

The Suffering

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[0 : 00] Taking a look at that video, you have turmoil, strife, fear, loss, suffering.

A little news montage that we saw is about the financial crisis that was, well, like 10 years ago now. It's crazy. Almost a decade ago. And you could have easily replaced that montage with any number of events and themes.

You could have replaced it with headlines about war or famine, violence, disease, corruption, disasters, or any other causes of suffering that you see in this world today.

Just think, if you guys watch the news, hopefully, or read the news, think about all the negative headlines, the negative, the bad news you've read and seen and heard over the last few months.

[1 : 05] And while there are so many themes, what I did like about this video was I think it captures something that is very relevant to us in Hong Kong. The idea of financial security and stability.

It's something we all need, right? Just that opportunity to just live our lives, to have our basic needs and our desires met. A life of stability and gain, not wild losses that are just like being tossed by an ocean storm.

But when people experience loss, when they encounter suffering, like the people who went through the financial crisis, when that lifelong security net is just pulled out from right beneath your feet, the responses can be devastating.

The effects can be absolutely devastating. I found that the British Journal of Psychiatry actually published research not long ago showing that in North America and Europe, at least 10,000 suicides from 2008 to 2010, around the time of the financial crisis.

10,000 suicides were related to that great recession. Job loss, debt, foreclosures, family finances just wiped out.

[2 : 43] Financial security completely lost. And on top of that, suicide and death. And this church, this friends, is the nature of this biblical episode that Melody just read for us.

And this little passage is short, but it's rich, very rich in content. We're in the second week of a series called Sinners Jesus Met, as Eric explained at the beginning.

How Jesus comes into the lives of these various people. And last week, we talked about the woman, the suffering woman, and Simon the Pharisee, and how God meets the religious, the pious people, the people who think that they've got it all together.

And today, we're going to look in this episode at how Jesus meets this widow. This widow who has just lost her only son. And if you remember from last week, just like Simon the Pharisee, and just like the suffering woman, this widow that we read about, she was also a sinner.

She was a member of God's people who had constantly failed to fulfill his purposes for them. If you remember from Deuteronomy, our last series, God had called his people to be this light, this beacon of hope to reflect his character, to reflect his love, to reflect his blessings.

[4 : 23] But they were not able to fulfill that. And here she was, this widow, her homeland under the rule of this foreign occupying force called the Romans, and also personally facing the loss of her only son.

And to understand just how devastating and just how terrible this loss was, we really have to kind of roll back a bit and understand first century culture.

We need to understand the status of women in that culture. And some of you, I'm sure, have heard and read about this. In that time, women were very much dependent on the men in their lives to provide.

There were very few openings for women to actually earn a living. So the obvious role of provider would have fallen to her husband.

But as the text says, she's a widow. She has no husband anymore. And then another key person would have then been her son.

[5 : 34] But obviously, here we see that her only son has just died. So think about this. On top of this kind of decimation of her economic security, she's obviously suffering through the actual loss of family.

She faces not only sorrow and poverty, but also loneliness. She also faces the knowledge that her family line has now been cut off.

And the text doesn't tell us in detail, but maybe you can imagine, imagine with me, what could this woman be thinking and feeling in this moment?

I think if I was her, maybe I'd be feeling, has God abandoned me? Has God forgotten me?

Maybe she's even feeling a sense of shame that her loved ones, the closest to her, are dying around her. Maybe she's even feeling a little bit. Maybe she's feeling a little bit.

[6 : 48] Maybe she feels cursed. She has the stench of death on her life. So this is the woman. This is the widow who is in the middle of this big funeral procession.

A crowd that Luke, in writing this, he describes it as large. Now, in that culture, in that ancient culture, funerals were a really big deal.

It was such a big deal that the study of the Torah, which was God's law, and one of the most unassailable, most important pursuits in life, even the study of the Torah was kind of suspended when there was a funeral.

And you had to drop that, and you had to go to the funeral. In the town of Nain, where this is taking part, where this is taking place, the town of Nain had probably had around 300 to 500 inhabitants, and pretty much every one of them would have been expected to go.

It was a big deal. But also, because of the public nature of this funeral, with all these people, basically the entire town coming out to the procession, there would have also been this impersonal, this impersonal nature of it all.

[8 : 16] There would have been flute players. This or this. Flute players, professional flute players at that time, that would have been part of the procession.

There would have been professional, mourning women accompanying the procession. And this was a real profession at that time. The women would weep and wail loudly, encouraging the people around to lament and weep with them.

And you see these professionals later in chapter 8, if you read on, and there's another situation where Jairus' daughter is dead, and Jesus says, oh, she's not dead, she's just asleep.

And the mourning women start laughing at him. And they're like, you're stupid. And then they go back to mourning. So obviously, this was a profession. They weren't personally mourning.

It was their job to mourn. So they could go from mourning to laughing at Jesus to back to mourning again. So there was this impersonal nature. There was work happening there.

[9 : 27] There were just people that were obliged to be in the crowds. And even a poor family at that time was expected to have at least one mourning woman and at least two flute players, according to the custom.

So if you can visualize this scene with me, this crowd of townspeople and professionals, you can imagine it was maybe a bit of a spectacle.

Surely not everyone was there because they genuinely wanted to be, often as we would expect in funerals today. It was really a hodgepodge of people coming out of the town gates of Nain.

Which happened, the town gates was also an official meeting place for the area. So there may also have been people just there about their business. A really busy environment, if you can imagine with me.

So it is here, in this chaos, in this busyness, with a large crowd of people around him, that Jesus intersects with this funeral procession.

[10 : 39] The Greek word that Luke uses describing the crowd that is following Jesus can actually be translated, a great multitude. And that's the same description for the crowd when Jesus fed the 5,000.

So it is entirely possible that the crowd following Jesus easily could have been over 1,000 people. That's a lot of people.

So if you can visualize with me, there's this funeral procession coming out of the eastern side of Nain, coming through the gates, wailing women, flute players, people just following, being there,

coming out of the gates of Nain.

And then coming from the east, Jesus, from the last stop that he made. He's coming, he's teaching, he's preaching, he's seen as this teacher. There's maybe 1,000 people following him.

He's approaching the gates. And this is where they intersect. And I found this kind of pretty cool image, an artist, perhaps a rendition of what it might have looked at.

[11:54] And no idea how historically accurate this is, obviously, but with the colors, just the people, I hope this helps you just picture, there would have been a lot of people there.

A lot of people. And it's in this busy crowd of possibly thousands of people that Jesus does something profound.

And guys, this is a short passage of Scripture, but these are details that I think I often overlook, and we can easily overlook when we just kind of read through and gloss over quickly.

So let's kind of walk through this step by step. So I don't know about you, but when I'm walking around Hong Kong, I'm usually trying to just avoid hitting people.

I'm just trying to get from point A to point B, you know, dodge around those annoying people who have their heads down like this. And I confess sometimes those people are me.

[13:00] And then I feel like I'm right, and people are wrong when they get in my way. And I'm not really kind of stopping and thinking about what's going on, you know? It's a busy, fast-paced world.

I want to get to the place I need to be and not be late. But here's the first thing that we see when we read the text. We read that Jesus sees the widow.

Now think about it. In order for Jesus to really see someone in a crowd of 400, I mean, this is a crowd of over 100 before me right now, and I have a hard time seeing some of you guys.

It's easy for you to see me. I'm kind of sticking out like a sore thumb. But I really have to focus at some of you guys to really see you. So Jesus must have been looking intently.

His mind would have had to stop and think about what he was really looking at. This procession that was unfolding before his eyes, it wasn't just like that video montage we just saw.

[14:08] You know, a bunch of news clips, a bunch of bad news, and then you forget about it. You switch the channel to ETV or something like that and think about whatever else. Jesus actually sees the suffering at the center of this crowd.

He sees. The second thing. What does Jesus do next? The text says his heart went out to her. His heart went out to her. It's not just his attention going to her, but it's his love, his care, his concern, his feelings.

A more literal translation is that he felt compassion. And the Greek word, it carries this sense that you're actually deeply affected in your bowels.

That deep. And you're affected in your inner being. There's sympathy. There's empathy. There's compassion. Jesus feels like he is suffering with the widow.

[15:20] That's what compassion means. So he sees. He has compassion. And thirdly, it's not just that his heart goes out to her, but it's clear that he physically goes to her.

He acts. So that he can now say these very interesting words to her. Don't cry. A more formal translation would be, do not weep.

Interesting. Now, in that moment, you'd probably be thinking, if you were eavesdropping, Jesus, that's so insensitive. How can you tell a woman who's just lost her husband and her only son to not cry?

She has professional criers for crying out loud. Right? Jesus. Come on, man. Get it together. I would never do that. You would chastise your husband if he said that.

You would chastise your wife if she said something like that at a funeral. But guys, Jesus isn't just some schmuck who's kind of throwing out some empty platitudes, some nice words of comfort so that he can feel like he's done his duty and move on.

[16:40] Obviously not. Just one chapter ago, he told his disciples this. He said, Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. And Jesus can say that word of comfort to the woman because he knows that he is literally about to demonstrate that.

So fourthly, what does Jesus do? He actually goes up to the bier. He acts. And the bier is basically an open coffin.

So the body would have been completely visible. So that's actually accurate in that sense. An open coffin, and he touches it. He touches it.

And this was another inappropriate thing that's a really inappropriate thing to do because it would have broken all the Jewish ceremonial purity laws.

[17:41] You know, you were not supposed to be touching dead bodies. But if you read the New Testament, when you read the Gospels, you'll see over and over again that Jesus, when it comes to actual human suffering, actual human need, when those things are at stake, he didn't worry about ceremonial matters.

And so he commands the man to return to life. He says, get up. And he demonstrates his authority, his power over death.

Now at this point, if I were Jesus, I think this would have been a great kind of end of the movie or end of a great scene. and just drop the mic and you'd be like, that's right.

And you just walk out, right? That's how I would do it if I was a Hollywood actor. That would have been kind of cool, right? That would have left the spotlight, the limelight, the glory to Jesus.

But there's one last thing that Jesus does. Number five, he gives the son back to the mother.

Interesting.

[19:02] Because I'm pretty sure the son and the mother would have found each other. I'm pretty sure she would have been, she would have realized that she wasn't dead anymore.

Because the text actually says he started talking. Why does Jesus do that? I think the thing that is amazing is that the most important thing in this whole interaction is not that Jesus did this miracle, as amazing as that in and of itself is.

The most important thing is that Jesus saw the widow. He felt compassion for the widow. He went to the widow.

He spoke, he comforted the widow. And he returned the son to the widow. And in this entire movement, this pattern, this action, the center of Jesus' attention is who?

The widow. The sufferer. And this is the principle that comes out so clearly when we meditate and we look at Jesus' action.

[20:22] That those who suffer are at the center, the center of Jesus' attention. So how are each and every one of us suffering today?

How do we bring this to our world, to our lives today? Indeed, some of you may have suffered great loss.

Deaths of loved ones. Loss of financial security, just like the widow. I'm sure some of you and people close to you have gone through that.

Others of you may have never faced this kind of suffering, like just completely similar or analogous to the widow. But if you consider all the various dimensions and facets of the widow's suffering and the widow's experience, I think we can all relate in some way.

We can all see how her experience reflects and touches our lives in some way. I think we all suffer loneliness in some way.

[21:30] we all face the uncertainty when things happen in our lives and whether we'll be able to fulfill our potential, whether we'll be able to make it, to make a living, to survive, to thrive, to flourish.

We all wrestle with our ultimate significance and maybe sometimes we even wonder, perhaps like the widow did, God, have you forgotten me?

God, you seem far away. And when catastrophe hits, like it did for the widow, these questions and doubts are often just amplified.

But even in the day-to-day, in the mundane, I believe we all face suffering and sorrow in its various forms. We're either directly suffering or we know somebody close to us, a loved one who is going through it and you are just grieving with them.

Or you realize, even if you're not suffering in the moment right now, that any moment in this broken, imperfect, sinful, financial crisis-prone world, that at any time disaster can strike, health, accidents, financial crises, could hit at any time.

[23:00] And when we look at the widow's suffering, when we kind of think about her mental and emotional state, there's something really interesting we can learn from. You see, in modern times, we often think about life and death as kind of a binary state.

I mean, it's pretty obvious, you know, generally, that you're either alive or you're dead. But in Hebrew culture, in that Jewish culture, there was actually this third in-between state, a state between life and death.

In this state, a person was considered half dead. Half dead. Not in a physical sense, not in the sense that the widow had been beaten half dead, but because she had suffered such a catastrophic, life-altering loss that she had entered into this state of living death.

That was her mindset. And interesting, right? Because in the New Testament, we read that we are dead in the sins in which we walk. We are dead in the sins in which we walk following the course of this world.

You see, our sin and separation, the writers of the New Testament say, our sin and separation from God actually put us in a state of living death.

[24 : 29] When I'm walking in my sin, I'm basically a zombie. I'm like the walking dead. We are physically alive. I'm alive, but spiritually dead and destined for eternal death.

So when we think about suffering, when we kind of take a step back and we actually look at our lives on an eternal scale, the suffering is just as clear and maybe even more.

God's Word says that each and every one of us has this sense of eternity in us. It's the sense that you have deep, deep down that there is something, there is something more to life than wealth and status and comfort and relationship and anything else that we think will make us happy.

It's that reality that all of those things will go to the grave with us when we die. And there must be something more.

God's Word says that we were created to worship God with our entire lives and for all of eternity. But when we chose to worship ourselves instead, when we turned away from God, selfishness, sin, and death entered into our lives, entered into this world.

[25 : 55] So God's Word says that our separation from God is the ultimate suffering because we can no longer fulfill the purpose of worshiping God.

That's why from Deuteronomy, the last series, all the way to now in Jesus' time, the people of God could not do it. They were suffering the inability to live according to the way they were created. And instead, they were seeking and worshiping things that would never satisfy their souls. They had rejected God, the only one who can satisfy.

So whether it's sort of present immediate suffering or suffering on an eternal scale, I want to ask you guys right now, and I want us to take a moment, think about what your suffering personally looks like right now.

Whether it's physical or mental, emotional, spiritual, what does it look like? Is it a sickness or some condition that just won't go away?

[27 : 17] Is it anxiety and worry? Is it the fact that some days you just don't feel like anyone really knows and understands you?

Not even your spouse or family member. They feel distant and you feel alone. Is it a feeling of emptiness and discontentment?

Is it just a sense in your gut that something's not quite right in life? Or is it just the fact that in some way everything you do and achieve in this life will fade away?

And it all just seems pointless sometimes? That's one that really gets me. You know, when I'm tired, when I'm busy, when I'm stressed, there's just that voice in my head that's just like, what is the point?

Why even bother? other? So be honest with yourself right now. What is your suffering today?

[28 : 28] What is your suffering? What is your suffering? In a busy and crowded place like Hong Kong, our suffering can seem pretty insignificant, right?

Just like those massive crowds that converged at Nain, Hong Kong is a busy place. There's people everywhere, for better or for worse.

There's so many people who are just going about their own lives around us, each with their own busyness and their own personal agendas. The widow was one of 400 residents of Nain.

you are one of seven million residents of Hong Kong. Jesus saw the widow so clearly in her suffering.

But do you know, do you really know that God also sees every single one of us in our suffering? no matter how great or small you think your suffering is, he sees, he sees.

[29 : 47] See, the amazing thing about the widow of Nain, about this episode, is that Jesus sees every one of us in the same way that he sees the widow.

The movement, the pattern that we saw with Jesus and the widow is exactly the same for us. And let me show you how. The Bible, God's word says he tells us, he tells us that God knows the

number of hairs on your head right now.

And if you don't have that much hair on your head right now, he knows other intricate details of your, of your life. That's just an image. He knows.

His word says that he searches the depths of your heart. Isn't that incredible? Every hair on your head right now.

And like this story, it's not that he, just that he sees and he knows, but he has compassion for us. When Jesus looked at the people, he yearned, he said he yearned, he gathered, he wanted to gather them like a mother hen, gathering his brood of little chicks.

[31 : 11] Isn't that a beautiful picture of how God loves us? He wants to take care of us. He sees us. He has compassion for us. But like the story, it does not stop there, because God also took action.

In the same way that he met the widow where she was, Jesus meets us exactly where we are. And if you could appreciate just how controversial and how culturally inappropriate it was for Jesus to touch that coffin, that open coffin at Nain, think about this.

How crazy, how scandalous is it for the God, the transcendent God of the universe, to come to us in human form in the person of Jesus Christ?

Would you do that if you were God? That's scandalous. That's crazy. And the people in in that story who witnessed that miracle, they declared, God has come to help us.

And that is certainly true because they thought Jesus was a great prophet that was speaking and acting on behalf of God. But even then they didn't realize the full truth that Jesus wasn't just a great teacher.

[32 : 39] He was God himself, visiting his people, dwelling with them, and walking alongside them. them. You see, at some point in every one of our lives, we ask a question like this.

I've asked it myself. I'm sure you've asked it in some shape or form. You ask, if God loves us, and God is really God, then why doesn't he do something about all the suffering in the world?

Why doesn't he do something about my suffering? And I've thought about that question, and I try to think about the times that I was really suffering.

I try to put myself in the shoes of the suffering, and this is what I realized. The origin of suffering is freedom and free will.

It's the choices that I have made and the choices that others have made. it's the collective choices of all humanity throughout history.

[33 : 49] Just think about that video and how that came about. And as difficult as it is in the moment, I know that if I'm really honest with myself, it is that freedom, that free will that makes me human.

I don't want to be a robot. I don't want the entire world to be robots that aren't capable of choosing. Because robots cannot love.

Robots don't really know what is good. They cannot comprehend that. And if I'm being honest with myself, in those times of suffering, I don't want to become a robot.

I don't want the world to become robots. I want someone to come and grieve with me. tell me that they know how I feel because they've been through it.

I want someone to tell me it's going to be okay because they have survived. And that's exactly what God does in the face of our suffering.

[34 : 57] He became human and suffered with us. He faced all the trials and temptations we face. He suffered everything we can suffer. Homelessness and poverty, the death of loved ones, rejection and abandonment, abuse.

Jesus even faced His own death on that cross. He experienced our separation from God the Father as He suffered the punishment for all of humanity's sin.

So in all of our suffering today, God says this. He says, my child, I'm suffering with you. I've gone through everything you're going through.

I can actually tell you don't cry because everything's going to be okay. I know that. Jesus saw you. He had compassion for you.

He came to you and He performed the greatest miracle for you. you see, the widow's son was resurrected, but eventually He would have died again, right?

[36 : 07] But on the third day after Jesus faced His own death, He returned to life to overcome all your suffering. He resurrected to this new eternal body and returned to heaven.

He shows you that not only does He understand your suffering, but He turns your mourning into laughter. Your suffering doesn't just end in death, but it ends in eternal life, in a resurrection body, in a new heaven, in a new earth that God is creating for us that is perfect.

And like the widow receiving her son back, you just need to receive this miracle by believing and trusting in what Jesus did through His life, His death, and His resurrection.

Guys, suffering is something I don't take lightly, but if there was someone who followed Jesus and understood suffering, it was the Apostle Paul.

Just read about his life in the New Testament. It was crazy. It was horrendous. But writing to the church in Rome, he said, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing, not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

[37 : 27] The Widow of Nain is a story of a widow in a state of living death, walking on a journey to the burial site of her own son.

When Jesus, coming the other way, stops the procession and intervenes, and He brings her entire world to life again.

that's the image of Nain. That's the image for us today. And the profound image is that Jesus offers that resurrection, that life, in the midst of our suffering today.

So how will you respond to that? How will you respond to that? I want to invite the band to come back up right now, but just take a minute now, personally.

I invite you, just close your eyes and maybe even bow your heads, and just think. I'm not going to pray out loud, just think in your own hearts. What is the suffering that you see in your own life?

[38 : 39] And how does Jesus Christ meet you, just like He did for the widow of Nain? Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.