

Why Does God Allow so Much Suffering in the World?

Be Ready to Share 2016 Summer Sermon Series

Kenwood Baptist Church

Missionary Alex Kirk, Training Leaders International

July 10, 2016

TEXT: Matthew 9:35-38



This morning, as part of the “Be Ready” series, we will be looking at a famous passage from Matthew 9 and asking what this text has to say about the issue of suffering. I am going to talk this morning a lot about the little country of Haiti. I’ll explain why and tell you a little about the work of Training Leaders International near the end.

Matthew 9:35-38

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”

INTRODUCTION

On January 12, 2010 at 4:50 in the afternoon, a massive, magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Its epicenter was practically in the heart of downtown. The damage was apocalyptic. Paul Farmer, renowned Harvard professor, medical doctor, UN special envoy, and veteran of three decades of medical relief work in Haiti, writes about the aftermath of the earthquake in his book, *Haiti after the Earthquake* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011). He describes being in the Miami airport when he heard about the quake and calling every Haitian cell

number in his phone trying to get through to someone. Nothing. When he finally reached the Haitian prime minister, he asked about the death toll. “Thousands?” he said. “Tens of thousands,” the Prime Minister answered. The real answer turned out to be hundreds of thousands. When all was said and done, nearly 250,000 people lost their lives during or soon after the earthquake. One and a half million, more than half the population of Port-au-Prince, were homeless. When Farmer got off the plane in Haiti about 24 hours later as part of a first-response medical team, he said that the “charnel house stench” was overwhelming. He knew it well from medical school, but he said he couldn’t imagine smelling it in an open space. Because so many of the dead were trapped under rubble that it would take months to clear. The entire city had become an open air morgue. Diseases like tetanus and cholera spread quickly. Aftershocks continued for days. People were afraid to stay inside any building. And amidst all of the incredible physical suffering, people walked around in a daze because their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters had been crushed by falling buildings or were simply lost—never recovered and never heard from again.

I share this story from Haiti with you because it is such a stark example of human suffering on as grand a scale as can be imagined, but we can all relate to it precisely because we all suffer. You can imagine that charnel house stench because none of us can escape death. You can imagine the pain of broken bones because many of us have broken bones. You can imagine the psychological trauma of losing a loved one because many of us have lost those closest to us. And even if your suffering is mild in comparison, it is *your* suffering. Depression, hopelessness, unemployment, lack of fulfillment, or chronic illness can level your life like an earthquake. Our passage describes this condition as being “harassed and helpless.”

Our condition of suffering represents perhaps the greatest challenge to the Christian faith that there is. You see, when theologians and philosophers talk about the problem of evil, or theodicy, as it’s called, they often talk about a trilemma—a problem with three heads: 1. Evil exists. 2. God is sovereign (or all powerful). 3. God is good. Those three things, so the story goes, cannot all be true. If God is good, then why human suffering? It is not really an abstract or philosophical question to most people, it is an acute reality. No life will ultimately be untouched by suffering.

So, as Christians, what is our response to suffering? How do we answer the challenge of suffering when we face it in our lives and the lives of our friends and loved ones? How do we answer the challenge of suffering when we speak to non-Christians? This passage from Matthew contains what is ultimately our best, and perhaps our only, answer. **In response to suffering, we proclaim that Jesus is bringing in His compassionate kingdom.**

So what does that mean and how does that help with suffering? Well, we'll look at this text and break it down. First, we'll see that (1) **Jesus is our compassionate king**; then we'll see that (2) **Jesus will bring evil to justice**. Finally, we'll ask what our role in Jesus' kingdom is.

DOCTRINE

I. Jesus is our compassionate king. To understand what this has to do with suffering, we have to realize that **bad leadership causes suffering**. You can see this clearly in Matthew 9:36. The text says: *"When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* This image is the first of two really expansive, dense, layered images in this passage, and both have a symphony of Old Testament resonances behind them. So in order for us to understand what exactly it means that Jesus sees the people are harassed and helpless, we have to unpack this image of sheep without a shepherd. As many of you probably know, "shepherd" was a metaphor for leadership (and especially kingship) in the Ancient Near East. So in Numbers 27:17, there is a concern that someone would be appointed to replace Moses in order that *"the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."* Without a shepherd, domestic sheep are liable to stray, to get lost, to fail to find the provisions that they need, and perhaps most acutely, they are vulnerable to attacks from wild animals. The passage of the Old Testament that brings all of this together most clearly is Ezekiel 34. The word of the LORD comes to Ezekiel commanding him to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: *"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?... The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts"* (Ezekiel 34:2, 4-5). The shepherds in this passage are the kings of Israel whose job was to protect the people in every sense of the word, but not only have these kings failed to protect the people, they have actually extorted, taken advantage of, and abused the people. To be harassed and helpless is to be without compassionate leadership and therefore defenseless.

The people of Haiti are a living example of this. The earthquake of 2010 would not have been nearly as destructive if it had not come at the end of over 200 years of some of the worst, abusive governance imaginable. The "presidents" of Haiti—with one or two glowing exceptions—have actively sought to get rich and maintain power at the expense of the common good. One president in the 20th century tore out the only train tracks connecting Haiti's largest cities in order to sell them for scraps and pocket the money. Because there were

no building codes in Haiti, the earthquake flattened everything and the loss of life was catastrophic. This was exacerbated by the fact that the country completely lacked any medical or emergency response systems, not to mention the infrastructure, to enable it to respond quickly and effectively to a disaster of that scale. Meanwhile, president after president has proven himself willing to use any means necessary to stay in power while embezzling tens of millions of dollars to live lavishly in exile.

Where have you felt the suffering of bad leadership? In your home? In your workplace? In contrast to the wicked rulers of Israel described by Ezekiel, Jesus steps into the gap, binds up the injured, heals the sick, searches out the lost. We see this in Matthew 9:35: *“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.”* It is this combination of proclaiming the kingdom and healing suffering that proves Jesus to be the promised Messiah (see Isaiah 61:1-3). In Matthew’s own words: *“This is the Shepherd come in power to protect and provide for His flock”* (Matt 2:6, quoting Mic 5:2). **Jesus is our compassionate king.**

How does this truth help us in suffering? Matthew 9:36 again says: *“When He saw the crowds, He had compassion for them.”* The word for “compassion” here is related to a word for innards. It is visceral—like a punch in the gut. It is a deeply felt emotion that moves you to action. Jesus’ compassion is never just a feeling. Every time this word is used in Matthew, “emotion results in caring and effective action” (14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; France 2007, 373). You do not have a distant God, you do not have a God who is unmoved by suffering. Nor do you have a flaky disingenuous God who cries during the presentation but does nothing to help the starving children. You have a God who both attends to you, notices your suffering, and then moves in compassion. **This is the first part of the response to suffering—Jesus is our compassionate king.**

II. Jesus will bring evil to justice. This truth is loaded into the second dense image—the harvest in Matthew 9:37: *“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”* If you study the image of the harvest throughout the Bible, you will find that it is almost always an image of judgment. So in Isaiah 17:5 about the judgment of Damascus, we read: *“And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain and his arm harvests the ears.”* We find this same imagery of the harvest as judgment in Matthew 3:12. John the Baptist, speaking of Jesus, says: *“His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

Without a doubt, in our passage, the harvest image carries a positive connotation from the surrounding context—it refers to those who are suffering and lost but who have been prepared by God and are ripe for the message of the gospel. However, given all this biblical context for the harvest imagery, I find it hard to imagine that this ominous sense of the harvest would not also resonate. This intuition is confirmed by the parable of the weeds, where Jesus develops the harvest image most fully (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43). Here Jesus explains that though He planted good seeds for the kingdom, the enemy has also sown weeds among the crop. These weeds will grow up with the good grain, but in the final judgement, i.e., the harvest (Rev 14:14-16), the weeds will be tied up and thrown into the blazing furnace so that “*all causes of sin and all law-breakers*” will be “*gathered out of His kingdom*” (Matt 13:41).

So what does this image of judgment have to do with suffering? Well imagine back to Haiti again. It's the early 1960s and you are a student at the University of Haiti studying political science. As your convictions about the unjust dictatorship of Papa Doc Duvalier grow, you join a student activist group and hand out fliers as the election of 1961 approaches. One afternoon while you are in class, several men dressed in denim, carrying machetes, with straw hats and dark sunglasses arrive at your home. These are the *Tontons Macoutes*—Papa Doc's dreaded secret police. They smash the house, traumatize your mother with threats. If you don't quit speaking out against the government, they say, worse will happen. At first you lie low, but after a couple of weeks the political terrorism has done nothing but increase your resolve that this corrupt government must go. You start attending meetings again. One night on your way home from school, five men in denim shirts, sunglasses, and straw hats meet you in a dark alley. Your family members never see you again. But they know all too well the dreaded torture chambers in the dark places of Port-au-Prince.

And so I ask you, how do you feel if you are that student's father? In that moment, you realize that the good God is the God who has His winnowing fork in His hand to clear His threshing floor and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire, so that, as Matthew 13:41 says: “*All causes of sin and all law-breakers*” will be “*gathered out of His kingdom.*” You see, without judgment for evil there is no satisfactory answer to suffering. **Jesus will bring evil to justice.** This is what the harvest is about.

Jesus destroys evil at the cross through suffering. It is crucial to realize that Jesus' response to suffering and evil is to become a victim of suffering and evil, and in so doing, destroy it forever. 1 Peter 2:24 says: “*He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.*” Jesus suffered intensely at the cross. Not just the excruciating physical suffering of the crucifixion, but also the emotional and spiritual suffering of abandonment by God. Jesus allowed Himself to be harassed and helpless

for us. Theologian Henri Blocher describes this as a great theological Judo move—“At the cross evil is conquered as evil: corruption, perversion, disorder ... God turns it back upon itself. He makes the supreme crime, the murder of the only righteous person, the very operation that abolishes sin” (Wright 2008, 68).

Let’s stop for a moment to reflect on the how Jesus’ death destroys suffering. Think about it. Jesus Christ—true light of true light, true God of true God, the holy creator of the universe, infinite in His power and perfection—sees the suffering of humanity and He comes down. He comes down to live the life of a man, to suffer under the growing pains and family conflicts that plague our lives, to endure hunger, sadness, temptation, and ultimately to suffer the greatest injustice ever committed. God Himself, true light of true light, the only sinless man would be wrongly accused, unjustly tried, and humiliatingly executed. But you see, precisely because He was pure and perfect—and infinitely so—He was able to take upon Himself all sin, all evil, and all suffering and in His death take it all away forever. *“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.”* **Through His own suffering, Jesus destroyed evil and suffering at the cross.** If you don’t know Christ, turn to Him. If you do know Christ, reflect on this.

IMPROVEMENT

III. In response to suffering, we proclaim that Jesus is bringing in His compassionate kingdom. And in this we have our answer to suffering, not in a neat and clean philosophical proposition, but in a Person and in His presence. Most of the time, our solutions to that famous trilemma are not solutions but dilutions. We dissolve the problem by denying one of the three truths. Eastern religions tend to deny the first truth—evil is an illusion. It is all about perspective. Many traditional religions deny the second—God is not all-powerful, there are many gods and evil spirits at work in this world. Many modern people simply question God’s goodness and paint Him as a tyrant, if they have not ceased to believe in Him all together. Only the three great monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—attempt to hold all three of these truths together, and only in Christianity does the loving, all-powerful God personally descend to do something about suffering. We have a God who feels our suffering and *does something* about it. The problem is not dissolved or explained away, it is entered.

Jesus’s response to suffering today includes us. Look again at Matthew 9:37-38: *“Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.’”* This plentiful harvest represents real people who are suffering and don’t know the power of Jesus and the kingdom of God.

1. Pray for laborers. Jesus rarely tells us *what* to pray, but here He says to pray for laborers. It is incredibly striking that this is the application. Jesus doesn't say, the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few so go! Rather, He says pray. Prayer keeps the harvest in perspective. It reminds us whose harvest it is and it trusts God to bring it in. We cannot fix the problem of suffering, and we in our power cannot bring in God's harvest. We have to trust Him because He alone can move to mend human suffering. So as an act of obedience to God and an act of compassion for your suffering sisters and brothers—pray for laborers.

2. Participate in the harvest. If you read on into chapter 10 of Matthew, the very *next* thing that Jesus does is to commission these very same disciples to go out and participate in the harvest (10:7). Now, this harvest work means both proclaiming the kingdom *and* healing the sick. In other words, it is coming alongside of people with the truth about Jesus as we endeavor to alleviate their suffering in whatever ways are within our power. You see, the real problem of suffering comes in the aftermath of real suffering, so when faced with questions about evil and suffering, we proclaim that Jesus is bringing in His compassionate kingdom, and when suffering strikes those around us, we enter it with them to give whatever comfort and healing we can.

So, why have I talked so much about Haiti? Well, because I am going there next month with Training Leaders International. I have been reading and thinking a lot about that country and their broken, broken history. To talk about Haiti is to talk about suffering, so for me, going to teach there next month, thinking about how mission, the kingdom of God, and the gospel connect to suffering is an extremely pressing topic. Scripture teaches clearly, and the history of Haiti confirms, that there is ultimately no answer to human suffering outside of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because there is no answer to human suffering while evil rages in our hearts—especially in the hearts of our leaders. So as much as we need to provide aid to the destitute and care for the physical and economic suffering of people, we also need to be training leaders who will proclaim the kingdom of God, plant churches, and teach people to follow Christ. I believe that the powerful effects of that work will transform communities and also begin to alleviate suffering in body and soul. This is what TLI is all about. In August, TLI will be launching our newest training site just outside of Port-au-Prince. In partnership with a Haitian school there, we will begin training 30 pastors and church leaders that by the grace of God will equip faithful laborers for Haiti. Will you pray for the Lord to raise up laborers?

CONCLUSION

Paul Farmer recounts another story of what it was like trying to serve in the wards of Port-au-Prince's General Hospital in the days immediately after the quake. (December 2013) "Late one evening," he writes, "about a week after the quake, I spent the better part of an hour trying to

convince a gasping, skeletal young woman [named Natasha], her lungs half consumed by tuberculosis, not to join the exodus that had emptied the wards after yet another aftershock. ... Never had I imagined such a scene,” Farmer recalls, “grasping the top of a heavy oxygen tank inside a trembling building and trying to comfort a patient, while wondering whether the whole place was about to come down.” Natasha was alone except for a young man sitting on the next bed—Farmer assumed he was family, but as it turned out he had never met Natasha before. “He had just traveled from a town south of Port-au-Prince with his own sister, badly injured when the quake destroyed their modest house. His sister had died a few hours before, he said, and he had not yet decided where to go. So he lay down in a fog of grief, in an empty hospital bed. And then the ground started to shake again. He leapt up to join the general exodus, but saw Natasha straining against her lifesaving contraptions ... He stayed in the building and did his best to calm her. Blood was seeping from around the IV catheter in her arm; panicked, she was also tugging at the tube that piped oxygen into her nose.” At this moment Farmer arrived and begged the young man to wait with Natasha till he could find a hospital staffer to take over her care. “They were both there the next day, still unassisted, but by then he was sitting next to her, reading from a well-thumbed Bible. He had also gone out into the fractured streets and found her something to eat.”

What a beautiful picture of the compassion of Christ for us in our suffering. This is the Christian response to suffering—not an “answer” per say, but a comforting presence, sharing the word of God, a humble meal, even as life comes crashing down around you. **In response to suffering, we proclaim that Jesus is bringing in His compassionate kingdom.** Proclaim this gospel. Pray for laborers like this. Point people to the God who sees our suffering and does something about it on the cross.