

LENT 1. SERMON NOTES AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

SUFFERING AND HOPE



PT 1. SOLUTIONS TO SUFFERING

SUFFERING? NAME SOME!

First get acquainted, welcome people, get to know each other, then dive in deep!

Name some suffering you have experienced in your life.

It could be big or small, but I am asking you to honestly name some suffering.

SEVEN NATURAL RESPONSES TO SUFFERING...

1. AVOIDANCE.

Have you seen someone avoiding someone else's suffering? What happened?

When have you wanted to avoid someone's pain or suffering?

When have you ever wanted to look away (it's OK to admit as we all have)?

Reflect on these three Bible passages. Find the 'avoidance' in each. What are you hearing?

***So if you live many years, rejoice in them all;
but remember that the days of darkness will be many! – Ecclesiastes 11:7***

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" - Matthew 16:21-22

He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. - Isaiah 53:3

How do you feel about the following quote?

Gordon MacDonald says there are three myths about suffering:

- ***That suffering is the exception***
- ***That suffering can never happen to me***
- ***That when it comes I can handle it.***

God does not avoid suffering. On the cross of Jesus God dives right into the darkest place!
How is this 'good news' for you?

2. DESPAIR.

The problem with despair is that it's like a pit, when you're in the pit you can't see out!

What does despair feel like for you?

In the book of Ecclesiastes we encounter the great king Solomon who surveys everything 'under the sun'. This phrase 'under the sun' hints that Solomon is showing us what a life looks like when it is based on material things. It also hints that there is something more than just 'under the sun'. Reflect on Solomon's words below. Have you ever felt anything like he expresses here? What's the answer to it?

I hated all the things I had worked for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me... So my heart began to despair... - Ecclesiastes 2:18,20b

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a famous atheist. He believed our fate as a race was to either exterminate ourselves or suffer continually. His despair was logical. It was based on history and human nature. What response would you give to Schopenhauer's logical despair?

How does the cross of Jesus Christ answer despair?

3. ROMANTICISING.

"Silent night, Holy night, all is calm, all is bright" (Oh really?)

Romanticising is when we try to make it 'nicer'. Like when we portray people with a terminal illness as serene, calm and happy even though they are fretting, anxious and fearful. We romanticise by seeing the deep beauty in suffering people without also recognising how bad it is.

Where have you seen suffering romanticised?

Why is this wrong?

4. DENIAL.

*Those who know me are horrified by my suffering;
those who see me in the street run away from me. - Psalm 31:11*

Have you ever tried to share your problems with someone who just told you to ‘snap out of it’?

There is a religious version of this. Many forms of Buddhism actually teach that suffering is not real. They teach that suffering is just a result of ‘attachment’. So if you love things or people or your body or the world this attachment to things causes suffering. They say that suffering is not real and that if we can release our attachments, then we will discover that the suffering was not real in the first place.

What do you make of this religious denial of suffering?

What are some other ways people deny suffering?

Can denied suffering ever be healed?

God is not missing from the darkest hardest places. Instead on the cross of Jesus we discover that God does not ignore or deny suffering but joins us. Isn’t that great news?

5. BLAMING SATAN.

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, Christ made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. - Colossians 2:15

Some religions teach that evil is as powerful as good. Some Eastern religions teach ‘Ying & Yang’ – ‘good & evil’ which they believe are equally powerful. This is a dangerous teaching called ‘Dualism’. Dualism is the idea that there are two equal and opposite forces (good and evil) that drive reality. Some forms of dualism even teach that harmony or balance between the two is needed. Yes, this is beginning to sound like Star Wars! But even Christians can stray into dualism when we give Satan too much power.

What is wrong with dualism?

Why is dualism definitely NOT the teaching of the Bible?

How would you answer a dualist?

“God’s little finger has more love and power than all the demons of hell combined!”

6. BLAMING YOURSELF.

Have you ever blamed yourself for something that was NOT your fault?

Guilt is a common ‘stage’ or part of grief. Have you ever felt guilty when grieving?

Sometimes when inexplicable things happen we assume we are to blame. Why do we do this?

Read and reflect on the story of the ‘Man Born Blind’ in John chapter 9.

His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. - John 9:2-3

Judaism teaches that suffering is reaping what we sowed. In the Old Testament there is the idea that people who suffer brought it on themselves. In Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism this idea is present in the teaching of 'karma' that each piece of personal suffering is a direct result of a previous sin...

Jesus taught very differently. He didn't equate each single piece of suffering with specific sins. When he met a blind child he refused to correlate that suffering to the sin of the man or his parents. He didn't let people do some kind of spiritual maths and put each sin next to a piece of suffering. The problem with this kind of teaching is that we then tend to also assume that every good thing we receive is a reward for our efforts – which we know is clearly bad form! Instead Jesus taught that the rain falls on both the good and bad alike, that we all receive blessings and suffering in life alike, and that God is going to do something good with it ALL in the end!

What do you think of Jesus' approach?

How might Jesus' explanation regarding the man born blind apply to other things you have seen?

7. BLAMING GOD.

Quietly read and reflect on the following prayers of Job and David.

Job 10:1-3

I hate my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul.

I will say to God: Do not condemn me, but tell me what charges you have against me.

Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?

Psalms 38:1-3

O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.

For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me.

Because of your wrath there is no health in my body...

What are you hearing in there? What's speaking to you personally?

Have you ever blamed God?

God accepted the blame when he hung on a cross! In Christ God accepted the blame for all the evil and suffering in the world. Only a human can represent us humans and yet only God can save. And so Jesus Christ, all human and all God is the only one who can take the blame for all the evil in the world. He took it on himself. The blame is over. The suffering is paid for. Only Jesus Christ can answer suffering!

As you begin this season of 40 days together as a group let your prayer centre on the cross.

FINISH WITH PRAYER!