gone through something tough in your life and you found yourself questioning whether God exists or not, at some point, would you raise your hand just to show me that I'm not alone? And you're like, God, are you even here?

It's interesting because you get asked that a lot and people are like, well, I don't believe in God because here's how the question goes. If God is here and he is all loving and all powerful, why are, why is there still suffering? If we peel back that question, often it's actually, why am I still suffering? Or why is the world around me that I can see, the people that I love, why is there still pain? Why is there still hurt? Because God, if you are who you say you are, can't you just deal with this? Can't you sort this out right now? Can't you remove this? Can't you stop all the wars? Can't you stop all the poverty and all the famine? Can't you deal with all those things so we can all have lives that are filled with health and wealth? Isn't that what you're here for, God? When we created to flourish, to glorify you, why are we so far away from that? And people ask that question regularly, but maybe just a few things, just I wanted to say. We're going to be looking at the passage of Romans 8, where we'll talk a bit about this. But one thing I'll say to you is this, and you know, I know Bob Marley sings it, that, hey, don't worry. Everything, every little thing is going to be all right. But I'm also here to say that some of the things that you're going through are just not good. They're just not right. Cancer is not good. There is nothing good about cancer. There is nothing good about war. There is nothing good about famine.

What I'm going to present to you is, well, even those things are definitely not good. God still somehow will use, will turn for good at some point. This van is going to keep flicking my Bible. So I'm going to keep moving back. So that's where I'm going to be going. But I want to just maybe address a couple of assumptions there. If you're there thinking, well, actually, I don't know if I believe in God because there's so many bad things that are happening in the world. I want to just kind of maybe address a couple of those quick assumptions before we jump into the word. And first of all is this, what's good? You say, if there is a good God, then why are there bad things happening? My question to you is, how are you measuring what's good? What's bad? If there was no God, as I said last week, if there was no God, if we look at an absolute terrifying, devastating injustice, a baby lying on the street dying, if there was no God, then why is that not good? Or why is that bad?

We have no frame of reference. There is no measuring stick to measure what is good and what it's not because everything's random. Everyone says survival of the fittest. Baby, you're not fit, so you won't survive. Why do we even think that is good or bad? Where is the measuring stick? Another question I'll have for you is this. Well, okay, then let's deal with some of the bad that you're talking about. What's some of the bad? What are some of the worst people that are around in this world? Let's start with the terrorists. God, you're powerful, you're good. Why don't you get rid of evil? And let's start with the terrorists because they're definitely evil. They're definitely bad. Let's get rid of them.

You get rid of the terrorists. You're like, okay, well, somehow the world still isn't good. There is still suffering. Well, okay, that's because we haven't got rid of all the murderers. Let's get rid of the

murderers. Let's do them too. Let's get rid of them. And suddenly you realize, oh, okay, got rid of all the murderers. And yet somehow the world still isn't fully perfect. And okay, well, let's, well, maybe we need to stretch this out a little bit more. Maybe we need to address more of these sinners. Let's go, let's go for the bankers. Let's get rid of the bankers. They are part of the big problem in this world. Let's get rid of them because there's, there's greed, there's selfishness, there's all these things that should be no poverty. Let's get rid of them.

[9:19] Well, we get rid of them. And yet somehow there is still problem. Well, okay, maybe it's the tax evaders. Maybe we get rid of them. And can you see where I'm getting at here? We can just keep going down this list of all the people who we think are bad, who we think are responsible for some of the evil and some of the suffering in this world. The problem is if we keep going down that line and go, God, why don't you get rid of them? The question ends up, the final question will be, must be, God, you also must get rid of me. Because I too, I'm bringing sin into this world. I too, am filled with sin. I too am part of the problem. And so do you realize that actually if it's God, it's a God of love, it's not as simple as just destroying all those who are bad. Because if that was the case, there would be no people left. Where do you get your measuring stick from? What is good? C.S. Lewis says this, God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go wrong or right. If a thing is free to be good, it is also free to be bad. If a thing is free to be good, it is also free to be bad. That is why we have suffering, because we have choice. And you and

I both know we have made choices that have led to our own suffering and also to the suffering of those whom love us and whom we love. So why is there still suffering? Because we still get to choose and sadly we choose this way. Another point about that when it comes to suffering is actually when we're talking about suffering, it assumes there is meaning and there are moral values that are in place for human existence. Because if there wasn't, if God wasn't there to give us this framework, to give us this meaning and purpose, then suffering doesn't really, isn't really a thing. Does that make sense to you? The fact that we are even appealing to this higher just concept that actually humans and animals and creation should be flourishing already says that we're assuming that there is meaning. There is an external meaning that is applied onto our existence. So we can't actually say suffering basically disproves God, because if anything, suffering actually proves there is something out there that is giving us meaning. We know that something is wrong. Well, why do we know that something is wrong? Because a creator has told us what his purpose for creation is, and we realize we are falling short of it. It's funny, another famous apologeticist guy said this, and he traveled the world doing a lot of talks about apologetics and fielding this question. And he would say this, do you know the question of suffering is really only exclusive to the modern Western world? He only hears this question in the modern Western world, where people are basically born and grown and taught to be entitled to comfort and to be entitled to health and wealth. And that's the only place he hears this in the modern Western world, because if he goes to all the other parts of the world, everyone knows that suffering is a part of human existence. But for some reason, the Western individualism we have pursued and gone away, where it's like, no, we can have a human existence that is apart from suffering, that we don't need to have suffering. But actually, the rest of the world knows that that is not true. It is part of it. Just have a think about that for a second. Actually, you've got even the classical Greek thinkers, who will actually know? Suffering is inevitable, it will happen. What is important is how we respond and how we react to it. It's only now when we are, when something bad happens to us, and we're like, I am outraged, God, this is ridiculous. Why is this happening to me?

The question really is, well, why not? Why not? There are so many, so many terrible things that are happening in this world right now.

Why weren't you born in a place that is war-ridden? Why weren't you starving? Why did you make it out of your mother's womb alive, with all four limbs intact? Why? Why you? Why not? Can you see, even our questions of suffering, we have assumptions, we have things that we don't even realize, we have entitlement that we don't even realize when we're asking that question. God, if you are so just and loving, why don't you sort out all these things? Well, you are part of that thing that he is trying to sort out. So we're going to try and unpack that through a little bit of scripture. Again, C.S. Lewis talks a lot about this. If you are interested, his book, *The Problem of Pain* is a big one, and actually afterwards, later in his life, he writes this book, and when he loses his wife, it's called *A Grief Observed*, which is another fantastic one, where he really dives into this.

[13:38] And I would say, we as Christians, we need to get acquainted with suffering. We need to get acquainted with what it is, and actually, if you look at scripture, if you look at this book, our friend Francis Chan noted one time, he said, if you look at every book in the New Testament, every single book talks about suffering. Every single book, you will find it. He said, the only one that may not is Philemon, but if you think, if you know the context of where that letter was written, suffering. For some reason, even though every book in the New Testament talks about suffering, for some reason, we are still outraged when we don't get the job that we want. For some reason, we are still just heartbroken when we are turned away by that person we're pursuing, and we question God's existence. We are still heartbroken when someone we know or love, or even ourselves, we're going through a sickness. We're like, God, why?

Why do I have this? And somehow, we've misread the Bible. Somehow, we've misinterpreted, and we think God is invested only, exclusively, in our health and wealth and comfort on this side of heaven.

But if we read it properly, we'll realize that is actually not the case. If I look at my own life, people tell me that, okay, well, I can tell you, I'm 39 years old. Some people are shocked by that.

They're like, oh, I thought you were much older. And they say it in such a kind way, like they're complimenting me, and as my heart just continues to cry, as they tell me that, I was like, I think it's because I'm a tired 39-year-old. I've experienced different things that, again, it's all relative in some ways. But I've experienced things that have maybe fast-tracked me on the journey of aging.

It does that to you when you lose your father at 17. It does that to you when shortly after, you have to explain to his parents that they've lost their son. And then I'm actually not telling them at all.

Losing your hair at 25 does that to you. I still remember the day as a teacher, I was walking down the stairs in the school with my colleagues behind me at 25, still just, literally, I think, prime James 25, prime James, like NBA. That was the year I would have been drafted were it not for my hair loss. And I'm walking down the stairs, and my colleague behind me shouts, I go, James, you're losing hair. And if you knew how vain I was, oh my goodness, my whole world came crashing down in that moment because there was something happening at the top that I couldn't control. And trust me, I tried. When you have that, it happens to you. You start aging and you start realizing, oh, life is not that easy. It happens to you when you end up in hospital yourself. Me, stayed there for a month not eating anything. And then fast forward when I have kids, one of my children, at the moment they are born into this world, need operation. We stay in the hospital for a whole month. And I've told you these stories before. And I sit on them now, and I'm like, oh, these were such precious stories. And these are times that I would never, ever swap and take away because those were the times that I felt the most human. Those were the times that I grew the most.

[16:50] Suffering does that to you. And C.S. Lewis says this, he, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

I have no cheap answers for you why you're suffering. I don't have that. If I did, you shouldn't believe me because I'd be pretending to be God and I'm not. But I will say this, I look at this book and I see Jesus promises many things. And one of those things is John 16, 33, he says, in this world, you will have trouble. You will. But take heart for I have overcome the world. Peter in 1 Peter 4 says, don't be surprised when you're facing fiery trials because that's how you're going to grow. The apostle James in chapter one says, count these trials, these various different trials and basically face them with joy because they're going to be the thing that molds you.

resistance, suffering. What is Uday doing when he's going into the gym? He's causing his body, his muscle fibers to suffer, to break, as I said last week, so I think he can come back stronger.

Life is the gym that we're in and God is using that. And maybe the most famous passage of all about this that you see on Fridge Magnus all the time is Romans chapter eight, verse 28.

And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose. Have you heard that passage before? People look at you when things are going bad and say, don't worry, God will use all things for good. I want us to dive into this passage because I think we're missing a part of that. I think we actually are misunderstanding what that passage actually means. And we take it and we think, God, everything should be good.

[18:40] When actually that is really not the case. I'm going to invite you. We're going to look at, we're going to fly through the, the, be at the preceding verses in chapter eight. And I think we'll get a better idea of why God allows suffering. Can I invite you to stand for the word of the Lord?

I'm going to ask Queenie, senior counsel Queenie to read us Romans chapter eight, verse 18 to 30. Thanks. Romans chapter eight, verses 18 to 30.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to fertility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

[20:07] Likewise, the spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the spirit, because the spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.

For those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those who he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Queenie. Now take a seat. Maybe before I jump into this passage, as I said, I know that all of us have got some kind of suffering in our lives, whether it's in our own lives or whether it's someone that we know.

[21:17] Why don't we just, as I go through this passage, I invite you to have those things in mind, those people in mind. And it's not to explain those things away necessarily, but it's going, God, why is this here?

And what are you trying to show? And what are you trying to do? That's really the purpose of it. So that fridge magnet passage, and we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. You sit there and you think, okay, that is Bob Marley singing three little birds over me.

That is saying, don't worry, be happy. Every little thing is going to be all right. And is that it? Is that all it is? That is just this blind faith and hope that when we are faced with cancer, when we are seeing all these things happening in the world, we just close our eyes and just don't worry, be happy, because every little thing is going to be all right.

Is that all we're doing? Is that how we as Christians should face suffering? And the answer is no, there is so much more to it. We need to first understand why the suffering comes about. And that's why Romans 8, we have to take the whole passage, because if we just take verse 28, then yes, let the good times roll.

But sadly, you and I know the good times don't always roll. In fact, they rarely ever come. Highlights are highlights for a reason, because there's a whole nother life, there's a whole nother real that you don't want to show, that there is so much suffering that is going on in your own life, in your own mind, in your own heart, and in your own families, and in your own workplace, and in your own world.

[22:28] So we look at this, and we look at Romans 8, and we see it from the beginning. He says, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you go down a little bit, verse 6, this is all setting the scene. Of course, this whole chapter is just majestic and covers so much here.

But maybe the first one that I want to point out is verse 6. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace. The reason why we have suffering, the reason why we have these things that are not flourishing, life that is not flourishing, is because we as a creation, we as human beings, we didn't do what God created us to do, which was to basically glorify Him.

We were made in His image, that we would glorify Him, and cause basically a whole creation to flourish. We didn't do that. We set our minds on ourselves. When we set our minds on ourselves, when we make decisions that are based on our own preferences, flesh, we end up leading down a path that ultimately leads to death.

That is, that He's setting the scene here as to what we're actually doing and why we feel this way. So if you go down, verse 12, So then, brothers, we are debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. So He's saying, okay, we, you and I, we set our minds on the flesh.

[23 : 41] That leads us down a path of destruction. It is not good. Creation, the world, is basically caving in on itself. You look at just the temperatures that we're all experiencing in Asia, you're like, oh, this world is changing.

Because we have basically had our own desires as priority. And then He says, we are all debtors. We are all debtors. Romans 3 talks about this. We are all fall short of the glory of God. Romans 5 says, we are still sinners, but yet while we are still sinners, He died for us.

And so then He launches His rescue mission is what He's saying here. And 18 to 22, For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

So He looks and He considers and He calculates these sufferings. And He says, okay, these sufferings are significant, but they're nothing compared to the eternal weight of glory. What awaits us in heaven is something that will far outweigh this.

Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 4, where he says, actually, this whole world is wasting away. Our bodies are wasting away. But we take heart because these light momentary afflictions are nothing when compared to the eternal weight of glory.

[24 : 44] The sufferings that we're going through are like a feather when compared to the eternal weight of glory that awaits us. That's why we do not lose heart. So you see this. For the creation, verse 19, For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

Creation itself, all of us, we're all just groaning and waiting for us as children of God to realize who we actually are. Do you know those epic Hollywood movies where you've got someone who was an orphan, and then they fight, and there's battles, and there's a story that they have to kind of follow through because it's a two-hour movie, and then eventually you get to the end, and they realize who they are, and they're revealed as basically the son of the Most High.

All creation is waiting for that, for the creation was subject to futility. Why? Because of our own decisions, because we chose the flesh, but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free.

That's God's plan. That's God's plan. The creation itself will be set free, that there will be no more suffering, there will be no more bondage, no more corruption, and we will all have the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Verse 22, this was especially applicable to Joe and my family this week, for we know that the whole creation has been growing together in the pains of childbirth until now.

[26 : 03] Those who have given birth to a child will know there is utmost pain, there is almost just anguish. Really, that's the stage that we're in right now, as humanity in this world.

We're just waiting, we're just groaning, God, can you just reveal yourself? Just like a mother would say, baby, can you just reveal yourself? And of course, the beauty and the joy is, the sorrow is followed very quickly by joy.

I've been told, I've been told, not first-hand experience, that after all the pain of childbirth, once you see the baby, for some reason, the pain and the memory of the pain just disappears, is what I'm told.

But I guess it's the same here, we're just waiting. We're waiting. In pain, as we look around, if you look at the news and you have a soft heart, you'll be like, this world is just falling apart.

The stories that we hear, again, we only read them as news articles and titles and subtitles and that's it, but these are all real stories of real people going through real suffering. Our hearts should break for these things.

[27 : 10] creation is waiting and groaning like childbirth until the moment God basically deals with it all. Verse later, verse 26, likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we all, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

And he who searches hearts knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. So he's saying, we chose flesh. It leads us to death.

We are now debtors. Because of that, creation itself is groaning and waiting for God to reveal himself again. And now the Spirit knows we don't know what we really want. The Spirit knows that we can't help ourselves in some ways, so the Spirit intercedes for us and prays for us because he knows what we want and because he searches our hearts and minds.

It's only after all that context do we get verse 28. And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him according to his purpose.

Can you see that the context there is so much more than just that one passage? Oh, God wants me to be well. It is way more than that. The project, the rescue mission is so much bigger than just you being happy in life in this season with your job.

[28:25] So much bigger. And what does it actually mean then if we go through that a little bit, just word by word almost, verse 28, and we know that for those who love God, this tells me one thing, that actually this promise isn't for everyone.

This promise is for those who actually love God, who choose to trust him, who choose to follow him, who don't have their identity set in this side of eternity. It's not for everyone.

Why? Because it's for those who actually understand that their security is not on earth, their security is in heaven. It's those who have had a new perspective, those who have decided, I'm not going to choose the flesh, I'm going to allow the spirit to guide me for those who are led by the spirit of God, our sons of God.

It's for those people, it's for those who have actively, intentionally chosen and say, Jesus, I trust you. My comfort, my destination is in heaven and isn't in the things of this world.

It's for those people. So before we take this verse and go, hey, well, God wants me to be happy, that's not what it's saying. It's for those, for those who love him, who trust him. All things work together for good.

[29:34] Again, quick things here. He does not say all things are good. That is not what he's saying. He's saying he will use all things for good. That's the difference.

You look at Genesis chapter 50 when Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery and he goes through this life and he's in prison for many, many years and he comes out and finally he has the moment where he can basically take revenge and what does he say?

Hey, it's okay. What you meant for evil, God turned for good. All the bad things that happen in our lives, all the prevailing darkness that we're surrounded by, God will turn for good.

We have to recognize that when you look at the news or when you look at your life and things that are not going well and you're like, man, that really sucks. Why? Because Ephesians 2 explains it. It says, and actually currently, the power of force in this world right now is the spirit of disobedience. Darkness is ruling. There is a prince of this world that is causing people to go astray. So don't be surprised at that. These trials are coming. Don't be shocked when bad things are happening.

[30:37] God will turn it for good. He is in control of all things. You might be sat there going, okay, I've gone through some really tough things. James, actually, there are some things that I'm going through right now.

There are thoughts that I'm thinking right now that would terrify you if you got to read my mind.

Surely God cannot use those things. And I'm here to say, respectfully, I disagree.

God isn't afraid of those deepest darkest corners that you have. In fact, those moments where you are walking through the valley, he is still with you.

And actually, those moments he will use. He will use for good. And again, what's good? The good isn't that you get the perfect job and the perfect life that you have.

There is a present good, but there is this already but not yet dynamic when it comes to the kingdom of heaven whereas it is going to be good here. You will live an abundant life here, but you will also have one that comes in eternity.

[31:38] Something far bigger. Something much better. That's what is good. There is an eternal good. Now, it carries on. Actually, it's for those of us who are really just wanting God just to kind of give us our wishes and grant us what we want.

Actually, it just gets worse and worse for you. So it carries on. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. For those who are called according to his purpose.

So it's good according to his purpose for your life. It's not what you want for your life. That's the difference. I think that's why when we come at the topic of suffering, we are coming at it from our own perspective.

We're coming at it from what do I want to do? What do I think is fair? What do I think is good? And God's saying, no, no, no. Love me. Trust me. Follow me. I will mold all these things that are happening, even something like cancer, and I will mold it and I will use it for good according to my purpose.

So ultimately, what is his purpose? I think his purpose is to liberate all of creation, to allow creation to flourish once again. That is why he is here. That is why he is coming back again, to wipe away every tear, to remove every pain, to remove every sickness, to even remove death itself.

[32:48] And how is he going to do that? And how is he going to do that? And that's where the final pie is because another temptation when we're reading scripture is we take verse 28. We love it. God, you're invested in my happiness so you're going to turn everything for good.

Great things. I'll be happy and I won't worry because every little thing is going to be all right. And then it carries on. There's a verse 29. So just when you thought, okay, well, maybe that's it. Maybe God is going to be just purposely involved in my, invested in my happiness. He says this, for those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed, conformed, conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and those whom he predestined, he also called and those whom he called, he also justified and those whom he justified, he also glorified.

I get it. When you read that, that second bit, that is utter Christianese. If you've grown up in the church, you're like justified, sanctified, glorified. I get it.

These are all great, great words. Something's happening to me. God's purpose. How is God going to liberate creation? How is he going to allow creation to flourish?

[33:55] He's going to conform you and I to look like Jesus. We are going to be the agents of that liberation. And he's going to use suffering to mold us, to conform us, to look like Jesus.

I don't know about you, but that gives me some comfort, but that gives me more terror. I'm just like, I don't want to be conformed. I don't want to go through this hardship.

There's a video that I saw many years ago by a Christian comedian who was kind of like, it was a video of him being like, imaginary chiseled away, just like a sculpture. And God's just going around him, just basically, just going at him.

And the pain that that would cause, but ultimately, a beautiful sculpture was created. That's what God's trying to do, even through the suffering, to conform us to the image of his son.

Because if we can look like his son, then we go back to Genesis 1.26, we will look like him. We will be made in their image and then creation will flourish. Those around us will flourish because we look like Jesus, because whatever he touches, wherever he goes, people are liberated.

[35:03] People are healed. That's what he's trying to do. That takes a bit of time for my mind sometimes. When bad things happen to me, like God, why would you allow me to go through this?

And he'll tell me, James, you don't see what I see in your life. You want me to make this year good for you. But I want to prepare you for eternity. So I'm going to use all these things and this is going to be short-term pain.

I get it. It's going to be hard. Every parent knows this. It's going to be hard, but you're going to have to go through this because it will prepare you. It will mold you for what is to come. C.S. Lewis says this, God isn't a grandfather.

He is a father in heaven. He is not your grandfather in heaven. I have a few friends who have the joy of just being grandparents and they told me and I love the way, I just love hearing grandparents talk about this and actually I hear Vincent talk about, talk like this all the time when it comes to EJ and what he feeds her.

He's like, I'm not the parent, I'm the grandparent. My job is just to spoil them. Whatever you want, ice cream at nine o'clock, sure. You can't sleep, not my problem.

[36:10] I am your grandfather because I am here just to shower you with whatever you want and that's it. You can be naughty, you can be naughty, you can climb a pad, sure.

That's what grandparents do. Well, maybe especially Western grandparents, Chinese ones maybe, less so. But God isn't a grandparent. God is a father.

God is a father who does allow for suffering to happen because he's using it for a purpose to prepare you, to mold you, to conform you to the image of Jesus. That's why he's allowing these things to happen.

And so we need to get over that mindset that God is here just for my comfort and my health and wealth right now. Because then he can really just fulfill his purpose through us once we surrender that.

His goal is to make us more like Jesus. So that's really the final part. Does God care about my suffering? The answer is yes. How do you know he cares about your suffering?

[37 : 14] Because this is a God that launches a rescue mission for creation. Knowing that it is in bondage, knowing that it is groaning and his mission is Jesus.

And who is Jesus? He is the suffering servant as it says in Isaiah 53. When you ask, does God care about my suffering? And you just need to look to Jesus and go, he does care about my suffering because he's right there with me in my suffering.

You look at the scars on Jesus' hands and you realize he cares just as much about the sickness that's around you as you do. That's why he came to redeem creation.

That's why he's here. And those of us who have gone through some deep, sharp suffering will know those are the moments when you feel the closest to Jesus because you know that he is right there with you.

You see that Jesus weeps in John 11 when his friends die. And he weeps and I've said this before, it's just the most weird scenario, event that happens for me because Jesus is just about to blow the minds of all the people in that room because he's going to bring Lazarus back to life.

[38 : 24] So why would he cry? And it says it three times and he's deeply distressed and he's moved. Why does he cry? He cries because I think, because he's upset, because he's angry, because this is not how it's supposed to be, because he's angry at the suffering because it wasn't what was designed.

Yet we as mankind chose to set our minds on the things of the flesh and it leads down to this death and he hates it and he hates the suffering that we're going through and he hates the suffering that is surrounding in this world.

That is why he came back into the world to save it. So, for me, that's why suffering, if anything, reminds me that God is very real.

It doesn't disprove God's existence for me at all. Why? Because of Jesus. Paul Tripp says this, when you suffer, you realize you aren't alone. Jesus didn't come to explain away pain or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence. John Stott says this, I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?

[39 : 26] We realize that in Jesus, he is not a far away God who doesn't care about your suffering, that he is right there with you, weeping with you, lamenting with you.

I want to encourage you with that. If you're going through suffering, if you're seeing a loved one going through suffering right now, just the image that this God is close with scars on his hands, having dealt with the very thing that we are just so angry, so upset, so worried about.

Look at the scars on his hands and feet and you see that he dealt with it once and for all. That's why 1 Thessalonians 4, it says, we as Christians, we don't grieve as those who have no hope.

We can still grieve and we talked about this, I remember talking about this with Queenie. But we grieve with hope. We feel the loss of the things that we love but we grieve with hope because we know that actually he came and that he will come again and he will wipe away every tear.

I think that's what we're supposed to do when we go and meet people who are suffering. We sit there, we bring the tissues and we wipe their tears and we wipe our tears and we go, this sucks, I am with you.

[40 : 37] This sucks. But I want to tell you about the creator who launched this rescue mission for us. I want to tell you why there is still hope and it might not be on this side of heaven.

We need to redefine in our minds what a good life is. What is good? What is success? You look at it from the vantage point of God and you realize he is interested in far much more.

But how can he who didn't spare his own son not graciously give us all that we need? That's what happens later in Romans 8. He said, despite all this suffering we hold on to hope.

Why? Because God is for us. He's not against us. He's with us. And he gave us his son. So why do you think he's holding out on you regarding that promotion? He gave you his son.

Would you stop worrying? His rescue mission was to bring us back to be connected with him. And he is coming to restore all things and he will bring to completion what he started.

[41:38] Can we take that suffering to him and have joy and have faith? but can we also stand beside those who are really, really suffering?

Can we be like Jesus to them? N.T. Wright says this and this is where I'll finish. The question isn't why is there suffering and what is God doing about it? The answer is he launched the rescue mission in Jesus.

Only Christianity gives suffering meaning. It is temporary, transformative and redeemable. Can we hold on to that? Kelly and the team are going to lead us in a song.

It's one of our favorite songs because if there's one, if we were to distill everything, even those three mission statements saying why do we gather here? What is it to do? It is to point us to heaven.

It is to point us to the place where it's described in Revelation 21 where there is no more pain, no more death, no more fear, if we can understand that, that he works for the good of those who love him according to his purpose by conforming us to the image of his son, then we will have what we need.

[42:52] We will have who we need to face suffering. Before we sing though, I'd love for us to spend a little bit of time. If the Lord has reminded of you of someone suffering or some kind of suffering, whether it's like what Ellen prayed, whether it's for the world or whether it's actually just something in your own life that you've been wrestling with and you've been asking that question, God, I don't know if you're even here, let alone whether you care or not.

I'm here to tell you he does care. He is right here. He is the suffering servant. He is the servant king. He will lift you out of this. He will be the one who saves you. He will be the one who comforts you. He is near to you. He is near to those who are brokenhearted. So he has never left you. He is your shepherd because of that you will lack nothing.

You lack nothing right now. And he leads you on the right path and sometimes that path will lead you to the valley of the shadow of death. But don't fear. His rod and staff, they are right there with you.

He prepares a table in the presence of your enemies and your suffering and he says, come sit with me. It's going to be okay. I'm not sure if Bob Marley knew him but he was right.

[44:10] Every little thing will be all okay because of him. If you forget everything that I've said today, he's here and he cares and he will fix.

that's it. He's here. He cares and he will fix.

I'll spend a moment now and respond to him. I think I realized what I was supposed to say as we finished.

And it was a gem that again, it was actually my wife. She talked to me last night about Ecclesiastes. She's learned, teach me to pay more attention to what my wife says. She finished by talking about Hebrews.

She wasn't preaching to me by the way, this is just a conversation we were having during a foot massage. But she was like, Hebrews 11. I was like, all right, let's talk about Hebrews 11.

[45:27] And if you know, that song just reminded me, so thank you Kelly for choosing it. There's just this hall of fame of all these greats in scripture who just follow God and just do these amazing things, right?

But there's this, if you go towards the end of the chapter, it gets really messy. You've got Abraham, you've got Moses, you've got Joseph, like Joseph, these are all greats, they follow God and great things happen.

Let me just read to you. Hebrews chapter 11, verse 32. And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephah, of David and Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms and enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Great things, things that maybe you and I will never get a chance to do. But then it says, women also received back their debt by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release so that they might rise again to a better life.

Others suffered, mocking and flogging. And even chains in imprisonment, they were stoned, they were sawn in two.

[46:54] Did you ever realize that? That in the Hall of Fame there were people who were sawn in two. who had to return their dead, who refused to go back to freedom but would rather die for their

Christ.

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.

These people made the Hall of Fame. And we go around going, God, why does my job suck? And then it says at the very end, and all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised since God had provided something better for us that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Can you see that? Those greats followed by those who were sawn in half, they saw something better. They didn't see health and wealth in this world.

They saw something far beyond anything that they could experience here in this world. The key, the final part of this that really hammers home for me, the final verse of this famous chapter, since God had provided something better for us that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

[48:17] That whole list, that whole roster of giants of the faith would not be complete without us. Without you. Without you, Bill.

We are part of this Hall of Fame list. We are to suffer in the same way or not. But to point people to a better country.

I think we finish now by asking you, who do you need to carry this message to? Is there someone in your life that is really suffering with terminalness that is just grieving and destitute?

Can you bring hope for that person? Maybe you do have someone who is actually facing something that in your eyes is trivial. Maybe it is a relationship that has gone wrong. Maybe it is something that is not going well.

Can you be that person that carries this message to them and says, it is okay. There is hope.

Hebrews 11 flows into Hebrews 12.

[49:27] Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses that also laid aside every weight and sin which clings so closely that has run with the endurance, the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him enjoyed the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

That's actually how Hebrews 11 finishes. Can we be part of this group of people that points people to a better country? To sit with them in their suffering, to be prepared for suffering ourselves.

How dare we profess to follow someone who was crucified and then not expect any trial and tribulation ourselves? We too are part of this hall of fame.

Let's hold on to that and have a think. Have a think who it is that we need to share this message of hope with. Suffering is a part, an essential part, a crucial part of the human existence but it is temporary.

May the Lord bless you and keep you as you go from here. Please take this message to those who need to hear it that are in your spheres of influence. Bless you and we'll see you next week.

[50:43] Thank you.