

ME:

Hey it's great to be here in Church. I love this place. I love the community, the vibe, all the areas we are involved with. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Sam, I'm part of the team here at Proclaimers. I've been coming to Church for almost 5 years now and I still love it! I still love it because of the impact we are having on this city! From street teams to a Sunday service. I love how Pastor Tom (Who sends his greetings from Riga, Latvia) has always championed the next generation which is the reason I'm standing here today. I love the impact we have on the communities from old to young. In fact, Pastor Tom shared a story in our staff meeting this week about the amazing job the kids team are doing. They handed out bibles last week and some of the kids wanted to go home to read their bibles instead of going out for lunch or doing the usual fun things. They wanted to go home and read their new bibles! Such inspiring kids! You parents must be so proud.

It's these moments that I understand why people want to be parents and then I see a screaming toddler in the supermarket and remember that children aren't always rosy cheeked angels running through fields of daisies on their way to becoming the president of the world.

I think regardless of whether you're a parent or not, we all know children have their good days and their bad days... If you want to know what a bad day is, try washing a child's hair at bath time.

Again, I have no experience speaking as a parent, so I'll speak for the children. "what a horrific ordeal you put us through!" Although parents, your intentions were the for the best, unfortunately your not always met with the positive response.. I don't know what are the best methods to use these days? You 21st century parents probably discuss these things of parent blogs or something right? But I do remember if you wanted a stress free bath time when I was a small boy, all you needed was a rubber duck that changed colour with the temperature of the water!. Simple minds... But that would keep me distracted. That was a good session. If you want to find out what a bad session looked like, get this stuff too close to the eyes. If the shampoo got anywhere near the eyes, the situation got tense. MUM I NEED A TOWEL!!! get it away from my eyes! get it away from my eyes! mum - "I haven't even put it on your head yet?!" Have you ever heard that phrase that tops off the tantrums? **"How could you do that! Why would you do that to me?!..."**

So ungrateful.. I know I've been making light of this and using children as an example (I had to make fun of someone else because Phil's knee is starting to heal and he'll be able to chase me down soon). I've been using children as an example but I believe we too still use that phrase.

How could you let that happen?

I remember when I was much younger living in Bali. My mum was working at an orphanage and one day we received terrible news. One of the local men (who worked alongside mum at the orphanage) and one of the orphan kids had been on a motor bike that was hit by a truck. Both of them died in the accident. Both of them left families behind. The man left behind a wife and two very young children. I remember the day. I remember them bringing the coffins in and the other children going up to them in disbelief, trying to see if it was really them. But most of all, I remember wife crying out, "Why did you do this to us? Why did you take him?"

WE:

(How could you do that! You (God) can't love me... or you wouldn't have let me go through this..

We all feel this same bitterness at times. We want something or someone to blame. When we can't find someone or something to blame, we blame God because He is 'all powerful' right? If he wanted to, *He* could fix this.

I know that for a lot of people, the suffering you're going through is so tough! You feel desperate and angry. I've felt that too! You don't know if you can keep going.. and through it all, it seems like God is dormant.

Why God?! If you really exist you wouldn't have let that happen! If you really cared you wouldn't have let them die. If you really are 'love' why is there suffering?!

Maybe you have a loved one who's in hospital with a serious illness and the doctors don't know how much more they can do.. or maybe it's you in that situation. Maybe you're struggling with your mental health. Maybe it's stopped you from living the life you wanted to live? Are you struggling with finances, not knowing how you're going to make that payment. Maybe you're living in the shadow of abuse.. not knowing who to turn too because everyone you know has always let you down. Or maybe it's someone you love who is suffering and you don't know what else you can do.. Whatever the situation, the question that keeps coming back, keeps haunting you is ,”Why God? Why me? If you'd been there for me, none of this would have happened. If you really loved me...” We blame God for our suffering because we can't understand why He would let this happen to us.

Now I don't know everyone in this room tonight and I can't imagine the pain and suffering you've experienced but I do know that suffering is not exclusive. We've all experienced levels of pain and suffering. And through it all, the question still remains:

How can God love us if He let's us suffer?

GOD:

I want to read a passage in the Bible, John 11. This passage follows the account of the death of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus.

John 11 (NIV)

The Death of Lazarus

11 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. **3** So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” **5** Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. **6** So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, **7** and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

Jesus Comforts the Sisters of Lazarus

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

18 Now Bethany was less than two miles[b] from Jerusalem, **19** and many Jews had

come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

- Interesting, Martha confronts Jesus with the, "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died"

23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26** and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

27 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

28 After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." **29** When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

- Mary as well, " "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died"

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. **34** "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

- This is the question/ accusation that we have come so accustomed to using ourselves. God I've seen you do these things for other people, why didn't you come through for me? In fact we go a step further and say things like God why would you even let me get sick in the first place? I believe a lot of our frustration with suffering is that we don't understand why it's happening.

Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. **39** "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" **44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. **46** But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. **47** Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. **48** If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

49 Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! **50** You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

51 He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, **52** and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. **53** So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Now I know that was a lot of bible I just read to you but I'll do my best to unpackage it and hopefully you'll be able to find something from what I say that can apply to your life. I've read this same passage over and over in different translations and there are a few things that really confused me. In fact there were parts of this passage that really shocked me (other than a dead person coming back to life) When there are bits that shock you more than a dead man coming back to life, you should take note. I think we can learn something about how Jesus works through suffering.

What shocked me about this passage were not the things that Jesus did do.

What I kept coming back to were the things that Jesus didn't do.

Now the first thing that shocked me when I read through this passage was verse 5:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days,

Jesus didn't stop the suffering?

What?! Jesus knowing that Lazarus was dying, stayed longer? It doesn't make sense! Surely Jesus couldn't 'love' Mary, Martha and Lazarus if upon hearing the news, He stayed where He was for two more days! Did Jesus allow Lazarus and his sisters to suffer? From reading this passage, it sounds like He did...

It's important to understand that although, from what we've unpackaged so far, Jesus allowed them to go through suffering, He did not cause it. We can be so quick to blame God for our problems or suffering but it is the fact that we live in a fallen broken world that problems and suffering are inevitable. But that doesn't mean it's God's fault. The majority of the bad things that happen in this world are a result of the choices of mankind. Right back to Adam and Eve and their choice to distance themselves from God's perfect plan for humanity.

Ok so although Jesus didn't cause Lazarus to become sick and die (permanently), he did allow him to suffer sickness and death and Martha and Mary to suffer grief! Surely this proves that God doesn't love us if He would let bad things happen to us?

Well I know it sounds like I've set this up all wrong but bare with me. I believe that Jesus did all these things intentionally in order to show that His love remains despite the presence of suffering. Jesus still healed Lazarus and brought peace back into that situation but He didn't work to the timeline that they expected or wanted. Why? Because He had a bigger plan at work. God doesn't work to our plans, He works to His own. But that doesn't mean that He has abandoned us!

I want to jump back to the account in John 11 to see how Jesus timeline was different to what was expected.

Jesus says in verse 4:

4 ...“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”

Jesus said that Lazarus would not die but he did?

Hate to break it to you Jesus buuuuut.. Lazarus is DEAD. Lazarus died. He was dead. AND I can prove it!
Verse 17 says:

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

I don't how much more dead you can get than that?

Verse 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Another translation refers to him as a cadaver (a corpse) a dead body. not an *alive* body! So *WHY* did Jesus say that “**This sickness will not end in death**” I decided to look up the original greek and Hebrew to see if the word death meant something different (It must do otherwise Jesus must be wrong) and what I found was really interesting. The word for death used in this passage in both verse 17 and 44.... literally mean death. Like physical death. So that doesn't help at all

So was Jesus wrong? Because the account clearly says that Lazarus died.. No, I think Jesus said that Lazarus would not die because Jesus doesn't stop in the middle of the story, He knows the beginning and the end and Jesus knew that the story DID NOT END IN DEATH! Death may have been part of the story. suffering may have been part of the story but it was not the end. God knows the begging and end of your story and you need to stop reading the middle. The middle may be tough but when God is writing the story, it does not end in death!

What we need to realise is that when Jesus is part of the story, and you think it's over and the battle is lost, He's is only getting started.

We know that he will not leave us in the midst of our suffering.

Psalm 23:4 (TPT)

4

Lord, even when your path takes me through
the valley of deepest darkness,
fear will never conquer me, for you already have!
You remain close to me and lead me through it all the way.
Your authority is my strength and my peace.[a]
The comfort of your love takes away my fear.
I'll never be lonely, for you are near.

He has already promised that He will walk through the darkest valley with us (the shadow of death). In the midst of your suffering, don't blame God, let Him walk through the pain with you. Ok so if Jesus' love remains despite the presence of suffering, what do we need to do? **We need to trust that through it all Jesus' love won't let us down.**

I believe we struggle trusting God because can't see God's timeline. We want God to work a certain way but get angry at him when things don't work according to our plans.

Jesus had a bigger plan. You see before Lazarus, no one had ever been brought back to life before. They had seen healing and miracles of that kind, but never something as powerful and awesome as someone dying and then coming back to life! Too often we want God to do the small miracles because we can't handle the pain. "Jesus if you could just heal my brother. Jesus if you'd been here..." but if we could just see that God has a better plan in mind then maybe we'd be more open. Jesus held back from performing a miracle that wouldn't have surprised anyone so that he could show that even DEATH had no power over Him!

See God wants to use your story as a testimony. He wants to be able to impact others. He wants you to be able to walk out of the clinic free of cancer! He want's you to be able to praise Him because the debt you thought would cripple you is gone and you're on the way to being able to bless others with finances and wisdom. I think that Jesus wanted us to know that whatever grief, shame, guilt, pain, suffering you are going through, He could take you out of it but that wouldn't give you the strength you need for the next challenge, that won't give you the resolve you need to persevere through harder times, that won't allow you to grow in the ways you need to to be able to do all the things that God has called you to.

When you're ready to give up, God is calling you rise up. When you're shouting, "God why did you let this happen" He shouting back, "Stop reading your story and start reading mine.."

When I was in Bali, aged about 11/12. I suffered a ruptured appendix. The doctors missed it the first time and I was seriously ill for 10 days.. When my mum took me back to the hospital, they disproved my appendix had burst and they needed to operate immediately. it was serious because a when an appendix bursts, the poisons and toxins, if they spread to the rest of your body, can kill you.

Thought this experience, I suffered, I was in pain, I thought I was going to die. But I wouldn't go back now and wish it never happened. Why? because it was through that experience that I resolved in my heart that God was real. I didn't die so there must be

some reason I'm still here. I have a great big scar that reminds me that God's not done with you yet! He has a plan and although you might not understand it, He is working all things together for your good. Even though you might not understand the timeline, know that there is a bigger miracle coming!

If Jesus had healed Lazarus when he was sick, Jesus wouldn't have been able to raise him from the dead. If He had just healed him instead, it wouldn't have caused the stir it did.

So if God is using my suffering for His glory, how do I practically navigate through our suffering?

YOU:

Involve God in your suffering.

Right from the start of this passage we read that the sisters told Jesus straight away that Lazarus was sick. They involved Jesus in their suffering.

So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When troubles come, when times get hard, when it's too painful, what/who is your first port of call? Is it Jesus? The sisters knew who Jesus was and knew what He was capable of. They hoped that Jesus would be able to come and heal Lazarus of his sickness. What they didn't know was that Jesus had power *even* over death. I wonder whether sometimes we are quick to dismiss what Jesus could do in our situations because He hasn't performed that kind of miracle for us before.. It seems impossible even for Him!

I wonder what would have happened if they didn't send word to Jesus? or if they, instead of reach out to Jesus, became bitter and blamed Jesus. What if they refused to involve God in their suffering? I wonder whether Lazarus would ever have been raised from the dead? I wonder if all those people who saw and believed would ever have encountered Jesus if the sisters had not chosen to put Jesus as their first port of call.

See, God has already promised that no matter what situation we are going through, He will be there with us!

When it comes to suffering, we have a choice to make. Do we blame God and exclude Him from the situation or do we include Him and witness His love transform our situation from a pray request into a praise report.

So what does it look like for us? How do we include God in our suffering
Tell him!

1 Peter 5:7 (NIV)

7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Pray - Praying is as simple as speaking to the person next to you. It is our primary form of communication with God. The Bible says to cast all your anxiety on him! There is nothing too big or too small for God. Sometimes we think that God filters prayers in terms of importance. But John 14:13 say I will do **whatever** you ask in my name!

John 14:13-14 (NIV)

13 And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. **14** You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Well ok maybe my payer isn't too small for God but what if God doesn't hear my prayer? There are probably too many prayer that God can't possibly have time to answer them all! Has anyone seen the Jim Carey film, Bruce Almighty? In the film he claims that he could do a better job than God so God gives him the responsibility.. You see one clip where 'Bruce is quickly overwhelmed with pray requests (in the form of emails) and struggles to possibly answer them all in his human capacity.

There lies the problem!

I think we forget that God's capacity is beyond even our comprehension. We cannot box **God's power** into human constraints.

Step 1, involve God in your suffering by speaking to Him. Lift up your suffering to Him. Cast all your anxiety on Him.

Be found in Church

Another way we can involve God in our suffering, is to involve ourselves in what God is doing. I want us to jump back and read John 11 verse 28 in the passion translation:

John 11:28 (TPT)

28 Then she left and hurried off to her sister, Mary, and called her aside from all the mourners and whispered to her, "The Master is here and he's asking for you." **29** So when Mary heard this, she quickly went off to find him,

Mary left the mourners and went to Jesus. She left the environment of mourning and grief and ran toward the One she knew could bring transformation. We need to do the same. Although we can't run to Jesus in the flesh, we know where he will be. **Church**. The bible says that when two or three gather in my name, I am there! Instead of wallowing in your suffering, pain, grief, burden, be found in Church, worshiping lifting up the name of Jesus! Run to where he is. Don't stay stuck in your suffering. I know it can be hard to get yourself into Church when you're going through tough time but Church is a community. Surround yourself with people who will run to you in your time of suffering and point you back to Jesus. Be found where God is. Involve Him in your suffering by praying, pleading and seeking God. (When we look back at this passage, The problem was not resolved when Mary and Martha spent time with the mourners, it was resolved when they took their suffering to Jesus)

US:

The reason we struggle with suffering is that we think that God doesn't love us.

But we need to understand that His plan is bigger than you can understand. You can't walk through the pain alone, you need Jesus to be present to give you strength and guide you. He might not take you out of the tough times but He definitely won't leave you in them!

Jesus loves you enough not to leave you in your loss.
His love won't abandon you to abuse.
His love won't leave you brokenhearted.
His love won't leave you in sickness.
His love won't let you down.

Why?

Because God is love.

Why?

He loves you!

Why?

Because He is willing to walk through your pain with you. He will bring transformation to your situation and the reason we can know that God loves us (even if we are going through suffering) is because He took on the ultimate suffering. God's love for us was so great that He sent his one and only Son, Jesus to be crucified in our place. Jesus took all our sin, all our debt, all our pain, all our heartache to the cross. IF DEATH HAS NO POWER OVER HIM, THAN NEITHER DOES YOUR SITUATION! Jesus has won for us eternal life! It means that even though we may be going through a tough time, this is not the end. Although we may experience suffering now, we can know that whatever the timeline is, God's love has saved us and will fight for us. It may be tough now but it's not forever.

Our earthly suffering can be used to point to Jesus' Transformational suffering. Lazarus' death was a sign post on the journey to the cross. (it was this miracle that convinced the religious leaders to kill Jesus). Our suffering can point to God's love and grace. You must get out of the blame cycle. God did not put you there but His love means that He is there with you through it. The timeline may not make sense but His grace does! Jesus strides into your suffering, this time with the cross behind Him. He has taken away the last true suffering, eternal death.

Imagine how our testimonies could change the world. There are people in this very city probably going through the same situations as you are but there is a difference. They don't have Jesus to turn to because they don't know who He is. We have a choice today, to either exclude God from our suffering or allow Him in and let Him use our suffering to transform us and become a miracle that shows the glory of God wherever we go. Imagine the people we could point to Jesus. When people ask us "How did that situation not break you?" We can tell them that "My strength comes from God and I trust that although I might not be able to read the whole story, I know that it doesn't end in death"