

Suffering is part of the human condition. None of us like suffering but all of us experience it in various degrees or ways throughout our lives. We see suffering around the world. This past week's chemical attack on civilians in Syria reminds us of the depravity of human beings and our capability to inflict tremendous suffering on others. Today is also the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Vimy Ridge battle from World War 1. April 9th, 1917, official records reveal two thousand, four hundred and fourteen Canadians died in this battle one hundred years ago. And that does not include French, British and German casualties.

Here today, we have not suffered a chemical weapons attack nor do our loved ones occupy trenches on a battlefield. But some of you are suffering today – from illness or pain or difficult medical conditions; from trouble at work or home or maybe from the spiritual warfare that surrounds us. The parents that you saw on this platform earlier have experienced great joy and some suffering because of these new little lives in their home.

Suffering is one reason many question God's existence. How can a loving God allow such suffering in the world? There is no simple or straightforward answer to that question. But there are some certainties that we can cling to when it comes to suffering. First, God Himself experiences suffering intimately and deeply. We will see some of His deepest suffering in the passage before us today. Second, God has great power to bring good out of suffering. We will also see that in our passage today.

We come to this topic because it is the beginning of Easter week, the week leading to Jesus' suffering. Since January 8, we have followed the account of Jesus' journey to the cross from Palm Sunday up to this moment. All those events happened in one week. Matthew slows down the pace of His Gospel to focus us on the immense events of that fateful week to help us ponder their meaning for history and our lives today.

Recently, we've seen Matthew take us from the Last Supper, to the betrayal in the Garden to the trials in the High Priest's house to Peter's denial. Last week Randy walked you through the handing over of Jesus to Pilate and the crowd's choice of Barabbas over Jesus. So Pilate releases Barabbas and Jesus would be crucified.

Our passage today focuses on Jesus' suffering, death and burial. It answers three questions for us as we go through it. What is the nature of Jesus' suffering? What was the purpose of Jesus' suffering? What were the results of Jesus' suffering then and now? So will you prayerfully walk with me through this account?

Matthew 27:27-66 (ESV)

²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him.²⁸ And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,²⁹ and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"³⁰ And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head.³¹ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

³²As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross.³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull),³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots.³⁶ Then they sat down and kept watch over him there.³⁷ And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."³⁸ Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.³⁹ And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads⁴⁰ and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."⁴¹ So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying,⁴² "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him."⁴³ He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"⁴⁴ And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

⁴⁵Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁴⁷ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah."⁴⁸ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink.⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

⁵¹And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised,⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.⁵⁴ When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

⁵⁵There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him,⁵⁶ among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

⁵⁷When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus.⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away.⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

⁶²The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ ⁶⁴Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” ⁶⁵Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” ⁶⁶So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

What was the nature of Jesus’ suffering - (27:27-44)

Jesus has just been scourged or whipped. Then verse 27 tells us the Roman soldiers took him into the governor’s headquarters. These soldiers could have been actual Romans – citizens of the capital city. Or they could have been auxiliaries who were military recruits from local populations. So they may have been Phoenicians, Syrians and maybe even Samaritans. In either case, the garrison at Jerusalem had a reputation for brutal mockery of condemned prisoners. They played a game with them where the prisoner served as the game piece. They would move him around the game board until the game ended which led to his death.

This prisoner presents them with an opportunity to vent any anti-Jewish prejudice they might have. Somehow this condemned and beat up prisoner was supposed to be King of the Jews. So to show their superiority over him and perhaps the Jewish people, they dress him up as a king. He receives a scarlet robe from a soldier that looked a little like the robes worn by kings. They put a crown of thorns on his head. The local thorns had long points that went out like the pointed crowns worn by royalty. A king also held a scepter or staff symbolizing their power to make decisions. So they give Jesus a reed plant.

Then, with Him dressed up in the costume of a king, they mockingly bow down before him saying “Hail, King of the Jews.” In their mind he has no power. His crown contains no jewels but thorns. His scepter is no golden rod but a rotting reed. Then the mocking turns vicious. They spit on him and take the reed to hit him in the head. This is done in front of “the whole battalion” according to verse 27. But maybe 200 soldiers mock Jesus. Then when the game ends, they strip him of his costume and put his own clothes back on him.

Now it’s time to lead him to the place of crucifixion. Normally, prisoners carried the cross beam that weighed maybe 40-60 pounds. But Jesus is so weakened by everything that He actually can’t carry his cross. So the soldiers force a bystander to carry the cross – Simon of Cyrene – a region from North Africa. One commentator points out that if anyone should have been there at this moment, it should have been the disciples. But a stranger must assist Jesus.

They lead him to a place called Golgotha, place of the skull or in Latin “Calvary.” This hill, outside of the city walls of Jerusalem at that time stood by a well travelled road. Romans liked people to see what happened to those who rebelled against them. Upon arrival, they offer Jesus wine mixed with gall. This could have been a drink to slightly intoxicate the condemned so their pain would be lessened a little. Or it could be another cruelty inflicted upon Jesus. Maybe the average criminal received wine but they added gall or horrible tasting drink to the wine to make it more repulsive. In either case, Jesus refuses it. He will experience and feel this suffering to its fullest measure.

Then they crucify him. That’s all Matthew tells us. He doesn’t reveal what crucifixion involved partly because his readers didn’t need any explanation. They saw it everywhere in the empire. It involved excruciating pain and suffering. They usually crucified people naked to add to the humiliation.

The soldiers sit down according to verse 36. They probably drank some of the wine themselves. Can you imagine a job like that? They take Jesus clothes and throw dice or lots for them because they were allowed to take whatever meager belongings the criminals had. They nail over his head a sign with the charge. The sign said “Jesus of Nazareth – King of the Jews.” This was done to deter passersby of committing the same crime. It mocked Jesus and the Jewish nation in a way. If he was a king he didn’t have any power. If he was their king, they didn’t have any power.

Then Matthew focuses on the people’s response to Jesus. Passersby shake their heads in disgust. They call out “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself!” So they pick up the charge that the high priest used to press Jesus. “What do you have to say to this? Are you the Christ, the son of God?” Now the people say “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” Talk about ironic. Because He was the Son of God, He *wouldn’t* come down from the cross. This “come down from the cross” taunt sounds a little like Satan’s final attempt to stop this. Satan tried to discourage Jesus from doing things God’s way since the temptations. He tried to prevent Jesus from going to the cross in obedience to His Father. Here passersby serve as his messengers.

But they’re not alone. The religious leadership picks up the taunt. “He saved others. He cannot save himself.” Are they admitting that He actually did some saving work? “He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe him.” They also serve as Satan’s messengers. “He trusts in God; let God deliver him. For he said, “I am the Son of God.” Yet precisely because He is the Son of God, the Father will not deliver Him because the Son obeys the Father’s command.

But the mocking doesn't end with the religious leadership. Jesus was not crucified alone. Two robbers or possibly revolutionaries were crucified on either side of him. They too join in the insults.

So what was the nature of Jesus suffering? Jesus endured painful and humiliating suffering. The temple guards beat him at the high priest's house. The Romans whipped him. The soldiers mocked, beat and spit on him. They exposed him by stripping him of his clothes. The people verbally abused him in the midst of his terrible suffering. But Jesus was no victim. Though there was injustice in all of this, it was purposeful from God's perspective. Matthew reveals to us in the next verses the deep meaning and significance of this crucifixion.

What was the purpose of Jesus' suffering? (27:45-53)

It starts with darkness covering the whole land from noon to 3 PM. This is no solar eclipse because Passover occurred at full moon. It is a deep darkness that may have reminded the Israelites of the plague of darkness upon the Egyptians back in Exodus. Darkness served as a symbol of God's deep displeasure and judgment upon humanity for its sin.

Sometime during these 3 hours, likely nearer the end, Jesus cried out – "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" The word translated "cried" is used only here in the New Testament. It is a strong verb indicating powerful emotion or appeal to God. Jesus cries out in agony at alienation from His Father. For the first time in their existence they experience this. In some sense, Jesus had to be cut off from His Father because He bore the sins of people. In some way He experienced God-forsakenness. Yet, how could the Triune God experience any fracture in its unity?

Many hear the cry and some misinterpret "Eli" to be the name of Elijah. Many believed that Elijah would return at the end to participate in some sort of salvation. Someone runs to give Jesus some wine. But before they can offer it up to him on a sponge, the bystanders command them to wait to see if Elijah will come to rescue Jesus.

But Jesus is not waiting for Elijah. He has come to end of His mission. Matthew tells us He cried out in a loud voice – likely the "It is finished" statement that John tells us about in His Gospel. Then He gave up His Spirit. Even in the final act of dying, Jesus is in control. It was a deliberate act of the will. Jesus' human spirit departs from his body to go into the presence of God, His Father.

These verses reveal to us that this suffering was not meaningless. **Jesus' suffering accomplished God's ultimate purposes.** What were some of them?

He gave his only son so that we would not perish and have eternal life. John 3:16-17 – “For God so loved the world, that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. “

God's purpose included showing us His love. Romans 5:8 - But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

God used Jesus suffering to give comfort to our hearts. 1st Thessalonians 2:16 - “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

God sent Jesus so that we could become His children. 1st John 3:1 - “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God, and so we are.” God's purposes included turning our purpose in life to a different direction. 2 Corinthians 5:15 - “that we might no longer live for ourselves but for him who for our sake died and was raised.”

God worked through Jesus' suffering to provide the ministry of reconciliation – 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 – “All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

Through Jesus' suffering, He bore our sins. He bore and endured God's wrath and judgment upon sin. He fulfilled His calling in serving as a ransom for many. He defeated the power of Sin. He defeated the devil . He killed death. He became sin on our behalf. (2 Corinthians 5:21) Jesus suffering advanced God's purpose.

Perhaps in a way, this gives us some clue how to cope with the suffering in our lives. Michael Wilkins writes “I am urged to humble myself to accept whatever suffering comes my way to advance Jesus' purposes in my life.” 19th century London preacher Charles Spurgeon said: *Our suffering must have a higher purpose than just our own advancement. Jesus suffered not for what he got out of it, but for what we did, and that brings us humbly to consider our*

own pain. Does every creak and strain cause us to focus on furthering our life's purpose in establishing the reality of the kingdom of God in the lives of others, or does it cause us to bewail life's misfortunes?

So Jesus dies having accomplished the great purposes of God. Before his death, we heard the testimony of those opposed - the mocking soldiers, the head wagging passersby, the skeptical religious leaders and the cursing revolutionaries. Now it's time for God to bear witness. He does this in several supernatural ways. First, the curtain of the temple, separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies is torn in two from top to bottom. This curtain rose to a height of 60 feet, 3 times the height of this sanctuary. It took 300 men to move this curtain because it was made with heavy material. Yet it is torn in two from top to bottom like we could tear a piece of paper. This could symbolize that the end of the barrier between God and humans. We no longer need a sacrificial system to approach God. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice on Golgotha. Now we have access to the very presence of God.

The earth shakes. Since this land is located on a fault line, minor earthquakes were quite common. But this one seems more serious because rocks split apart. I think you have to have some pretty serious force to split rocks apart. Israel is full of rocks. I spent 6 weeks there one summer building a large chicken coop for an orphanage. For 5 weeks, we hauled, moved, piled, picked and arranged rocks. To hear and see a whole bunch of rocks split apart must have been a tremendous assault on their senses.

On top of that tombs open up. Normally, that is not good news. I don't know about you, but I don't like the idea of tombs flying open. But these tombs opened up for an amazing testimony by God. Verse 52 - *And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised,⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.* These saints were people who believed and walked with God before Christ. "And coming out of the tombs *after his resurrection* they went into the holy city." So those raised went into Jerusalem after Jesus was raised.

But this kind of creates a problem. Were these people resurrected on Friday at the moment of Jesus' death and then stayed in their tombs through the weekend until Sunday morning? That would be a bit weird in an already weird situation. Notice, the text doesn't necessarily say they were raised at the moment of Jesus' death. It could be read "they were raised and came out of their tombs after his resurrection. So maybe the tombs were opened by the

earthquake on Friday. Then the bodies were raised after His resurrection on Sunday. They go into Jerusalem and appear to different people.

Whenever this resurrection actually occurred, think about what God may have been doing here. There was prophet named Ezekiel who had a vision of a valley of dry bones. Then God brings the dry bones to life putting muscles, flesh and ultimately life into them. Jerusalem's tombs were located in the Kidron valley. The earthquake opens the tombs to expose the bones. Then some of these are raised to new life after Christ. They become a fulfillment of God's promise of resurrection not only for Jesus but for all believers. So God shares His testimony about His Son. There's no mocking worship, shaking of heads or brutal taunts. A 60 foot curtain is torn from top to bottom; the earth quakes; rocks split and dead come to life. God affirms Jesus' sacrifice and testifies that He is in fact the Son of God. So we've seen the nature of Jesus' suffering – pain and humiliation. We've seen the meaning of Jesus' suffering – to accomplish God's glorious purposes.

What are the results of Jesus' suffering? Jesus' suffering resulted in unrestrained discipleship. People who previously had no desire to confess Jesus as Lord or were too scared to do so now boldly display their belief or allegiance to Him.

The centurion and other soldiers at the cross see all these supernatural signs. Though they are Gentiles and Jesus' own brutal executioners, they recognize there is something absolutely unique about this one. So the centurion confesses "Truly, this was the son of God!" The passersby and Jewish leaders mocked this claim. The executioners now believe it.

Women present at cross have witnessed all of this. They had followed Jesus all the way from Galilee providing for His and the disciples needs. Mary Magdalene – healed of 7 demons; Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of James and John. They persevere in Jesus' presence despite the fact that He's now expired.

But most striking is the appearance of Joseph of Arimathea. We will hear much more from him at this week's Good Friday morning service. But suffice it to say for now that Joseph risked everything to ask for Jesus' body and bury it in His own tomb. His wealth, position, reputation & life. Jesus' suffering and death provoke unrestrained discipleship.

What would like that look like in your life? For some, it might not look any different than the way you're living now. You live from and for Christ. You are an unashamed completely devoted disciple of Jesus Christ. You're not perfect. But your words and actions demonstrate Joseph of Arimathea like identification with the crucified savior.

But others might be more like closet Christians. Maybe it's time for us to come out of the closet and demonstrate and proclaim who we really are. It is hard. Junior High and High School students – I think you are in one of the toughest environments to be a Christian. I found a tremendous amount of peer pressure in Junior and Senior High to conform to the mainstream of the culture. It is difficult when you can get shunned, mocked and rejected for your faith. It's hard when everyone else on the work crew pursues unrestrained self-indulgence. It's difficult when our culture continues to marginalize devoted Christians as intolerant extremists.

But I look at the mocking and humiliation Jesus endured for us here when it came to mocking and humiliation. He went through it so that we could be part of all God's great purposes and so we could taste the eternal blessings of His kingdom on earth right now.

I think of the Apostle Paul when facing his execution. He describes something called his first defense where he was put on trial for proclaiming Christ as Lord and not Caesar. He writes, "At my first defense, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it." 2 Timothy 4:16-17

So you may suffer some temporary humiliation when you take a stand for Christ at school or in some social setting. But you never know how He might use that to rescue another friend or person who is hopelessly lost or desperately looking for love. They can find it in Him.

There will be more on this unrestrained act of discipleship by Joseph of Arimathea this Friday morning at our Good Friday Service. But I pray that God will strengthen each Christian here to stand for Him and endure a little embarrassment or mocking for the sake of God's reconciling work to come into another person's life.

Yet some of you here today struggle just to make it let alone think about taking a stand for Christ. You wonder if you have the strength to go on or if anyone cares. Notice Jesus' suffering here. He endured all of this without any medicating agent. He endured pain. He knows pain at multi-levels and in excruciating measures. He sympathizes deeply with your weakness and wounds. But He also comes to give life, hope and a new identity in Him. Maybe you

need to adjust your thinking a little as we prepare for Easter. You are God's child. You are so loved by Him. He sent His Son to die so that you could have life. And even if hard things come, you're not alone. God has that amazing supernatural ability to bring something good out of something hard.

Jesus suffered a painful and humiliating death that accomplished God's purposes for the world and us. He is gracious even to disciples who failed Him. He calls us to unrestrained discipleship today.