

**THE REAL JESUS**  
**A Series on the Book of Mark**  
**“On the Problem of Suffering”**  
**Mark 11:1-11**  
**New City Church of LA**  
**March 22, 2009**  
**Speaker: Kevin Haah**

**I. Introduction**

Series called THE REAL JESUS. We are looking at the life of Jesus through the Book of Mark. Today, with this passage, we start the last week of Jesus' life. Jesus is finally approach Jerusalem. We learned last week that the disciples are pretty scared, but they know something going to happen in Jerusalem.

**Read Mark 11:1-11**

1As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, 2saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 3If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.' "

4They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, 5some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" 6They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. 7When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. 8Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. 9Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

"Hosanna!<sup>[a]</sup>"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"<sup>[b]</sup>

10"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Hosanna in the highest!"

11Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

When I started to study and meditate on this passage, I couldn't help but to notice really interesting and weird details in this passage. Jesus is right outside of Jerusalem. He told two of his disciples to go into the village ahead, and find a colt tied there, which no one had ridden, and then he told them to bring it. And if someone asked, "what do you think you are doing?" Jesus said just say that the Lord needs it and will return it. Some people say that Jesus must have made prearrangements with the owner of the colt; but, I don't think that's what the passage says or even implies. I think Mark wrote this because he wanted to show that Jesus was very intentional about how he entered Jerusalem and how he walked into the cross. It was not something that happened to him. It was something that he came to do, every step and every detail. He knew exactly what was going to happen, and it happened exactly the way he said it would happen. Jesus was fully in control of his circumstances and his destiny.

When Jesus rode on the colt, which had never been ridden, it was a supernatural thing. What happens when you ride on a colt which has never been ridden? He's going to try to dump you off the saddle. It's rodeo time! But, Jesus was fully in control over his situation!

And what he did fulfilled the prophecies made about him hundreds of years ago in Zachariah 9:9:

9 Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!  
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

As Jesus rode on the colt, he was fulfilling the prophecy in Zachariah.

Jesus knew exactly what was going. He knew what was going to happen. Remember he said in 10:33 that he was going to be betrayed to the chief priests, condemned to death, handed over the Gentiles, be mocked, spat upon, flogged, killed, and rise again in three days. He knew where he was going. He knew how he was going to get there. He had everything under control. He WAS IN CONTROL over all circumstances and events. Everything worked out the way he said it would. Jesus is completely sovereign.

And this passage started to fascinate me. There are two ideas right here: his sovereignty and control demonstrating his glory. Yet, his destiny was suffering. All symbolized by the colt. His declaration to the world that he is the Messiah. Yet, his declaration at the same time that he is a suffering Messiah. These two ideas didn't go together in the mind of the Jews at the time, and I think these two ideas don't go together in our minds as well.

If I can control everything and had that kind of power, the first thing I would do is to make sure I don't suffer. Yet, Jesus suffered. He intentionally walked the road of suffering.

I think the number one question that people have about God is that if He is so powerful and can control everything and all situations, why does he allow suffering to exist?

This is a classic problem of suffering in Christianity. It's often phrased like this:

If God is all powerful and good, he would not allow suffering in this world. Since there is suffering in this world, either God is not all powerful or he is not all good. He can't be both all powerful and good.

So, what I would like to do is to look into four things:

**(1) the Cause of Suffering; (2) the Purpose of Suffering; (3) How God Works Through Suffering; and (4) How God Was Involved in Suffering.**

## **II. First, the Cause of Suffering**

One thing must be clarified from the beginning. Suffering is not a part of God's original created order. If you look at Genesis 1 and 2, there is no suffering before humanity decided to sin. God did not and does not cause suffering. Suffering is an alien intrusion into God's world. The cause of suffering is not God; it is our sin.

Now, if all suffering is a result of sin, directly or indirectly, why did God allow sin to enter the world?

God did so because he loves us and wanted to have a mutually loving relationship with us. And the only way to have a loving relationship with us was to give us free will. Love is not real if it is forced, if there is no free will. Relationship is not real if there is no freedom to not to have that relationship. So, God gave us freedom, and we messed up.

(1) Some suffering is a result of our own sins. If you put your hand in the fire, you get burned and suffer. If you abuse drugs, you're going to get addicted. If you abuse alcohol, you are going to suffer from alcoholism. If you drive recklessly, you are going to cause an accident. Things like selfishness, greed, lust, arrogance, bad temper often lead to broken relationships and cause all kind of suffering.

(2) Some suffering is a result of others' sin. Not all of our suffering is a result of our own sins. If you ever read the Book of Job, the main point of that book is that there is no automatic link between one's own sin and suffering. Sometime, as we discussed, there is. But, sometimes, there is not. Job's friends all thought that Job's suffering must be the result of his sins, but they were all wrong. God chastised them for their accusations.

So much of the suffering in this world is a result of other people's sin. Think about war. So much of the world's suffering is caused by war, and so much of war is caused by the evil of men. Much of starvation is caused by systemic evil of unequal distribution of world's resources. We must begin to see evil in its face and realize that so much of it is systems we've created, knowingly or unknowingly.

Even at an individual level, suffering is often caused by sins of others—murder, adultery, theft, sexual abuse, unloving parents or absent parents, drunk drivers, slander, unkindness, gossip, or selfishness of one kind or another.

You might be saying, ok, I can see that so much of the suffering is caused by the sins of men and women, individually or systematically, personally or by other people. But how about natural suffering? How about illnesses? How about Earthquakes? How about natural death? What causes those sufferings?

(3) Some sufferings are a result of the fallen world. Genesis 3:18 says that as a result of Adam and Eve's sin, "thorns and thistle" entered the world. Ever since that time, Romans 8:20 says that "the creation was subject to frustration," it is "groaning," it is in "bondage to decay." Somehow, when sin entered the world, it had an effect on the created order as well. In essence, the principalities of evil started to control the world. And, it started to decay. It started to malfunction at a cellular level. Now, the Bible tells us that all of these sufferings were caused by sin, indirectly, but still caused by sin.

But, you might say, well, isn't God sovereign? Isn't he in control of everything? Isn't he a powerful sovereign God who is able to control all circumstances? Why doesn't he get rid of them? Why does he allow them? Why doesn't he get rid of them in my life? Why doesn't he zap them?

### **III. Let's start by looking at the Purpose of Suffering.**

The philosophical problem of suffering is actually easily resolvable. Many philosophers have pointed this out. The classic problem was: If God is all powerful and all good, he has the power to stop all evil. There are terrible evil in the world; so, God must either not be all powerful or all good. But, if there is a reason for suffering, the problem is resolved. For example, the suffering of surgery: we don't call what the surgeon is doing evil even if it causes pain because there is a point to the suffering. What is the point to the suffering? Here are some thoughts:

(1) Human freedom is an important point. If God took away the consequences of one sin (say Adam and Eve's sin), then he has to be prepared to take away the consequences of the next sin. If he kept taking away the consequences of all of our sins, then, in effect, there is no freedom. We can't ever walk away from God. Nothing important could ever come by human choice.

(2) Now, I am sure there are other reasons, but it's hard for us to see. We are people who live in a three dimensional world and God lives outside of time and space. He can see the past and future here and there all in one swoop. It's hard to fathom's God's omnipotence and omnipresence. Now, the underlying assumption behind the problem of suffering is that sufferings appear pointless to me, so they must be pointless. Just because we don't see it doesn't mean there aren't good reasons for them. I think this puts enormous faith in our ability to reason: If we can't think of a reason, there can't be any.

### **IV. Even though we often don't understand the point of the suffering, God can work through suffering.**

Think about Joseph in Genesis, one of the sons of Jacob. He was an arrogant man who was hated by his brothers. In their anger, they sold him into a life of slavery and misery in Egypt. I am sure Joseph asked God to help him escape from the suffering and misery, but he experienced years of bondage; but, his character was refined and strengthened by his sufferings. Eventually, he became the prime minister of Egypt who saved thousands of lives and even his own family from starvation. If God had not allowed Joseph to experienced years of suffering, he would never have been such a power agent for social justice and spiritual healing. Joseph said to his brothers who sold him as a slave (Genesis 50:20): “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

**In the same way, if you allow it, suffering can be used to bring you closer to Christ.** C.S. Lewis said: 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.

The hardest times of our lives often become the impetus for spiritual growth. My sister-in-law has a rare blood disease called Aplastic Anemia that turned into Leukemia. She was told she had about 5 years to live about 10 years ago. She outlived her expected lifespan. Even though she was physically weak, she was stronger than ever spiritually. She lived moment by moment in the presence of God. For a long time, we prayed for healing, but God did not answer our prayers. We didn't understand why; but, she became stronger. Not only so, but recently we found a match for a bone marrow transfer. We praise God for that. But, her suffering brought her closer to God.

**There a few metaphors that the Bible uses to show how suffering builds our character.** One image is that of the discipline of children. The write of Hebrews (in Hebrews 12:10) says that “our father disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” He says that: “no disciple seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Peter uses a different image: that of a metal worker refining silver and gold. He says in 1 Peter 1:7: “These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

**God also uses suffering to make our lives more fruitful.** Jesus talked about how God prunes every fruitful branch so that it will be even more fruitful.

**God can use suffering to bring about his good purpose.** Paul says in Romans 8:28: “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

**V. God is not a person who is estranged from suffering. He suffered for us and is suffering along side of us. He is involved in suffering.**

God is not looking at our suffering as a disinterested observer, sitting up there in heaven removed from this suffering world. God is, as Tertullian puts it, “the crucified God.” He became one of us. He suffered in all the ways in which we suffer.

Well, how can God suffer the way we suffer?

In the text for today, we see two amazing things happening:

One, we see that Jesus was in complete control over all circumstances of his triumphal entry. He knew everything that was going to happen and it came to happen exactly the way he said it would. Even the way people cried out, it fulfilled prophecies. Yet, the road into Jerusalem was the road to his crucifixion. He said that to his disciple at least three times already. God’s power and sovereignty did not stop his suffering.

And the magnitude of his suffering was horrendous. In order to understand the magnitude of His suffering, we have to understand who Jesus is. He is the Son of God who was not created but took part in creation and lived for eternity “in the bosom[buzem] of the Father,” a relationship of absolute intimacy and love. That’s what John 1 tells us. But, at the end on the cross, he was cut off from the Father. It hurts a lot to lose a parent. And I don’t even want to think about how much it would hurt to lose a spouse. And I can’t even fathom how much it hurt for Jesus to lose the infinite love of the Father that he had from all eternity. Jesus’ suffering would have been eternally unbearable. Jesus bore, as the substitute in our place, the endless exclusion from God that the human race has merited. So, when, on the cross, Jesus cried out: “my God my God, why have you forsaken me,” he was experiencing unimaginable suffering and cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds any suffering we have gone through.

Why? Because he wanted to save us from our sins: the sins that caused so much suffering in the world. He wanted to save us from the bondage of our sins.

If we ask the question one more time, why does God allow evil and suffering to continue, and we look at the cross, we still may not know exactly what that answer might be. HOWEVER, we know what the answer isn't. It's can't be that he doesn't love us. It's can't be that he's detached or indifferent to what's going on here. He takes our misery and suffering SO seriously that he as willing to take it on himself.

If we understand this, we have deep consolation and strength to face the brutal realities of life on earth.