

The result of God rescuing his people from sin

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[0 : 00] In AD 200 in North Africa, Perpetua, a 26-year-old wife and mother, is arrested by Roman officials, torn away from her husband and baby, never to see them again.

And she's sent to the Roman arena to be killed by wild animals in front of hundreds of jeering onlookers. AD 429 in Carthage, men by the names of Rusticus, Liberatus, Regatus, Servus, Septimus, and Boniface are tied together in the hold of an old ship filled with wood and straw, which is set alight, leaving them to burn to death.

1409 in Smithfield, England, John Badby is arrested, taken to the town square, placed in an empty wooden barrel, surrounded by dry wood, and burned alive.

Much closer to home, on the 25th of July 1993, during a service at St. James Church, Kenilworth, four armed gunmen, storm in, open fire, kill 11 people, and leave many others maimed or handicapped.

And this year, 2015, not three months ago, in Syria, a 12-year-old boy and his father is caught and beaten by ISIS soldiers, and both of them are executed.

[1 : 29] Now, I know this is not the nicest thing to hear on a Sunday morning, but we don't come to church to feel nice. We come to church to hear truth, even if that truth is uncomfortable.

And the uncomfortable truth of these deaths that I've just mentioned is that all of these people were Christians. Christians who suffered terribly at the hands of evil.

Many of whom specifically because they were Christians, but many of whom also had just suffered because of the world that they live in, and the results of living in that world.

And it's important to hear this, because as Christians, we often tend to think, we often tend even to take it for granted, that because we're Christians, God is going to keep us safe.

He's going to keep us safe, at least, you know, from major disasters or trauma in this life. And yet history shows us that's just not true, isn't it?

[2 : 32] And God tells us that it's not true, that there's no guarantee of safety, for Christians even. Don't get me wrong, God's Word does tell us that God is in control of every situation in life, and He often protects and always provides for His people as they do His work.

But that doesn't mean that they'll always be spared from situations of even terrible suffering in this world. And this morning, we need to understand why that is, and how we as Christians can be ready to face evil in an evil world.

And we're going to do that, we're going to start by turning to Jeremiah 31, and we're going to have a look at what it says to help us to think through this in a much more biblical way than we tend to.

Now, if you read Jeremiah 31, it's actually not talking mainly about suffering. On the contrary, it talks about blessings, the amazing blessings in store for God's people.

So look at verse 8, which is also on the screen behind me. Look what it says. See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Now, this is describing, we looked at a couple of weeks ago as well, in another prophecy, all these prophets are describing this great gathering that's going to happen.

[3 : 51] God gathering his people into his kingdom, into relationship with himself, and not only gathering them, but verse 11, rescuing them. Have a look. For the Lord will deliver Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

And Jacob, of course, just refers to God's people who were Israel at the time. So in the immediate context, this verse of God delivering his people speaks about Israel's national enemies who were causing them great suffering at the time.

They were being attacked by the Syrians and Babylonians and various enemies. But what it's ultimately talking about, this verse 11, is not just Israel's enemies at the time, because those always

foreshadow something much bigger, something much more universal.

It's ultimately talking about humanity's real enemy, which we also saw a couple of weeks back in the other prophets. Humanity's real enemy is sin. Your and my real enemy is sin, which is really the cause of all the evil and suffering we see in the world around us.

And it's the destructive power in our own lives that causes us to turn away from God, to not live the way he designed us to, which is best for us. And it cuts us off.

[5 : 06] Worst of all, it cuts us off from God and enjoying God and relationship with God and enjoying God's blessings. And so that is our greatest enemy. And yet, we read the prophet tells us God will rescue us from that enemy.

And that's why once sin is properly defeated, look what's next from verse 12 in Jeremiah 31. Look at the result of God rescuing his people from their enemy sin.

They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion. They will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord. The grain, the new wine, and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden and they will sorrow no more.

You see, God says here through Jeremiah that once he redeems his people from sin and its effects on their lives and their world, and once he brings them into a proper relationship with him, everything will fall into place.

They will be, he calls them like a well-watered garden. And anybody who has a well-watered garden, which especially in summer we struggle to have, but anybody who has a, or you go to a really well-watered garden that the irrigation system is all working properly, it's just beautiful.

[6 : 14] It can be in the middle of this arid region, but if it's well-watered, it's beautiful and it's flourishing and it's looking like it's meant to look with no kind of decay. And you see, that's what God is describing his people to be.

They'll finally flourish when they're in relationship with him and they'll be who God intended them to be, designed them to be, with no death or decay, living in a world like God originally intended, where people are enjoying all his blessings without hindrance.

You know, it talks about the food, your new wine, olive oil, some lamb, you know, some, it's just lovely, juicy food that it talks about because all the things we enjoy in life is from God and he wants us to enjoy them, but we can never enjoy them and get the satisfaction now in this broken world that we're meant to get, but now in this world to come, God is describing all of us enjoying his blessings like never before, without hindrance, without limit, and enjoying, most of all, enjoying God without hindrance, without sin getting in the way, without limit, enjoying him like we were meant to.

Now you see, what's happening here in Jeremiah 31 is there's a little picture of heaven here. It's just a little picture. It's nothing, it won't, it'll never be able to describe what heaven, what the new creation will truly be like, and yet it's a little picture just to whet our appetites.

It's what we all long for, isn't it? Deep down inside, we long for a world that works, that functions properly. That's why everybody gets angry with, with our president, when he messes up.

[7 : 56] And yet, even if he's replaced, it's not going to fix our world. No amount of human leaders, no matter how clever they are, will fix our world. Our world is broken because of sin.

And we all long for it, we all long for sin, sin to be taken away, so that our world will be fixed. Well, God is promising that through Jeremiah. It's coming. That is what God is promising for all the people that he's gathering to himself.

And yet, I want you to notice, right in the middle of all these blessings, of this picture of heaven to come, right in the middle, is this, in verse 15.

This is what the Lord says. A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning, and great weeping. Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

What? You know, where did that come from? Everything was great up until verse 15, wasn't it? But then suddenly, God tells his people that there will be great mourning and weeping.

[9 : 05] And that doesn't seem to fit. But it's supposed to shock us. It's supposed to be a stark contrast right here. But what's it talking about, this Rachel and Ramah?

What's all that about? Well, Rachel, if you look back into the Old Testament, Rachel was a key figure in Israel's history. She was Jacob's wife, and she was seen ever since her life as really Israel's mother figure throughout their history, even long after she had died.

And in a way, she represented all Jewish mothers, did Rachel. And after she died, she was buried just outside Jerusalem near a town called Ramah. And so, Jeremiah is prophesying here that

something bad is going to happen near Ramah, just outside of Jerusalem.

Something that will cause Rachel to mourn. In other words, it will cause many Jewish women to mourn. What could that be talking about? Well, not long after Jeremiah wrote this prophecy, you know what happened?

Israel's enemies, Assyria and Babylon, invaded and conquered Israel and took them into captivity. And what an invading army would do when they took a nation captive is that they would take away all the boys who would grow up one day to be able to fight, and they took them from their homes and families and they drafted them into their own army so that they wouldn't be able one day to fight against them.

[10:31] And when Assyria first conquered Jerusalem and started taking these boys from their homes, before the long trip back to Assyria where they would be taken into their army, they needed to organize them for the march ahead and they did this just outside Jerusalem which happened to be in the town of Ramah.

And so that was the town where all the Jewish mothers would gather to see their sons for the last time to hug their boys before they're taken away.

And they'd be crying, they'd be mourning, they would be grief. You can imagine the scene, can't you, of these Assyrian soldiers dragging these kids from their mothers who can do nothing except watch.

And that, what was happening, was the initial fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. Jeremiah prophesied that this would happen in Ramah. And the point of it being here in Jeremiah 31 is to stress to us something.

It's to stress that even while God promises His people, Israel, great blessings and rescue in the future, He says before that they're going to experience great suffering in the present.

[11:47] God's people, who He loves, are still going to suffer. That's the point He's making here. But why? Why? I mean, that's a key question.

Why would God allow His own people to go through suffering like that? And that's a question which if you haven't wondered yet, you will one day when you face great suffering.

If you're a Christian, you're bound to ask, if God loves His people so much, why do they still suffer? Why does He put them through suffering if He loves them and if He's sovereign?

Well, to answer that, we need to turn to the New Testament. We need to turn to the book of Matthew, to His account of the Christmas story because right in the middle of the Christmas story that Matthew is narrating, Matthew quotes none other but this exact verse that we read in Jeremiah referring to the suffering of God's people and it's not here by mistake.

Have a look from Matthew 2 verse 16. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

[13:14] Then, what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. a voice is heard in Ramah weeping and great mourning.

Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more. Now, as I said earlier, Jeremiah's prophecy was originally fulfilled in the Assyrian invasion.

Remember when they carried off all those boys away from their mother but that wasn't the only fulfillment. As often you find in Old Testament prophecies, it's fulfilled in a number of ways and every time is increasingly a greater fulfillment.

You see, it's fulfilled again, this prophecy, again at the birth of Jesus. Again, Jewish mothers are mourning for their children. This time, not because they are taken into captivity but because they are torn from their arms and murdered in front of their eyes.

This is a terrible atrocity by a psychotic murdering king but of course, we know it wasn't the first atrocity like it and it wouldn't have been the last. There were many evil rulers before Herod and there would be many still to come even into our own day.

[14:27] We only need to look to Syria to see very similar atrocities happening. But you see, what's so disturbing about this atrocity is that it's part of the Christmas story.

I don't know if that's ever struck you. It's the part we don't like to remember though at Christmas.

You know, we don't have little scenes on our mantelpiece of Herod slaughtering babies.

We don't want this to be part of the Christmas story. But Matthew doesn't sugarcoat Christmas for us like we often do. He doesn't sugarcoat our world like we often like to do.

The real Christmas is disturbing. The real Christmas is another reminder that we live in an evil world with suffering around every corner and that none of us are immune to that.

Even Jesus himself is not immune to the effects of evil. The Son of God only barely escapes from being killed as a baby and only to be caught and killed 30 years later.

[15:32] And if even he was at the mercy of the evil people of this day, of his day rather, we shouldn't expect that we won't be at the mercy of the evil people of our day.

But the question remains, why? Why would God allow this? If God's, if Jesus is God's Son, if he's the Messiah, he was supposed to come to earth to defeat evil, to bring its perpetrators to justice, not to suffer at their hands.

Why would God allow that to happen to his own Son, let alone his people? Why would God not just wipe out evil once and for all? Well, it's as we read on in Matthew that we see why.

It's when we understand what Jesus went on to do that we see why. And what we see is that it was necessary for evil to reign in the present precisely so that it could be ultimately defeated in the future.

and you see that's the amazing thing about how God works in this world. He doesn't just allow evil but he uses it and turns it for the ultimate good always.

[16:50] You know, we see this, for example, in the story of Joseph. If you're familiar with Joseph back in Genesis, we touched on this in our Bible studies last week if you went to Bible study.

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery which was an evil, unjust act.

And then he went off to Egypt as a slave and he worked in a house and he was framed by an Egyptian woman who accused him of committing adultery with her when she, in fact, was trying to do that to him and he resisted but he was framed and accused and sent to prison.

Another evil act, unjust. But what we see if we read on in the story is that God used every single one of these events to elevate Joseph to being one of Egypt's leading government officials which would never have happened if those events didn't happen first.

Which of course resulted in the saving not only of the nation of Egypt from drought but the saving of his brothers and their father who would one day be the forefathers of Israel of course.

And you know what Joseph told his brothers when it all came out? You can read this at the end of Genesis. He said this to them. He said, you intended evil but God intended it for the good, for the saving of many lives.

[18:10] You see, God used evil for good to save people. All those evil things were necessary for God's ultimate good outcome.

And that's how God works. Evil doesn't come from God but seeing as here he will use it to achieve his plans. evil. And that's exactly what happened in the life of Jesus too.

Not only did God allow evil to touch his son but it was necessary to achieve God's ultimate plans to save many lives. And let me explain why.

This is very important that you get this. Remember that promise of God that I spoke about in Jeremiah earlier to defeat the ultimate enemy of his people which is sin? Well how did God do that? How did God ultimately defeat sin? You see the only way sin can be defeated in our lives in your life in my life is if the price of our sin is paid for.

[19:09] If the guilt of our sin is taken away and that can only happen if according to God if we are punished for our sins or an acceptable sacrifice is given in our place that has no sin of its own to pay.

Those are the only two ways that sin can be defeated in your life and we know that Jesus came to be that acceptable sacrifice with no sin and when he died on the cross he was being punished in place of us for our sins so that our guilt could be taken away so that we can come to God without guilt for sin because they've been paid for and you see that right there Jesus dying on the cross for sins that is the ultimate defeat of the enemies of God's people the greatest enemy of sin your greatest enemy and mine was defeated on that cross but I want you to notice this morning that would never have happened if Jesus wasn't willing to subject himself to the power of evil people if he wasn't willing to suffer at their hands and to let evil reign over him for a time listen to what Matthew records as

Jesus died on the cross those who passed by hurled insults at him shaking their heads and saying you are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days save yourself come down from the cross if you are the son of God in the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law and

the elders mocked him he saved others they said but he can't save himself he's the king of Israel let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him he trusts in God let God rescue him now if he wants him for he said I'm the son of God in the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him you know the most frustrating thing about reading this is knowing that he so could have done that at a moment he could have called armies of angels down to take him off the cross to defeat those evil people but he didn't he let himself be spat on he let himself be tortured and killed at the hands of evil people and the reason is because if he hadn't have let that happen sin would never have been defeated and so you see evil needed to reign for a time for it to be ultimately defeated in the future you see that and it still needs to today reign for a time because God hasn't finished

God hasn't finished his saving work in the world you remember how Jeremiah also spoke of a time of God gathering his people to himself before he remakes the world into what it's supposed to be before he defeats all evil and destroys it for good God is gathering his people to himself and that is what's happening now all those prophecies that talk about this great gathering that is talking about today through the church God is gathering his people to himself through the proclamation of the gospel and it's the last thing that needs to happen before this world is remade and evil is destroyed once and for all but it needs to happen first people still need to trust in Jesus to be saved for his death to count as theirs for their sins to be paid for and they can only do that when they hear the gospel of Jesus and believe it but that's why God hasn't brought an end to this world yet he's delaying that he's delaying final judgment he's delaying the destruction of all evil because he's allowing more and more people to be gathered to Christ before it's too late you see he's allowing evil still to reign he's allowing evil to reign in order to rescue more and more people from its power that's how God works and of course that is only possible it's only possible for more people to be gathered to Christ through the church because like

Jesus did God's people today are still willing to be subject to evil and evil people as they share the gospel as all those people that I mentioned at the beginning were if Jesus wasn't willing to suffer we wouldn't be saved today and if we're not willing to suffer for him other people won't be but really as I close this morning the most important question you must ask first and foremost is has God gathered you into his people yet has he I'm not asking do you come to church or even are you a member of a church I'm asking you has he gathered you to himself has he gathered you into his people because that's the only reason God is allowing this world to continue to give you a chance to come to him before it's too late and God is allowing this world to continue to give your neighbor a chance to come to him and hear the gospel before it's too late but have you come under God's rule have you been gathered to him have you joined his people truly and have you experienced the hope of eternal life to come or do you still not know where you're going when you die ask yourself well all I can say to you if that's you is come come to

[24 : 50] Jesus because he died on the cross and when he died on the cross he did everything for you to be redeemed back into God's people all you need to do is to come to him nothing else just come to him stop ignoring him come to him put your faith in him and follow him follow him into eternal life and if you have done that which I hope many of you have then take heart even while you suffer the hardships of being in a broken evil will take heart don't let being a Christian stop you don't let the suffering of being a Christian stop you from the work that God has given you the work of calling people to hear the gospel and be saved themselves and this church hopefully provides you with tons of opportunities to do that take those opportunities like tonight's carol service a perfect opportunity to bring someone who you know has not yet been gathered in to come and hear the gospel but if you are a Christian take heart take heart be of good cheer because listen to the promise that God gives Jeremiah straight after telling his people that they will face suffering he says this verse 16 this is what the Lord says restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears for your work will be rewarded declares the

Lord you see what gives God's people courage in a world of suffering what helps them to get through all the rubbish that this world throws at us all the difficulties and hardships of life what gave all those martyrs courage who went before us is the assurance of knowing where we're going when we die that changes everything and Jesus died to give you that assurance and that assurance changes the way you live changes the way you view suffering in life and when we fix that front and center of our thoughts every day and then if we do that if we fix our eyes on where we are going then no suffering will totally defeat us it may be painful it may be hard but it won't defeat us Nicholas

Ridley and Hugh Latimer were burned at the stake for following Christ in 1555 the night before the execution

Ridley told a grieving friend talking about the day to come he said this because he was about to die the next day he knew it he was about to be executed during the day he said this to his friend who was teary eyed he said quiet yourself though my breakfast shall be somewhat sharp and painful yet I am sure my supper shall be much more pleasant and sweet there was a man who faced suffering with courage because he knew where he was going do you let's pray heavenly father thank you for the sobering reminder this morning that even your people are not immune to suffering in this world your son himself was not immune to suffering in this world but thank you Lord for putting it in perspective for us through your word thank you for showing us that you are working to the ultimate good in all things the ultimate good of your people Lord thank you for the great assurance of eternal life through what

Jesus did by taking our sins on the cross help us Lord to trust that and help us every day to live looking forward to what's to come and Lord comfort us with that knowledge even as we go through suffering and help us to never shy away from declaring the truth as you gather more and more people to yourself and we pray this in Jesus name Amen Amen and the