

## Man of Sorrows: The Suffering of God

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

March 3, 2024 AM Sermon

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Hosea 11:1-11, Luke 19:41-44, Romans 8:26-27

Last week in my sermon, I tried to talk about a way to deal with your suffering. I said that when this evil comes into our life, we can fight it and turn it into good if we absorb, lament and rejoice. I put a lot of emphasis on absorbing. I said we are like sponges and we can absorb some of the misery that comes into our lives, and we can absorb some of the misery that comes in the lives of our neighbors. We can sponge up the world's misery and respond with hope. I based that on some of the things Paul says in his letters, and it was an attempt to give you a sense of something you can do in the face of your suffering. To empower you.

You listened politely and many of you said you were blessed. But after the sermon, one kind church member came over and shook my hand and said with an exhausted smile, *"I'm tired of being a sponge."* I think this person spoke for many of you. I KNOW this person spoke for many of you.

Don't get me wrong. I think the sponge sermon was important. I think what we talked about last week was true and Biblical. But I also know that our sponge is small, we have a limited capacity for absorption, and many of you are way past that capacity. You are tired and your sponge is saturated. And if that's your situation, having me or anyone else stand up here and say, 'Hey everyone! You can absorb the world's pain! You're a sponge!' is maybe not the most helpful thing you've ever heard.

When you're super-saturated, you're not ready to take on some spiritual absorption project. When you're super-saturated by a steady stream of suffering and disappointment, you're staggering. You're not ready for an assignment from your pastor, more likely you're wondering, *"Is God even paying attention to what I'm going through? Is he seeing this? Is he not hearing my prayers? Is he not seeing me sob in my bed at night? Does he even care?!"* And that's a place that lots of us reach at different points in our journey. You are beat up and you are starting to wonder if God is paying attention.

I want you to know: that's a biblical place. That's the place the Psalmist gets to in Psalm 44:23– *"Awake Lord! Why do you sleep?! Rouse yourself! Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?"* Lord, are you asleep? Don't you care?! Sometimes when the suffering is persistent enough, a person can even start to get the feeling that God isn't just indifferent; he's hostile. That's Job. *"When I think my bed will comfort me and my couch ease my complaint, even then you frighten me with dreams and terrify me with visions...I despise my life...Let me alone! Will you never look away from me or let me alone even for an instant!?"* (Job 7:)

Suffering can put you in that spot. I once received a note from a church member who had been going through a long period of suffering. Most of the time he showed a strong Christian Reformed face, but in the email he told the truth about how he felt – at least at that moment. *"I'm sick and tired of God kicking us around. If he is trying to teach us something, I wish he would be more gentle."*

That's basically the same as Job. If you're just going to kick me, why don't you leave me alone.

It also reminds me of C.S. Lewis in a *Grief Observed*, the memoir of his grief at the loss of his wife after a long battle with cancer. In his grief and pain, Lewis reflects on some of the things his Christian friends have been saying to him, things like, "Don't worry. She's in God's hands now." But after the long fight with cancer and all the disappointments and cruelties he saw along the way, he responds in his journal by saying: "*She's in God's hands?! But she was in God's hands all the time, and I have seen what they did to her here. Do they suddenly become gentler to us the moment we are out of the body?*" These are not easy things to hear, and maybe not so encouraging, but they are real, AND they are biblical. This is where our souls can end up in this world. Even for good people, this is what happens when your soul is over-saturated with suffering.

I want to speak some words to this kind of pain this morning. I want to speak words to those who are super-saturated and worn out. I offer you no explanation. I will offer no set of spiritual exercises or disciplines that will help you sort things out. I just want to show you your God. More specifically, I want to show you one of the parts of our God's character.

It goes without saying that our God is an infinitely complex being. God's true character is beyond our powers of comprehension and beyond our powers of description. But the Bible gives us images and pictures of his character. God reveals himself to us. For our purposes this morning, think of the Bible as a divine art gallery. Through the stories and poems and prophesies of Scripture, God gives us a gallery of self-portraits. Hundreds of paintings. All of these paintings are a little different. All these paintings reveal some different aspect and different nuance of God's character. They reveal God to us.

When we are suffering, we want rescue. We want God to end our suffering. And so, in our prayers and in our thinking, we gravitate to certain paintings in the gallery. We are drawn to paintings in the gallery that emphasize God's strength and power to save. So, for example, we might turn to the portrait painted by Exodus 14 of the God who parted the Red Sea to save the Israelites. Or we might think of God rescuing Daniel from the lion's den and closing the mouths of the lions. Or we might think of Jesus standing up in the boat with the frightened disciples and calming the terrible storm. In our need and in our pain, we go to those portraits of God and say, "God save me! God help me! You are so strong! You are so mighty, there's nothing you cannot do! Please heal! Please help!" But when this obviously powerful God doesn't give you the help you want, when you want it, that's when you begin to wonder if he's listening, or if he cares.

So this morning I want to put you all in front of a few other pictures. I want to get you in front of some different portraits. I want to get you in front of some pictures that show you the suffering of God. Because those portraits are there, and as you will see on this gallery tour—there are portraits that show suffering in all three persons of the Trinity.

First, there are portraits of suffering of God the Father in the Old Testament. Our first reading was Hosea 11. Hosea 11 is the cry of a Father whose heart is breaking because of his son. God is the Father; Israel is his son. On the one hand God is furious with Israel's sin: "*A sword will flash in their cities! I will*

*punish them!*” But the Father also remembers how much he loves his son. *“I taught him to walk. I carried him in my arms. I kissed him on the cheek. I fed him cheerios in his high chair.”* In Hosea 11 we see God’s anger and his compassion in a kind of tug of war with each other. That comes to a head in verse 8 where the Father says, *“How can I give you up O Ephraim? How can I hand you over O Israel! All my compassion is aroused!”* This is a picture of a Father whose heart is breaking. This is a portrait of a heartbroken God.

We see a similar portrait in Jeremiah 31:20. Jeremiah is a book where you hear God express a lot of anger. At the beginning of the book, God is absolutely fed up with Judah. God stomps around in anger. *“My rebellious children! They never listen to me! I will hand them over to the power of the sword!”* But in Jeremiah 31:20 God says this: *“Is not Ephraim my dear Son? The child in whom I delight? Though I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore, my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him.”* We read the terrible judgments of God in the Old Testament like they are nothing but anger, like they are pure wrath. But passages like Jeremiah 31 show us that’s not true at all. God’s anger is full of pain. There is sorrow in his judgments. He yearns for his children and his heart is breaking.

Hosea and Jeremiah show us a God who is in pain because of his children; does that pain put tears on the Father’s face? Jeremiah and Hosea don’t say that, but as we move to our next portrait, the picture of Jesus in Luke 19, we get a fuller picture. In Luke 19 Jesus finally arrives at Jerusalem after a long journey from Galilee. He’s come to Jerusalem for a specific purpose: he’s come here to die. He’s come to die for the sins of the world. So after a long journey full of trials and opposition, he finally arrives at his destination. The city comes into view, and what does Jesus do? He bursts into tears. He weeps. He weeps because he loves this city. He loves these people. He loves them so much that he’s here to die for them. But he knows the suffering that will come upon this city because of their sin. He can hear the wailing, he sees the panic in the streets, he sees the motherless children and it breaks his heart. I think you can see that in this picture Jesus is torn up by exactly the same kind of pain that breaks the Father’s heart in Hosea 11.

When it comes to pictures of God suffering, Jesus has the most portraits by far. There he is weeping at Lazarus’ funeral. There he is flat on his face in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood. There he is watching his friends abandon him and deny him. There he is getting mocked and spit on. There he is crying out in pain and loneliness on the cross.

What about the Holy Spirit? Are there any portraits of the Holy Spirit where we see the Spirit suffering? You might not think so, but actually there are! That passage I read earlier from Romans 8 is one of them. Paul is talking about all the suffering that we still experience, even after we belong to Jesus. He uses the image of groaning. As we wait for God to finish his work, the world is full of groaning. Creation groans. We groan. And then, remarkably, Paul says that when the Spirit hears creation’s groans and when the Spirit hears our groans, the Spirit groans too! Only the Spirit’s groans become a prayer that goes to the Father. *“We don’t know what to pray for but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with wordless groans.”* The Holy Spirit doesn’t just see us groaning; the Holy Spirit *feels* us groaning. The things in our lives that are so painful and confusing that we don’t

even know how to pray for them anymore, the Holy Spirit doesn't just know about those things, the Spirit feels those things and turns them into prayers.

Here's what's amazing about that: when is that happening? That's happening right now. Paul is saying that right now the Holy Spirit is feeling your groans and turning them into prayer. That means that your pain and your loss and your confusion and your fear—through the Holy Spirit, that's something God experiences in himself. God experiences your pain through the groaning of the Holy Spirit. It's also amazing to think of how much pain and hurt the Holy Spirit must bear up into the heart of God every day. If the Spirit is carrying all our pain and fear up to the heart of the Father, what must that wordless groan sound like? We are not supposed to picture God, but if we were able to draw a painting of the Spirit interceding, expressing our groans before the Father, what would it look like? Like Edward Munch's painting, *The Scream*?

There are more portraits I could show you, but let's stop there. Why am I showing you these Biblical portraits of a suffering God? Because I want us to have a richer sense of what it's like when we come to God with our pain. Maybe it's more like this. So maybe I'm getting my prayers ready for God. I've been suffering for a long time. I've been watching my life come apart. I've been watching the life of the people I love come apart in a way that makes no sense and God just doesn't seem to be doing anything. So I'm mad, and I'm ready to give it to God, I'm ready to let him have it. So I open the door to the heavenly throne room, expecting to see a powerful king seated on a throne, serene, composed, omniscient, omnipotent - glittering in his strength. But instead I see the Man of Sorrows.

His face is full of love, and strength, and I can feel his love moving out towards me, but it is also lined with a thousand ages of pain. And I see that some of that pain is *mine*. His face is lined with my worries, his cheeks are stained with my tears, and the hand that reaches out to me in welcome has been shattered by my sin. He says, in a voice that sounds like the rushing of many waters, "Well my son, what is it that you wanted to tell me?" And I tell him of course because that's what I've come to do, and now he's asked me. I tell him all the stuff I was angry about, and he takes it. He takes in every word. And when I'm done, the man of sorrows lays a broken hand on my shoulder and says, "Don't be afraid. I have risen and the future belongs to me."

And that's all he says. He doesn't explain or expand – but that's okay because both of us are crying. That's all I have today. I have no advice, no program, no spiritual exercise. All I have for you is the Man of Sorrows. The God who loves you. The Lord who died for you. The God to whom you belong.

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