

Since the new year began we've been talking about **suffering** under the theme "**Nobody gets to Heaven without a fight.**" We've talked about the inevitability of suffering in this fallen Kosmos. And the strange fact that God-in His grace-amended suffering. **God seeded Suffering with redemption and restoration and renewal.**

**We began** seven weeks ago by laying out five categories of suffering [*Tragedy, Human-induced, Environmental, Self-inflicted and Every-day life*] and seeing how God used them all in the story of Joseph to accomplish **God's intended good.** Then we spent some weeks trying to see those sources of restoration and renewal hidden away in the suffering we face. We found: suffering, rightly processed, releases in us such qualities as **humility, discipline, empathy and gratitude.**

So far we've been talking about the **ordinary, everyday suffering** that's part of being human. The kind that makes it so **Nobody gets to Heaven without that fight.** **But sometimes** God taps some of us for bigger, harder, challenges. Sometimes God calls people to resist the corruption of unjust systems, or to stand up and speaking Kingdom of God TRUTH to the powers that be, to take on a larger struggle for justice with a commensurate increase in personal suffering. **And they're typically ordinary people just like you or me.**

But before we consider some of their stories, I think we need to talk briefly about the importance of JUSTICE in the scripture. [SLIDE] "Biblical justice involves making individuals, communities, and the Kosmos whole, by upholding both goodness and impartiality" [Paul Louis Metzger CT 2010]. Most often Justice in the scripture is about taking the side of the little guy and calling out the Powers who want to steamroll over the outcaste, foreigner, sick, and despised. In the NT book of James [SLIDE] **James 1:27** Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world. It's the same in the OT [SLIDE]: **Prov. 29:7** The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern. James directly calls out his congregation for disdain the poor and preferring the rich [2:1-13]. In this James is taking his lead from Jesus who called out the leaders of Israel saying [SLIDE]: **Matt. 23:23** "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

Before they enter the promised land Moses reads the law to the people. He tells them to appoint judges and then says [SLIDE]: **Deut. 16:19** Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. **20** Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you. **And later: Deut. 27:19** ' Cursed is he who distorts the **justice** due an alien, orphan, and widow.'

God's required justice- no favoritism for the rich and concern for the weak- is all over the scripture. [SLIDE] **Psa. 106:3** Blessed are they who maintain justice, **Prov. 21:3** To do righteousness and **justice** Is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice. **Is. 1:17** Learn to do good; seek **justice**, Reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

When Jesus says **Matt. 6:33** "...seek first [God's] kingdom and His righteousness,..." "righteousness" means "**right standing**" in the covenant community as defined by God. And an accurate definition of God's righteousness in covenant community requires **justice** [N.T. Wright] So seeking God's Kingdom and his righteousness includes seeking justice.

**That said, let's consider some folks God called to the larger fight for justice**

We'll start with the prophet **Samuel** . [SLIDE] [1Samuel]. His birth was an answer to his Mother's prayer so she dedicated him to the Lord's service. At the right time Samuel went to live with the high priest, Eli, at the house of the Lord at Shiloh. **Eli** had two sons who were the original "evil priests": **Hophni & Phineas**. When people brought animals to sacrifice to God, these two demanded they be given the best cuts of meat before it was even offered up. If anyone said "no" these temple-thugs threatened to take it by force. Besides that they seduced and slept with the women serving at the Tabernacle [forced?]. **They were wicked, unjust priests using their position of power to prey on the women and on ordinary worshippers who couldn't do a thing about it.**

Eli -their father- knew all this. He confronted them about it. They blew him off and he did nothing. **A mysterious man of God shows up with a message for old Eli** [1Sam2]: "This is what the Lord says..." Because of what your sons do and because you don't stop them God says I am cutting your family tree off. All of them will die before their time. And you'll know I'm speaking truth when your two sons die on the same day."

But what about the boy? Well ch2 says **Samuel grew in stature and in favor with the Lord.** One night God called out to Samuel. He didn't know what was happening and he ran to Eli saying, "**Did you call me?**" Three times this happens until Eli realizes God is calling Samuel and says to him: "*Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'*" Sure enough, God called to Samuel and the young man replied: 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"

**And the first prophetic word young Sam has to declare is for his superior, the high priest, Eli.** And it's a word of judgment against him and his sons and all his family It's a word of judgment against "the powers that be" because of the injustice they practiced on the ordinary worshipper. Eli accepts the message.

And it came to pass that there was a battle with the Philistines. Hophni and Phineas carry the Ark of the Covenant into battle to secure victory but the Israelites are slaughtered. 1Sam 4:11 The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died. And when Eli heard it he fell back off his chair, broke his neck and died.

**Samuel took up the calling to speak truth to power and demand God's justice.** Samuel served Israel well as prophet and judge. His sons did not. They took bribes and twisted justice. So the people said: "**Give us a king so we can be like the other nations.**" This broke Sam's heart and God's too. God said: Give them what they want but you tell them the absolute TRUTH about what it will cost them.

And he did: The King will take your sons for soldiers and field workers and craftsmen and your daughters for bakers and perfumers and cooks. He'll take the best of your vineyards and fields and still demand a percentage of your crops and wine and flocks or men or maid servants. You, the people, will become slaves of the king and when you cry about it, I, the Lord will leave you with the results of your choice [1Sam 8:11-18]

Samuel warned them **but they would not hear the Truth he spoke**. Saul their first king was a disaster. Then comes David- a man after God's own heart - and then his son Solomon who begins well but fails in the end and then the kingdom splits and good kings are seldom seen. **But Samuel was faithful to follow his calling to speak difficult truth to dangerous power in the service to the justice of God.**

At the end of 1Kings 16 we meet **King Ahab of the N. Kingdom**. Here's what you need to know about him: **30** Ahab ...did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. And after marrying Jezebel [the Cruella deVille of the Old Testament] and setting up altars for false gods Baal and Asherah. **33** ...Thus Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

So God sends a prophet . **[SLIDE]** by the name of Elijah to speak Truth to Ahab: As surely as God lives it will not rain in Israel until I say so. See ya. Elijah stays in hiding for the most part of three years and there is NO rain.

In the third year God tells Elijah: "Go find Ahab." He does and he gives old Ahab a dose of Truth: "This drought and famine is all because you abandoned God's commands and worshipped the false god Baal." Elijah challenges the 450 prophets of Baal to a duel, on Mt. Carmel, in front of all of Israel. God wins spectacularly [1Kings 18]. The people turn to God and kill all 450 prophets of Baal. And just to make the point clear it's then Elijah prays and the rains come. Sounds like that "fight" came out pretty well. *Well.....*

**Cruella de Jezebel** not happy about the death of Baal's prophets, or the embarrassment to her and her gods, vows to kill Elijah. *This isn't unusual in this sort of fight.* **When you're called to speak Truth to power the powers don't like it.** And they fight back. And Jezebel had long been trying to eliminate every prophet of God for a while now- sort of a hobby. I told you that story to tell you this one]

**[SLIDE]**

Tucked away in Elijah's story is a little story about a fellow . by the name of **Obadiah** [1Kings 18]. Obadiah managed palace affairs for King Ahab. He was not a prophet but "he was a devout believer in the Lord." When he realized Jezebel was making a hobby of killing God's prophets, he **secretly gathered up about a hundred of Yahweh's prophets and hid them in a couple of caves** – fifty in each and at his own expense supplied them with food and water. If Ahab or, God forbid it, **Jezebel** found out about this Obadiah would have been executed as a traitor to the throne. But his devotion to God's kingdom and righteousness called him to risk the danger for the sake of those who couldn't save themselves.

Remember **Corrie Ten Boom** and her family hiding Jews in their home during the Nazi

occupation of the Netherlands? Their home became “The Hiding place” and **Corrie** and her sister **Betsy** and their father **Caspar** because of their devotion to Jesus Christ opened their home to hide refugees — both Jews and others who were members of the resistance movement — being sought by the Gestapo. In one instance a mother and baby needed a home. Corrie asked a local pastor to take them in. He said: “No. We could lose our lives for that Jewish child.” Corrie’s father, Caspar, came up and took the baby and said “You say we could lose our lives for his child. I would consider that the greatest honor that could come to my family.” Betsy and Caspar died in prison. Corrie was released on a technicality and her story changed the world. The Ten Booms –like Obadiah - were called to a bigger fight against evil forces for the sake of God’s justice.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel –let’s say @760BC is being ruled by Jereboam II. This utterly apostate Kingdom was militarily powerful, incredibly secure, prosperous, wealthy and blatantly religious The golden calf god Jereboam I set up was worshipped as if it were Yahweh- and the people saw the King as responsible for all this blessing. [The religion of the N.Kdm was a tool of politics and public relations. It was a machine for the monarchy] **[SLIDE]**

Amos the prophet tells us this all came to be at the expense of the little guy: the outcaste, the foreigner, the sick, the despised. The rich lived in luxury and the poor in misery. The rich enjoyed an indulgent existence while the poor were a target for legal and economic exploitation. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer. [Archaeological digs show similar sized homes in the 10<sup>th</sup> century replaced in the 8<sup>th</sup> by large expensive homes & “slums”]

So God called on Amos to speak Truth to the N. Kingdom and Jereboam II. He says: **[SLIDE]** Amos 7:14b “I was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. Amos was a middle class cattle man and fig farmer from Judea. He knows the outdoors he’s got a gift for language and how to use it. And he knows he’d rather not have this calling. **[SLIDE]** Amos 5:13...the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil. But he also knows when God says “speak up” you gotta speak up: **[SLIDE]** Amos 3:8 The lion has roared — who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken — who can but prophesy?

Amos is tapped to proclaim God’s judgment on the powerful trampling the poor, the rich denying justice to the oppressed, the bribery-driven injustice of the courts and the failing façade of their religion. God’s message through Amos is judgment without hope.

God will spare Israel no longer. God will not pass by. Now he will pass through. Assyria will be his instrument to destroy Jereboam II and the N.Kdm. This unpopular message put Amos life at risk but he kept up the “good fight” and he persisted with his call to “24... let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

**Now let’s talk about Jesus.** I was surfing the internet and reading various articles and blogs on the topic of Christians and “protest.” I was surprised to find some that said: Christians should not ever be part of political protest because: Romans 13 **[SLIDE]**

**Rom. 13:1** Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established, possibly followed by saying you don't ever see Jesus protesting against Rome. My response: I sure don't see Amos or Samuel or Elijah submitting to **their** governing authorities.

And as to Jesus not protesting against Rome, that's just silly. The immediate governing authority over Israel was **the Sanhedrin**- the high priest and the Pharisees and Sadducees and lawyers. And whenever their laws or policies were less than loving Jesus took on that extra fight and spoke Truth to power. [SLIDE]

The Rabbinic law said: no healing on the Sabbath. Every time Jesus healed on the Sabbath- looking the Pharisees in the eye as he did it- that was a protest against law bridling compassion. It was also an act of love for the person healed.

The Pharisees noticed Rabbi Jesus' choice of company- tax collectors and sinners- and they grumbled [Lk 5] to the disciples why is he eating with this unclean, unholy riff-raff? Jesus says: **Mk 2:17** ...“ *It is* not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” His choice of company, shoot his choice of disciples- was an act of love, sure, but also an act of protest against the choices typically made by the Religious leaders about who was good and who was worthy.

How about Jesus' cleansing of the temple? That was a one-man protest against the religious/financial systems that were controlled by the High Priest's family and taking financial advantage of every worshipper that came into make a sacrifice. [like Hophni & Phineas]

When “evil was afoot” Jesus stepped up and took up the fight against it or spoke dangerous Truth to those in power. [SLIDE] **Matt. 23:23** “ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. **24** “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!  
Of course it was talk like this that got him killed.

We've focused mostly on biblical examples of people called to a larger fight beyond life's ordinary suffering. But the centuries are full of saints who've taken on a bigger fight for the Kingdom of God.

Plagued with poor health, **William Wilberforce** –for the sake of the gospel and despite being vilified by his opponents spent 18 long years working in Parliament for the abolition of slavery in Great Britain.

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** among other German pastors led the Confessing Church in faithfulness to Christ and resistance to Hitler. As Hitler gained power Bonhoeffer studied in America. He wrote: "I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the Christian people of Germany.

How about something a little more modern: fellow Alums from SPU, **John Beuchner**

**and his wife Lori** became aware of the incredible evil that is the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation. They felt God's call to take on that fight and began **Mercy Project Colorado.** MPC serves as a hub to bring together churches, financial resources, safe houses, and trauma care resources to assist in **the after-care** of those who have been rescued from the sex-trafficking industry.

You see they were called to a larger fight and a commensurate level of sorrow and suffering and frustration on behalf of the hurting and oppressed.

You see. Nobody gets to Heaven without a fight. For some of us that may just be walking through the regular suffering we face daily from frustrating annoyance to debilitating sorrow. But **SOME** will be called to take on another fight, a bigger fight for the sake of the gospel, and the justice of the Kingdom of God and the well being of the outcaste, the foreigner, the sick, the despised.

May we all be brave and faithful enough to hear the call and respond like Samuel:  
'*Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.*'