

## The God Who Suffers

Readings: Psalm 22: 1-21 & Matt 27: 32-46

"We were only about half a block from that big gate, we started driving away and about another half a block and we all got sick, just like that. This stench that hit us, it was just dead bodies." This is how Don Schoo of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division describes entering the Buchenwald concentration camp just hours after its liberation on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1945. As more and more concentration camps were liberated reports flowed in of the horrors witnessed by the soldiers. Stories of finding emaciated prisoners looking like the walking dead, corpses left unburied on the ground, the gas chambers. The Holocaust stands apart from all other events as the defining example of 20<sup>th</sup> century evil. And the reason is partly this: from about 1755 onwards European philosophy began to grapple with the nature of evil and it came to the conclusion that we were on a great march of progress and that eventually we would become so advanced that we would eliminate suffering.<sup>1</sup> But this optimism was shattered by the horrors of World War 1, the so-called "war to end all wars" and the final nail was driven in by the discovery that a respected and cultured European nation like Germany could systematically exterminate 11 million people in such a horrific manner.

The Holocaust would provide a mighty challenge to theology, especially Jewish theology which came to various conclusions to make sense of what had happened. Some Jewish theologians saw the Holocaust as punishment for the Jewish community's sins or for turning their back on their traditions. Others saw it as proof that there was in fact no God. And others came to the conclusion that while there is a God, he was a cold god uncaring about humanity. After all, what place does a loving God have in Auschwitz?

And it wasn't just Jewish thinkers who struggled with this question.

Jürgen Moltmann was born 8 April 1926 in Hamburg, Germany and received a thoroughly secular upbringing. He was a highly intelligent young man and was fascinated by mathematics and intended to study it at university. But before he could commence studies he (along with his classmates) was conscripted into the German army at the age of 17. It was in the German army that three major influences on his thinking would happen. The first was in July 1943 during the Allied bombing of Hamburg in which he witnessed a close friend torn to pieces by a bomb that miraculously left Moltmann unscathed. Despite not being a believer, that night he cries out to God for the first time "Where are you?" and "Why did I survive when all the others died?". He was later stationed on the front lines where he surrendered to the first British soldier he met in 1945 and was imprisoned in various prisoner of war camps until 1948. It was in one of these camps that he learnt of the horrors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. In fact, his captors nailed photos from Buchenwald in his hut so that he and the other prisoners would be forced to confront what their people had done. And Moltmann loses all hope in German culture and finds it replaced with a deep shame and remorse for the Holocaust to the point where he states that he would rather die than face what his nation had done. But he is given hope in the form of a copy of the Psalms and the New Testament given to him by a chaplain. And Jesus finds Moltmann in the prisoner of war camp.

But he still has to wrestle with the question of where was God amidst the suffering of the Holocaust. And in his book *The Crucified God* he points to an anecdote by a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel:

*"The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. 'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment for a long time, I heard the man call again, 'Where is*

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<sup>1</sup> N T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, ©2006), 20.

God now?' And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows'

And Moltmann comments:

*"Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference."*<sup>2</sup>

And this may sound like an odd statement but he's condemning a belief inspired by Greek philosophy called "classical theism". This is the belief in which God is seen as the most perfect being possible, unchanging and incapable of feeling pain or suffering.

And Moltmann charges that to do this is make God into a dead idol from our own insecurities about life.<sup>3</sup>

And I think he's onto something here. People often ask me why God seems so angry and jealous and childish in the Old Testament. And this desire to protect God from these passages is understandable. But an emotionless God is not the God we are shown. Rather we are shown a God who is love and is passionate about humankind. And in His passion and love for humanity he allows Himself to suffer and be affected by His creation.

And nowhere is this more apparent than in the crucifixion of Jesus.

For me, it's the biggest problem with the idea that God cannot suffer. What are we to do with the crucifixion of Jesus – God made flesh? Some have tried to protect God by saying that it was just Jesus' human side that suffered on the cross while his "God side" was off over here somewhere. But if Jesus is fully human and fully God then we cannot say this.

The only thing we can say is that Jesus is God and that Jesus is God crucified on the cross.

And we cannot speak glibly about this.

And if I may step on some toes, I think we often do speak too glibly about Christ crucified. I think we often use the resurrection to protect us from the horrors of the cross by glossing over it.

Jesus hanging on the cross cries out "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" – "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" In this moment Jesus feels a deep separation from the Father. And in turn, the Father suffers the death of the Son.<sup>4</sup>

Psalms 22 has long been read as a prediction of the crucifixion of Jesus because of the similarities between the experience of the Psalmist and Jesus. And while this is a perfectly valid interpretation we have to be careful not to overlook what it meant for readers pre-Christ. The heart of this psalm is the theme of the deep feeling of abandonment by God. The sufferer has fallen prey to the wicked schemes of others and crying out to God for deliverance. Not even the clothes on his back are safe. The vicious attacks have dehumanised him to the point where he feels that he is only a worm.

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, SCM Classics (London: SCM, 1974), 283.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Life-Style*, trans. M Douglas Meeks (London: SCM, 1978), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Moltmann summarised in Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 176.

The psalmist cries out *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”*

It seems that the only thing the psalmist can put hope in is that God has been faithful in the past and will be faithful to him again.

He cries out

*“Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.”*

In fact, suffering and waiting for deliverance has been quite the running theme in our series on Psalms. When I preached on depression I drew from Psalm 6:

*“Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;  
heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.*

*My soul is in deep anguish.  
How long, LORD, how long?”*

When Karl spoke about the tragic loss of his father at a young age he drew upon Psalm 30:

*“Tears may flow in the night, but there will be joy in the morning.”*

When Susan spoke on prolonged illness without healing she drew upon Psalm 71:

*“O God, don’t stay away.*

*My God, please hurry to help me.”*

Psalm 22 draws these elements together into a prayer of suffering that encompasses faith and doubt. And throughout time it has provided a model of encouragement for those who feel abandoned and are wondering how far off deliverance is. By making it solely about Jesus we miss what the psalm is saying to us about suffering and abandonment.

If we make it merely a prediction about Jesus’ death we miss something deeply profound about his cry. By drawing on Psalm 22, by drawing on the Judaic tradition surrounding it, Jesus demonstrates his solidarity with suffering humanity. Jesus takes the cry of the suffering psalmist and makes it his own. He takes our suffering and makes it his own.

And this may seem like a strange statement because in the Western Church we tend to emphasise the horrifying pain of the crucifixion when we talk about the suffering of Jesus. But in Christ’s Middle Eastern context the punishment was focused much more on shaming the criminal. When you were crucified you were taken outside the city walls, striped completely naked, and lifted high for everyone to see. It was a slow death that could last days. You became a nobody, an outsider, a blasphemer, cursed by God, an exile from your community. It was a thoroughly dehumanising punishment in which every aspect of your identity was stripped away from you.

Suffering and loss seem to go hand and hand because often suffering results in the loss of part of our identity. The death of a child can result in the ceasing to be a parent. The loss of a spouse can end our identities as a husband or wife. In a society where we are defined by what we do, the sudden loss of a career can strike a tremendous blow to our identity. A bout of serious mental illness can

take away our identity as a functioning and stable adult. And as history has taught us, oppression at the hands of others strips people of their humanity.

And Jesus takes all of that upon himself. He takes all of history, all our shame, all our suffering, all our emptiness and grief upon himself, and he feels it deeply as he is exiled. Through the cross God suffers with us and for us.

And I know this doesn't rationalise suffering. It's a topic I've always struggled with. But I've come to the conclusion that you can't rationalise evil and suffering. You can try to understand it and the factors that lead to it but you can never rationalise it or turn it into a logical theory without going mad. And I'm sure some of you are disappointed that I haven't told you the grand reason for why we suffer. But a logical theory of suffering wouldn't make anyone feel better. In my experience with people, being told the reason for why your loved one died or why you've been diagnosed with cancer doesn't soothe the pain. Neither does telling them that God has some great plan that required little Jimmy to get hit by a truck. What does soothe is the presence of another person who cares and perhaps cries with us. And so the idea that God suffers with us, even when we don't feel like He does, doesn't rationalise why we suffer, it doesn't rationalise the Holocaust happening, but it does give hope. And this hope can only be found in the God who suffered on the cross, the God who loves us so passionately that He would allow himself to be wounded for us, and the God who will win against suffering in the end.