

Reading: Job 1:1-22

Theme: The question of suffering.

On the afternoon of 21st October 1966, as we came out of school, we were met by many of our mothers and/or grandmothers who hugged their children or grandchildren and many of them were crying. Many of us wondered what was happening. We found out why when we got home - for some 9 miles away, many parents would never ever meet their children from school again, as their school had been engulfed by moving coal slag mountain and slurry - Aberfan! One church minister in the village of Aberfan said on the news that night *“This time the Almighty has made a mistake!”*

Many people feel like that about sufferings which they or family members go through, or about natural disasters, famines, wars or large-scale terrorist attacks. We can so easily ask *“Why?”* Even *“Why does God allow suffering?”* *“Doesn’t suffering disprove there is a God?”* We touched upon the question of suffering in our studies of Psalm 139, but I will consider it in more detail this evening. I know I’ll not answer every question or variation of questions we may have about this topic, but I will try and give some foundations for answers to equip us to think and help us to make some sense of sufferings and tragedies - maybe even about the coronavirus pandemic we are still going through. I realise it would be too easy to be glib, to give unthinking answers, but I will try to give some reasoned answers.

1. No God means hopelessness and chaos reigns.

Because of suffering, events, pain etc. people write off God. They cannot and will not believe in Him - that sounds fair enough, but it does not remove the problem of suffering, just removes having anyone to blame! It means we are left with staring into a dark abyss of hopelessness and chaos and these events then become random, senseless, without reason or purpose.

This reinforces the teaching of evolutionary scientists, that we are just products of random chance and therefore chaos rules and nothing has any ultimate purpose, value or meaning. It is taught we are random

chance creatures produced over billions of years, so it doesn't ultimately matter if we randomly suffer or are wiped out, for all is meaningless.

No God means there is no point or purpose and we are only valuable as a chemical reaction. Death can then be viewed as a recycling of chemicals, the rearranging of atoms. Yet many do not like this idea, in a sense they are hypocritical to their beliefs - say one thing, but place an emotional value on bundles of chemicals they call loved ones. Yet this cannot be in line with their evolutionary and atheistic beliefs.

2. God slips up and then corrects Himself.

Was that minister from Aberfan right when he said "*This time the Almighty has made a mistake*"? If he was right, as some people say, then it allows God time to clean up and make up for the mess He's made; doing so in some way so that good comes from the suffering and some purpose is achieved. If we view God like this, then He is just a bigger version of bumbling mankind and to be honest, who would want a God like that - bigger, but making bigger mistakes! We would be better off having no God than One like that!

3. God knows what's going on and why.

We could shrug our shoulders and say "*It's fate*" or "*It's chance*" or "*Allah wills*". We could say "*It is a mystery and we can't understand it.*" Even "*God knows best!*" Yet we, people around us, want real answers, pointers in the right direction concerning this question of "Why?" If God is real, then surely real answers, pointers in the right and real direction can be expected. As I will try to do in this message. Under this heading let's see 4 things:

A. Sussing out God: if God is God, how on earth can we begin to suss Him out and understand what He is like? Thankfully God has had written down for us what we need to know and this the basis of what I will say - for the Bible claims to be God's word - true and reliable. If that is the case, then we are able to bring it to bear on this question of "Why?" Moving on we see:

B. God is the Creator of everything: this is where the Bible begins and points us. He is presented as all-powerful, all knowing and in complete control (sovereign). He made all things by design and on purpose, including man and woman and declared all things “very good”. In His original creation, fresh from His “hand” we learn that everything was perfect, no fault, blemish, no pain or suffering, nor disasters, illnesses, plagues and no death for any animal. That is what we would like and what science seems to be striving for - to make it heaven on earth, a paradise in this life. Yet things are far from that situation now, so as we move on, we have to consider:

C. What on earth went wrong: something must have gone wrong big time! The Bible tells us Adam and Eve didn't listen to God, but disobeyed Him. The Bible calls this “sin”. Disobeying God is not a small matter - do not just leave it at scrumping an apple, but it was active disobedience, rebellion and treason against God and went against the only command God had given to them. Basically, they said “*We know best, we will do things our way, not Yours*”. Adam and Eve had great privileges and yet even in perfect surroundings, with God walking and talking with them as friends, they blew it. They had every reason to obey God, yet deliberately disobeyed!

Due to this God punished not only Adam and Eve, but all their descendants and He also cursed all of creation and at that point suffering and death were brought into this world and all Creation. All creation still suffers because of their sin and rebellious disobedience against God. Hold on a minute,

D. Couldn't God have done something? Surely God could have stopped Adam and Eve disobeying, sinning and prevented the sin and the suffering. Yes, He could have, but Adam and Eve were not little pre-programmed robots. God wanted Adam and Eve to have free will - to choose to love and obey Him freely. Mankind was on test there to see if they would willingly love and choose God. Sadly, they blew it - big time!

Sure, God could have scrapped them and made Adam and Eve mark 2, but would they have done any better? God wasn't going to keep on until they got it right! He made and treated Adam and Eve, as He does all people, with dignity and respect. When they fell, we all fell in them and we are part and parcel of being under the same judgement and God allows suffering and death as penal consequences of their guilt and sin - which we all share in.

This does not mean sin and suffering are stronger than God, but He chooses to allow suffering to continue for its allotted time, but the day will come when God will stop all suffering and bring it to an end in this world and He will make a perfect world, a new Creation, with no suffering in it. But we are not to leave it there and mumble something such as "*Sometime God will sort it all out...*" That is really a copout. The point I am trying to make is that God knows what is going on and why. Moving on we see:

4. God is doing something now.

We are to realise God is actively involved in our world - He has not wound-up Creation's spring or charged its batteries to simply leave it run down. He is involved and concerned about this world, so much so that we have:

A. The Maker's instructions: if we buy a piece of sophisticated electrical equipment or a car or something like that, incredibly they provide an instruction booklet! As a man, I'll let the other men into a secret - if all else fails, read the instruction booklet! It really is helpful - what to do, how to get the best out of it and what not to do! It is the maker's instructions - if you put diesel instead of petrol in the fuel tank, or water in the engine, then do not be surprised if it goes wrong. We might have a nice cup of coffee or tea, but spilling it into the inside of a computer doesn't do it any good, and if we did so, who would be to blame, especially if it was on purpose?

God, the Maker of all Creation, of men and women, has given us instructions how to live - the 10 Commandments are a good starting point, so is the sermon on the Mount, as well as many other examples

and principles for all areas of life in the Bible. Imagine if people kept and lived out the 10 Commandments, what a different place this world would be - no killing, no misplaced lust, no coveting the money, possessions of other people and so no stealing or muggings. Marriages would carry on, there would be stability in homes, be no cheating, lying or gossip. Governments would not have to spend billions on war machinery, law enforcement; governments wouldn't waste or plunder their peoples' resources, but use them for the benefit of their people. Food resources would be shared, aid would get to those in need and not stolen by the black-market profiteers or even their own governments. Following the instructions of the Maker correctly would eliminate so much suffering.

Who is to blame if God's true and good rules are ignored and broken? God or man? What about the resulting sufferings from ignoring such - do we question who really is to blame?

If we leave God out of our lives, He can let us get on with things and if we make a mess of things, then nowhere does He promise to bail us out! Sometimes we are to learn from our errors, and when things go wrong, we are not to become lazy. If God overrode errors of judgement or design, no one would learn or the errors be corrected. We know the Titanic disaster, but resulting from it, hundreds of thousands of lives have been saved by safety procedures put in place. Aberfan -if the NCB had **not ignored** the surveyor's report not to build the slag heap there - it was prone to many streams bubbling up in very wet weather, then the school would not have been demolished. The NCB made a mistake - not God and learning from it has most likely prevented many such disasters. The tragedies on 911 exposed the lack security procedures on internal flights, which have now been corrected.

Suffering is a symptom to make us question "*What is wrong?*" God has told us what is wrong. We would be foolish to ignore a specialist's advice on the medicine or the treatment they gave. If we did so and then remain ill, we couldn't blame the doctor. Yet people ignore God's

diagnosis and remedy, yet still blame Him! Following the Maker's instructions will alleviate so much suffering, but then:

B. What about natural disasters: such things as earthquakes, famines, plagues, pandemics, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions etc.? What does the Bible say about these? The Bible tells us all Creation was affected by the repercussions of Adam and Eve's sin. Man wanted to be as God, but natural disasters remind us all that we are just mortal creatures. They are constant reminders of the ongoing outworking of God's judgement in this world. Mankind thinks it is top dog, the best, even god-like. We rightly own we have achieved much, incredible things, have made many advances and understand so much, but people at their best are but people, but God is always God!

God speaks to us in so many ways - He whispers quietly to us in the good and the happy times, yet in the disasters God **SHOUTS** to people - that we are not in control. Sadly, people do not listen, even as God calls loudly; some even will shut their ears and minds and try to shout back in defiance.

As people, we do not listen collectively or personally, as we fail to realise we personally are included in the ongoing judgements of God - we are growing older; we suffer pain. Yet these are great blessings! What? Now you know I have flipped! Pain and old age blessings? Pain is a warning, a survival mechanism which tells us something is wrong - so we try and do something about it. No pain and we could so easily and very soon end up dead! Yet pain also reminds us we are mortal and have to be ready to meet our Maker one day. Suffering, pain per se, are not good - except to remind us of our frailty and mortality. Old age is designed to remind us we will not last forever. We complain of so little time, but act as if we have an unlimited store of it! Yet we do not! Old age and its accompanying weakening of the body, or wrinkles, firm and trim figures bulge and grow; grey hair or hair loss occurs... Many of us see, or will see, visual aids to the ageing process as we look in a mirror! We are mortal and will one day, sooner or later, die. Natural disasters, our own personal sufferings, our own ageing processes, call on us to

consider God. We are not in control; we will come and go and have to face God.

C. It seems so unfair: nice people suffer, die, are wiped out; young people with exciting potential and futures are gone. We can ask “*Why me?*” Or “*Why did such and such happen to...?*” - they, nor I did wrong, are nice, and good and better than... In that case maybe the question should be “*Who should suffer then?*” “*Why not you or me?*” How would you lay down the criteria for those who should or should not suffer? We can say certain things, but others may lay down different criteria and we could be included in theirs at a very rapid rate! Whoever chose, even if you or I chose, it would come back to us sooner or later. Then what could we say? If suffering were measured out according to our deserving it, then none of us would know any good. Suffering or lack of suffering does not say anything about a person’s deserving, not deserving, or about their morals or spiritual standing. Realise:

D. God is holding back suffering in ways we cannot imagine: we see a disaster, but fail to see God may have prevented worse as a result of it or in it; yet we may not be any the wiser. Many potential rapists, murderers, despots, dictators have been prevented from arising by a disaster. God can even restrain the suffering in such disasters in ways we will not grasp or understand - in the 911 attacks on the twin towers, many were enabled to escape that disaster by the built-in design structure of the towers, which delayed their collapsing until after many more had escaped. Illnesses and the death of dictators are often welcomed by their people - to many then, age and death are blessings! People think God is cold and indifferent to human hurt, suffering and pain, but that is not the case as we are told in the Bible that:

E. God Himself knows personally what it is like to suffer: God knows this in and through the Person of His Son the Lord Jesus, who entered human existence; experienced and knows about suffering and grief. For Adam and Eve, the ultimate part of the punishment was death - physical death yes, but also eternal death which is being separated from God forever and actively punished by Him in hell. The Bible

describes hell as a place of undiluted suffering, while heaven is a place of undiluted joy, but our time here on earth is a mixture of both sufferings and joys.

The Bible tells Jesus took our punishment for our sin on Himself there on the cross of Calvary and when we trust Him, come to faith in Him and accept Him as our Saviour, that eternal part of punishment is removed off us and we are pardoned, given new life, have new natures and then we want to obey God's commands. From then on, we, as individuals, are to begin to make a difference in people's lives and not actively add to their sufferings. For God begins and does something in us when Jesus is our Saviour. Does anyone listening or watching want that change or are ready for God to do it in them? Perhaps God has been challenging you, causing you to think about your relationship with Him and He can bring about a glorious change in your life which will give you hope and comfort in life as well as hope and comfort in facing your death - whenever it comes upon you - for as a Christian you will have a home in heaven and there in heaven will be no pain or suffering, neither will there be ageing, or tears. It will be, well, heaven!

Many people question why God doesn't do something in this world and its suffering, but are they willing for God to begin with them or even you if you've asked that question? I have tried to cover a lot of ground and may have answered some questions, probably left many more questions unanswered or raised even more questions in your mind! Ultimately none of us will ever fully understand these things. God is God, but we can see and reason matters out wisely and lovingly to others and to our own minds, so that we can help people in trying to answer the questions.

Pray God would help us to have a growing understanding, as well as a quiet confidence and trust as we go into many changing scenes of life in our uncertain and confusing times.