

**Text:** Mark 6:14-29

**Date:** July 15, 2018

**Focus:** Our King Jesus is with us in our suffering and has suffered for us on the cross.

**Function:** As Christians, we endure suffering with our eyes focused on Jesus.

*In Jesus Name, Amen.*

There is one thing that I know for sure about suffering. And that's that we all do it. All of us suffer. If you disagree with me on that, if you haven't suffered, come talk to me after worship today – because I'd like to hear your secrets.

No, we all suffer. And, generally speaking there are two kinds of suffering that we go through.

The first kind of suffering is the explainable suffering. The expected suffering. The suffering, that if we are honest with ourselves – the suffering we deserve.

Here's a quick example. When I was a kid my brother and I would often spend summer afternoons and evenings playing with our neighborhood friends. We played all sorts of games – tag, hockey, football, and soccer. And one day we were playing soccer in my parents backyard, which was fine, except that for some reason we decided that because we didn't have nets to shoot into, the goal would be the back of our house. So, we were literally shooting and kicking soccer balls at the house. And so we shouldn't have been surprised when one of us – not me – kicked one of those balls right into the large windows and it shattered. Now, because I wasn't the one who kicked the ball and crushed that window, I'm not exactly sure what kind of suffering came about because of that, but I'm sure there was some. But, I think we can all agree that any suffering that did come would have been expected, explainable, and deserved. Not a surprise

This is the kind of suffering that comes about as a result of our sin. Like when we lie to a friend and then they stop talking to us. Or, this is what happens when we boss around the people we love in our lives and then they don't want to spend time with us. We might feign ignorance and act surprised that we suffer – but we have no good reason to have expected anything different. There are consequences to our sinful behavior.

So, we all suffer, and sometimes it's explainable, expected, and deserved.

But, other times, our suffering is completely unexplainable.

Most of you know that I like to run. And, I have for a long time. When I was in high school I was obsessed. Running was a huge part of my life. I was on the cross country and track teams and running consumed me. But, around my junior year of high school I started to be hurt all the time. In fact, my wife and I met in high school, and she has no memories of me running. She knew I was on the track team, but the only thing she saw me do on the track was fold the flags that marked the course. Because I couldn't run, that was the job I was relegated to. And I couldn't explain it. I did what my coaches told me to do. I went to doctors and followed their

advice. I received treatments. I bought the right shoes and wore these fancy orthotics. But, the pain wouldn't go away! I couldn't explain it. I certainly didn't expect it.

You've all experienced this on an earthly level. Maybe you carefully watch what you eat, but you still find yourself getting sick all the time. Or, maybe you have devoted yourself to your job. You've given it your all, and then one day your boss calls you in to tell you your being let go. Or, you try to be the best parent you can be, you teach your kids the faith and share the love of Jesus with them, and then you watch them wander away. Sometimes our suffering is totally inexplicable. Unexplainable. Unexpected. It seems so undeserved. Sometimes we suffer precisely because we have done the right thing. The righteous thing. The God-pleasing thing.

That's the kind of suffering that John is met with in our Gospel reading for today. Today's story of John's imprisonment and then eventual death seems totally undeserved. John was a prophet after all. He was sent by God to proclaim the arrival of the Savior, and that's what John did. He crossed all his T's and dotted all his I's. John is a holy and righteous man. And the crazy thing is that even evil Herod gets that. Even this wicked king sees John's goodness. Mark, the author tells us that Herod liked to listen to John, and was "very perplexed" at John's words. Another way of translating that from the Greek would be to say that Herod was "At a loss for words." Herod was speechless at John's holiness. And yet, it's for that holiness that John will suffer. We hear at one time he stands up for the truth of God's Word boldly and calls out King Herod and his wife for their improper relationship – Herod's current wife had once been his brother's wife - and as a reward for his godly boldness he gets thrown in jail and then has his head chopped off and served on a plate.

And all of it seems so wrong. Because it is! John's suffering is not right. It is not deserved. It's hard to explain. In fact, John's suffering is a direct result of having done the right thing. It's maddening how frustrating this story is.

Well, I think it's God's reminder to us, that as Christians we will suffer. There's no way around it. This example is God's way of taking off our rosy-colored glasses, of removing the blinders, and giving us a dose of reality. As Christians, we will suffer. And sometimes our suffering will be totally explainable and justified and expected. But, other times, like John, we will suffer even after doing all the right things. In fact, sometimes, like John, we will suffer BECAUSE we've done all the right things, and stood up for the truth, and boldly proclaimed God's Word.

Today we are reminded that sometimes, parents, yes, you are going to spend countless hours and an immeasurable amount of energy passing down the faith to your children. You'll pray for them. You'll bring them to church. You'll read them the bible, and then they'll walk away. Other times, Christians, you are going to finally work yourself up to invite your coworker to church. You'll have prayed for this person and this moment for months. You'll have prepared all the right words. And then, when you finally work up the courage, you'll be laughed at. Other times, as Christians you will do your best to fight back against temptation. You'll tell God that you finally want to be done with some sin. And so you'll go to church every week. You'll pray fervently. You'll find other Christians to encourage you and mentor you. And then for some reasons, it will feel like Satan is working over time. The temptations will only get

stronger. And you'll wonder "What is going on here! I'm doing everything I'm supposed to!" And the temptation will be to either doubt that your doing the right thing or maybe to doubt God's goodness. Or to wonder if maybe God is angry at us.

But, John's story reminds us of something so important when it comes to our suffering. John's example reminds us that our present suffering is NOT a sign of God's punishment. Your painful, present circumstances are not a reflection of what God thinks about you. Parents, the fact that your children have abandoned the faith despite how much you tried and how often you prayed, that is not a sign that God is angry with you. And when you are laughed at or rejected when you share your faith – that is not God's way of saying that you really screwed up. No, today we are reminded that sometimes we suffer precisely for having done the God-pleasing thing. Because sin is real. And Satan is real. And suffering is real. And that is maddening. And frustrating. And scary. But, God wants us to know that you don't need to doubt His love because of your present suffering. God wants you to keep on keeping on doing the right thing!

When I read this story earlier in the service, just a few minutes ago, I finished the reading, and then I said what we always say, "This is the Gospel of the Lord." But, if I'm honest, I kind of wanted to say it like this, "This is the *Gospel?* of the Lord?" Because, there doesn't seem to be very much Gospel in this story, there's not really any Good News to be found. What we find is a much needed, and sobering reminder, but it's not exactly the kind of story you want to read to your kids before they go to bed, right? Honestly, there is not very much, if any Gospel in our reading today. But, maybe this story is a good reminder that we never read one single Bible story in isolation of the others. God, in His grace, has given us a whole book full of stories. So, while one story might have a lot of Law, others have more Gospel. And so we need to look to the fullness of the Scriptures to hear the rest of the story.

So, what is the Gospel for us in light of our suffering? Where can we find Good News in this world of pain and hurt and persecution?

I would say that there are 2 Gospel reminders we need to keep in mind as we go through suffering. The first is that God is with us in the midst of our suffering. God was with John in his prison cell. God is with John today, in Heaven, having seen John through the suffering. And God is with us today as we suffer.

Now, I know it doesn't always feel like that. In fact, I think the loneliest times in our lives are the times when we are hurting. When I was a kid, like I said at the beginning, I played a lot outside with my brother and neighbors. And most of the time it was fun. But, sometimes there was some suffering involved. Maybe I would lose a game. Or maybe I would get hit in the head with a ball or something. And when things like that happened it was my calling card to run away. Without saying anything I would just run away, go back home. I would isolate myself. Go into my room, shut the door. And I think, a lot of us do that in the midst of our suffering. Maybe because we're embarrassed. Maybe because the people that are around us are the ones that have hurt us. Whatever the reason, we feel like no one is there. But, God is there. He is always there. Even in the midst of our suffering.

The other Gospel reminder we need is that Jesus understands your suffering because He has suffered too. You might think that no one understands what you are going through. You might think that no one could possibly get the pain you have. But, Jesus does. He gets suffering. And that's because He faced the ultimate suffering on the cross. Jesus faced rejection and abandonment by His Father on the cross. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" you probably remember Jesus said. I mean, talk about suffering! But, do you know why Jesus did that? So that you could have an eternity with no more suffering. And so that right now, you would know that your God, the creator of the universe, understands you.

I wish I could promise you all that you wouldn't suffer anymore. But, that's not what God says. We will suffer. Sometimes, and we all know this, we totally deserve it. But, when you suffer after doing all the right things and checking all the boxes, and saying all the prayers, know that your suffering is not a sign of God's disfavor. Instead, trust that God is with you. And then look to the cross, where Jesus suffered FOR YOU.