

Upside Down World - Suffering

Mark 5:21-43

So we're looking at another in our series Upside Down World - how the gospel turns the way we see life upside down. And today, we're going to look at how that's true for suffering - those times when life is really hard and you wish it wasn't.

Now, obviously, we can't say everything there is to say about suffering in one go. So this is inevitably going to be limited. But I want us to think about the reality of suffering, what you can learn in times of suffering, and then how you can live with hope in suffering. And I want us to do that by look at the stories of two people who come to Jesus for help in their own suffering.

Reading: Mark 5:21-43

The Reality of Suffering

Jesus is presented here with two very different cases. Sure, they're both physical - a little girl so sick she's about to die, and a woman who's been sick for 12 years, but in terms of timescale, how long this has been going on, they're very different. One is the kind of acute event, a previously-well child who's condition rapidly worsens, that can shake a family to its foundations. The other, a chronic medical problem that has left the woman physically and emotionally hollowed out. Both physical, but at opposite ends of the spectrum in duration. And that's a reminder that suffering - those times when life is hard and you wish it wasn't - comes in multiple different shapes and sizes.

It could be acute or chronic. It could be physical - like cancer, or emotional - like relationship problems, or mental - like depression. Or a mix of those. It could be something that leaves you physically limited, your body's just not working like it should; or something that leaves you with your sense of self-worth crushed, you're bullied at work, or you daily face the unkindness of those who should be kind to you. It could be something that takes over your life with endless rounds of doctors appointments and you've never had so much people contact. Or it can leave you lonely and isolated. Or both.

And it doesn't even have to be you who has the primary problem. As Jairus falls at Jesus' feet, pleading for his little daughter - his only daughter, Luke's gospel tells us - it's a reminder that the suffering of those you love brings its own suffering.

But these two stories also remind us there's a universality to suffering. Look how Mark describes Jairus: v22, he's 'one of the rulers of the synagogue.' That means he's a man of social standing in the community and almost certainly a man of some some wealth. While the woman who has been bleeding for 12 years is a woman in a patriarchal society. And her bleeding has left her poor and ritually unclean. Jairus was a man you'd be honoured to know - the woman was someone you'd cross the road to avoid.

And yet suffering has come to Jairus. Because, sure, wealth, and education and social status can protect you from much hardship. They can't offer you, or those you love, ultimate protection, can they? Suffering and death come knocking at everyone's door, regardless of income, or academic degrees held by those behind the door.

And Jairus clearly loves his daughter, doesn't he? But a loving family is also no ultimate protection. In fact, love may increase your pain when those you love suffer.

Not only that, but Jarius is a deeply religious man. But that too is no protection. In fact, if you are religious, and life takes a turn you dread, it can seriously shake you. Because if you think you can earn God's favour and blessing by living a good, morally upright life, and you live like that, but instead of blessing you and giving you favour, the daughter you love becomes sick and on the point of death; or you lose your job; or your research tanks, or your marriage is hard, then you either think God has failed you: I've done all this for you, and look what you've done for me, how could you do this. Or you think you've failed - I haven't lived a good *enough* life; God must be punishing me for my sin, even if I don't know what that sin is. Or you'll think both at the same time and you begin to hate both yourself and God.

So, there's a universality to suffering, but think that God's favour and blessing is something you have to earn and deserve and you're going to be ill-equipped to face it.

But there's another aspect of suffering here, and that's the fear that comes with it. In v38, after the messengers tell Jairus that his daughter has died, Jesus says to him, 'Do not fear.' And it's obvious why he says that, because what Jairus has dreaded has happened - death has robbed him of his daughter.

And it's the thought of what suffering can take from us, or impose on us, that makes us fear it. And here, suffering and death threaten to rob a mum and dad of their daughter. And sickness has already robbed the woman who's been bleeding of her dignity, because to be unclean was to be untouchable, a social leper. And just like leprosy, it left you isolated you, on the fringes of society. 'That's terrible!' you think. Sure, but even today, in a culture that idolises beauty and health, to be chronically sick makes you, if not an outcast, at least on the edge. No wonder we fear it.

It's why the woman, Mark tells us in v26, 'Had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all she had, and was no better but rather grew worse.' It's that drive to do whatever you can to avoid, or get rid of suffering - and it's consumed not just her life but her livelihood. And if the religious person thinks suffering is unfair, so gets mad with God, or deserved, so angry with themselves, then the person who's not religious, but instead thinks this life is all there is, can respond in ways similar to this woman. She spent her life's savings on doctors, looking for a cure, *any* cure. And the person who's not religious may do anything to avoid, or be rid of suffering, because suffering ruins your life and this life is all you have.

But of course, it doesn't have to be doctors you turn to. I once spent time with a young guy who had experienced an emotional break-up that left him feeling worthless and lost. And he described how he had tried everything - alcohol, drugs, one night stands, to try and be rid of that pain. But they just dragged him down further. He's like this woman, isn't he, spending all he has on one 'doctor', one potential cure after another, but it left him worse off than before.

And religious or not religious, suffering can undermine your faith in God - at least in a God who's all powerful and all good. Because why would he let this happen?

So suffering is universal, we're afraid of it, and we can struggle to deal with it. But the gospel gives us a very different way of seeing it.

The Lessons of Suffering

Now, if the reality of suffering has this ability to undermine faith in a good God, should it? You see, if, as the non-religious person might think, that this life is all there is, that there is no ultimate meaning to life, to moral absolutes, then why is suffering such a problem? It's just a fact of life, neither good or bad.

Yet deep down we know suffering is not how things should be. Deeply loved 12 year old daughters shouldn't die. A woman shouldn't have to go through 12 years of what this woman went through. But if there is no God, if there is no right and wrong, if life has no meaning, you have no way of saying why those things are wrong or shouldn't happen. Thinking like you do about suffering only makes sense if there is a God who is absolutely good and all powerful.

So why might he allow suffering? Now, again, we can't say everything, but just put yourself in Jairus' shoes for a moment. He is desperate to get Jesus to his daughter before it's too late. Look at v22-23, 'he *fell* at [Jesus'] feet and *implored* him *earnestly*.' Jairus would have been a respected member of the community, the kind of person people would have stood up for when he entered a room. And yet, he falls down in front of Jesus, a man his colleagues were ridiculing, and literally begs him to help. Because, somehow, Jairus knows that Jesus is his only hope, so he'll do anything to get him to his daughter's bedside.

But there's this crowd, Mark says, who thronged about Jesus. Imagine Jairus' growing anxiety. 'Please everyone, please get out of the way; please stop slowing him down, my daughter's dying.' And then... 'o no, Jesus, please no, why have you stopped to talk to this woman?'

Su used to be a doctor, and she worked in the Emergency Room. And whenever I had to pass through, it was always like a war-zone - patients everywhere. So they do something called *triage*. A patient comes in and someone, a nurse, makes an immediate assessment of the seriousness of the condition: 'do they need to be seen now, or can they wait until the doctor's seen all the real emergencies?' And as Jesus calls for the person who touched him to come forward, he has a triage situation in front of him, doesn't he. A little girl about to die, but could be saved if he acts quickly, and a woman who's been seen and treated in ER multiple times already, who's had her condition for as long - 12 years - as the little girl has been alive.

Which patient should Jesus have prioritised? I mean, if this was the Emergency Room, and Su had sat down and chatted with this woman, leaving the little girl to die, she would face discipline.

So why does Jesus behave like this? Because, if you think about it, it's not hard to put yourself in Jairus' shoes, is it? When life is not going the way you want, does it ever feel like Jesus is sorting out everyone else's problems, but you feel abandoned in the crowd like Jairus?

You see, despite the fact that he is facing an emergency, Jesus doesn't seem to be in much of a hurry here, does he? In fact, one commentator (Ellis) says of this event, 'Jesus was never in a hurry'. So why doesn't Jesus get the urgency of the situation?

Well, Jesus knows that when life is not going the way we want, there's almost always more going on than just the problem itself. And he wants more for Jairus, and this chronically sick woman, than

simply the return of physical health. And Jesus' timing is not our, or Jairus' timing, because his priorities in suffering may be different from our own.

Firstly, for this woman he stops to talk to, he wants to draw her into a personal relationship with him. Look how and why she approaches him: v27-28, 'She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well." So she has no first hand experience of Jesus, no previous relationship. She's heard reports of him, and she approaches him from behind, hoping to stay anonymous. Because think of the shame, think of the looks, think of the people pulling back, if she had to shout out in the crowd, 'I'm unclean, please let me get to him.'

And Jesus could have simply let her slip away after, and carry on with Jairus. But Jesus wants more for her than hearing reports of him, or seeing his back, or even, only, experiencing physical healing.

Instead, when he feels power go out of him, he insists on knowing who's been healed. And in doing so, there's a sense in which he brings her out of her anonymity and social isolation. Because he knows the physical is just one part of what she's suffering. And look how he speaks to her: v34, "*Daughter*, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

Daughter. The woman who everyone else has shunned - Jesus calls 'daughter.' Jairus is desperate for his beloved daughter, but Jesus knows this woman needs to know that she also is a beloved daughter. That she needs more than physical health. She needs to know he loves her, loves *her* like Jairus loves his daughter. Let her slip away, and return to her anonymity and she'll never know that. Know that and she goes away, not just healed, but at peace, never needing to hide again. Because knowing you're loved by Christ can heal years of hurt.

Maybe when life is hard you doubt that love. Or maybe you've never experienced it. Well, when Jesus makes you wait, or in some way calls you out, maybe it's because he wants more for you than physical health. Maybe he wants you to go much deeper with him, and experience him in ways you never could, or would, if all was right with your world.

But the lesson Jairus learns is different, isn't it. While he's waiting, the messengers come and say, v35, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any more?" To which Jesus replies, v36, "Do not fear, *only believe*." And you could translate that, 'Keep on believing, stay trusting Jairus'. And by having to wait, Jesus has enrolled Jairus in Jesus's school of faith, of learning to keep on trusting him when things are not going to plan; when anxiety is gnawing away at him. You see, if you're to grow in kindness, is what you need everyone being nice to you? No - you need circumstances that will test your kindness. Or if you're to grow in patience, what do you need? Everything to happen *right now*? No - you need stuff to happen that will test your patience. And if we're to grow in faith and trust in Jesus, sometimes that means he keeps us waiting, longer than we want.

But why should you trust him - especially when things aren't changing? And why would you want your relationship with Jesus to deepen anyway?

The Saviour in our Suffering

The obvious problem in using this passage to talk about suffering is that both Jairus and the woman got what they were asking, didn't they? They had their prayers answered. But what if you don't?

What if your situation doesn't change? What if you have to wait much longer than Jairus before it does?

Well, from this passage, I'd say two things. Firstly, Christ understands your suffering. These two interactions alone tell you, he has seen first hand what it is to suffer, or want to hide, or be isolated, or be overwhelmed by the suffering of one you love.

But he's done more than witness it. He's experienced it. You see, if you ever feel like your prayers have gone unheard or unanswered, look at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he prays, sweating, that God would take the cup of suffering away from him. Is that prayer granted? No. Jesus doesn't get to take the suffering free path. And so Jesus doesn't sit, like Buddha, with a smile playing across his lips; and he's not distant or aloof from suffering like Allah. He kneels in the night and prays, and sweats, and then, isolated, shunned, and spat upon, he faces the cross.

When the woman touches him, power goes out of him, and she is made whole. And at the cross, he does it again, except this time for us. At the cross, he gave up his power, his life, that we might receive it. He became weak, that we might be made strong. His body was broken that we might be healed. He was lost that we might be saved. Isaiah saw Jesus' suffering coming and said, he was 'a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not.' (Is 53:3). Jesus didn't just witness suffering and the isolation that goes with it, he experienced it.

So the gospel tells us, we have a God who suffered, and suffered for us, because he loves us. And that means, when you face suffering, you can know God is not punishing you - because Christ has already carried all your sins in his body on the cross. You're not getting your just desserts - Jesus got them for you. So whatever we go through in life is not to punish us, but to teach us, to draw us deeper into relationship with God.

CS Lewis said that one of the foundations of friendship was 'You too?' You meet someone and it turns out they went to the same school as you, or enjoy the same hobby as you, or have gone through the same experience as you. And you go, 'you too?' And a friendship begins. Well, in your suffering, look at Christ's suffering, and say, 'you too?' And let that friendship deepen.

Face suffering with a religious I-have-to-earn-God's-favour attitude, and suffering will break you, because you'll either think you don't deserve it, or think you do, both of which are bleak. Face it from a secular, this-life-is-all-there-is world-view, and you'll never learn the lessons of suffering - you'll only ever want to be rid of it. But face it with the gospel: Christ suffered for me, and you'll begin to open up to what God wants to teach you through it. And as you do, you'll become steadily more like Jesus.

But secondly, it's Christ, not everything coming good, who is our ultimate hope in suffering. You see, why do the messengers tell Jairus not to bother Jesus any more? And why do the mourners laugh at Jesus when he says the little girl is only sleeping? Because they think death is stronger than Jesus; that when it comes to the power of death, Jesus doesn't know what he's talking about or what he's up against. What they don't understand, and what we can so easily forget, is that the One who said, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life', has entered our world of tears.

And just watch him as he walks into that little girl's bedroom. And watch him as he sits on her bed, and v41, 'Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi." So Peter, who was there, and told Mark this story, can still hear those words in their Aramaic original. "Talitha cumi." "Little girl, I say to you, arise." In fact, Talitha is a diminutive. It's what Jairus, her dad, would have called her. I call my girls Poppet - and they hate it! Maybe you'd use Sweetie, or Honey. Well, Jesus is using the words her dad would have used to call her for breakfast. 'Poppet, it's time to get up'. The night is over, the day has come.

But that's what death is in the presence of Jesus. It's sleep. And through his resurrection, you can know he is the Resurrection and the Life, that however dark things are for you now, morning's coming.

In religion, all your hope is in you, that somehow you can be good enough that God won't make you suffer. In irreligious secularism your hope is in never experiencing suffering in the first place, because life's too short for that. In the gospel, your hope is in Jesus, the sunrise from on high, who suffered in our place, and vanquished death and has the power to turn our grief into joy.