

The Supremacy of Christ in an Age of Terror

by John Piper

The Supremacy of Christ in an Age of Terror: Understanding the Reasons and Purpose of Suffering and Terror in the World.

Duration: 38:11

Scripture: Proverbs 16:33, Proverbs 21:1, Isaiah 45:7, Habakkuk 3:17-18, Matthew 10:29-31, 2 Corinthians 6:10

Topics: "Sovereignty Of God", "Atonement Of Christ"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that the reason for the existence of a troubled and terrorized world is not because God is not in control. The Bible clearly states that God governs everything in the universe, from the smallest bird to the largest storm. The speaker also highlights that the joy we pursue in Jesus Christ is always intertwined with sorrow in this world. The followers of Jesus are described as sorrowful yet always rejoicing. Lastly, the speaker explains that the reason for the existence of a troubled world is to provide a place for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to suffer and die for our sins, demonstrating the deepest display of God's love.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.DesiringGod.org. Let's pray together. Father, I ask for your help now as we continue to worship.

And I endeavor by your help to honor you in your word. Be glorified in this message, I pray. Be exalted in the way that these songs have exalted you.

And incline our hearts toward Christ and his supremacy over all things. In his name I pray. Amen.

The year is 2005. And for the first time, the anniversary of 9-11 happens on the Lord's Day this weekend. Therefore, it seemed good to us to step back and pose the question again about the meaning of the supremacy of God in an age of terror.

One of the truths that we embrace with trembling joy at Bethlehem is the truth of God's supremacy in all things. The mission of this church is we exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. And when we say that, we do not mean except in calamities or except in war or except when Al-Qaeda blows up a building or a train or except when cancer takes a mom or a child is born with profound disabilities.

There are no except clauses in our mission statement. We did not formulate this mission statement in 1995 in a rosy world and then get surprised by the reality of suffering. Oops, we forgot.

We didn't formulate this statement of mission for this church with our head in the sand as though we didn't know people in this church die and agonize with suffering. We have seen many people die in 25 years, some with sweet peacefulness and others in terrible suffering. We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things, all things with a capital A, through Jesus Christ all the time, no exceptions.

None of us who has lived a few decades, and I'm moving towards six, none of us who have lived a few decades has embraced this mission without trembling. None of us has lived this mission for any length of time without tears. We have said it dozens and dozens of times and we will say it till our last breath that the joy we pursue and the joy we embrace in Jesus Christ is always in this world interwoven with sorrow.

There is no unadulterated joy on planet earth while history lasts. None for those who care about other people. The Bible describes the servants of the Lord like this, we are sorrowful yet always rejoicing, 2 Corinthians 6.10. Sorrowful yet always rejoicing, how in the world can that be? It can be because Christ is supreme over all things forever and suffering and death remain for a while.

Therefore, life is not simple. There is pleasure and there is pain. There is sweetness and there is bitter suffering.

There is joy and there is misery. There is life and health and there is pain and disease and death. Therefore, emotions are not simple.

For those who love others and don't just care about maximizing their own comforts in a private little sphere, this complexity will always mean we rejoice with those who rejoice, we weep with those who weep and we always know somebody rejoicing and we always know somebody weeping. Therefore, we will in love discover the mystery of sorrowful yet always rejoicing and rejoicing yet always sorrowful. If you haven't found that mystery, you haven't lived long yet or you don't love people or you're not a Christian.

Sorrowful yet always rejoicing is the banner that flies over this church because suffering remains for a while in this world and Christ is supreme now and forever after this world. The first plane that hit the World Trade Towers, Flight 11, immediately killed 92 people on board. Flight 175 hit the second tower a few minutes later, killed 65 people immediately on board.

Then, within an hour or so, these two towers fell to the ground and about 2,595 people at latest count perished in the towers. Those who worked there, those who were just visiting and those who wonderfully and heroically had gone in to help them. Flight 77 carried 64 people when it hit the Pentagon and they all perished immediately.

125 workers at the Pentagon died. Flight 93, 45 people on board, turned around over Pennsylvania and headed where? White House? Congress? Who knows? And Todd Beamer and some others wrestled control out of their hands and they all died, not in the Capitol or the White House, but in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Didn't hurt anybody else, just themselves.

We thought that that calamity would be a good one to focus on this weekend. We thought that was the plan months ago, to have a 9-11 reflection. God had other plans, didn't He? Who can pose the question of God's sovereignty, God's supremacy, Christ's supremacy over all things and leave Hurricane Katrina out of account? What happened last week in New Orleans and surrounding areas is different than anything

that's ever happened in this country.

The Galveston hurricane, September 8, 1900, probably killed more people, up to 12,000, but it didn't displace hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people. It didn't leave a major American city underwater and paralyzed. It didn't devastate lots of surrounding small towns.

Who can speak of the supremacy of Christ over terror in an age of terror and not talk about the terror of 140-mile-an-hour winds, broken levees, floodwaters over 80% of the city, and who knows how many dead in their attics? And lest you think, lest we think naively about the cost of life here, we should remember that this is not unusual. Fifty million human beings a year perish in the world. Six thousand every hour, over 100 every minute, and most of them do not die in ripe old age, sleeping away into eternity.

Most of them die young, and most of them die after long, agonizing struggles with pain. Millions die because of man's evil against man. Sudden calamities like we have seen ought to shock us into the realization that this happens every hour.

Six, seven, eight thousand during this service will die. Some of them, as I speak these words and you sit there comfortably, are screaming in pain. I would dare say hundreds of them right now are screaming in intolerable pain this moment as I speak.

Nothing special about New Orleans. Suffering comes one pain at a time, and if it's your child, it's everything. If there is to be any Christian joy in this world, therefore, along with love, it will be a sorrowful joy.

It will be a brokenhearted joy. What person, what person in this room has lived long enough not to know that the sweetest joys and the deepest pleasures are marked with tears, not laughter? Would anybody over thirty dispute that? There's meaning in that, very deep meaning in that. Even our own experience, believer and unbeliever alike, are experiencing a testimony at those moments that in this world there is not absurdity.

In a world of evil and pain and misery and death, it's not a place where there is no good and purposeful God. Some people, not all, some people have found that in the greatest evil, in the time of greatest sorrow and the most tears, God has appeared to them as the greatest need, and at those moments they have experienced the most profound evidence of His existence. It works like this.

A great evil happens in the world. You're involved. Say a Holocaust with six million murders.

Say that. Or say a Soviet Stalinist cleansing in the Gulag with ten times the Holocaust. Say that.

And you're involved in this. And up till that moment you were blithely pursuing your worldly pleasures with scarcely a thought about the living God, with no serious belief in anything absolute except you at the center of your pleasures. Evil and good, whatever you think they are, they are.

Living your life in a dream world of relativism until you see something so evil, so horrible, so great, that your soul screams out with an ultimate moral indignation, No! This is absolutely evil! And you find for the first time coming out of your mouth a moral conviction. And it startles you. Where did that come from? I don't believe in absolutes.

I'm enjoying relativism and how much freedom it gives me to do what I damn well please. Where did that come from? This profound, absolute certainty that there is such a thing as evil. Where did that come from? And you're confronted in your own soul with a witness of a reality that either you can depart from it into absurdity or you can go with what it is telling you.

It exists! And it has roots, it has ground. Your own soul is screaming, This is absolute evil! It exists. And if somebody were to tell me right now, it is the vagaries of the electrochemical synapses of my mammal primate brain on the way to some higher evolutionary animality, I would swear them into non-existence.

That's not what this is. My whole soul bears witness. That's not what this is.

It is not a meaningless non-evil called electricity. It is evil! There is moral reality in the world. And therefore, paradoxically, the moments of greatest evil have proved to be the moments of strongest need for God and strongest evidence there's got to be an absolute reality that is defining these and has written them on my heart.

There's got to be a reality out there. This cannot be mere evolutionary materiality and energy and time all just making me say with absolute certainty evil exists. So I ask, Why, Lord, does this world exist? Why this evil? Why terror? Why Katrina? And I have two answers that are not the reason this world exists and four answers why this world exists.

Number one, and please know that one of my points, though I wanted it to be and now it is, I suppose, is mystery. Don't hear me exhausting the mind and heart of God as though I have him in a box. I know all that he does.

I just know perfectly what God thinks. Don't hear it that way, please. But also hear it as coming from the Bible and give it a fair hearing as faithful to what he does say to us.

Number one, the reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is not because God is not in control, total control. The Bible is overwhelmingly clear that God governs everything in the universe from the smallest bird to the largest storm. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny and not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father? Even winds and sea obey him.

I'm just reading the Bible now. The lot is cast in the lap, but every decision is from the Lord. The king's heart is a stream in the hand of the Lord.

He turns it wherever he wills. Who has spoken and it came to pass unless the Lord has commanded it? Does disaster come to a city unless the Lord has done it? He commands and even the unclean spirits obey him. I am God and there is no one like me saying my counsel will stand.

I will accomplish all my purpose. And there are hundreds of texts like that in the Bible. If God is God, he rules the world.

That's what it means to be God. The largest enemy he has is Satan. And Satan cannot thwart the sovereign will of God.

He does whatever he does against God's will with permission. And he's never off his leash ever. Read Job and read Luke 22, 32.

Second, the reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is not because God is evil or unjust. 1 John 1, 5. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you. God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

Psalms 25. God, good and upright, is the Lord. The angels cry before God in heaven, what? Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty.

The whole earth is full of his glory. He's absolutely holy. And whenever he does things, ordains things that look evil to us, he teaches us how to speak about them.

Man meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Genesis 50, verse 20. There are good and holy and just purposes in all that God does.

For those who love him, he works everything together for good. First reason now why this terrorized world does exist. Number one, the reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is because God planned the history of redemption.

And then permitted sin to enter the world through our first parents, Adam and Eve. God planned the history of redemption through Christ. Then, moving toward it, he permitted Adam to fall.

Listen to this word from 2 Timothy 1.9. God saved us and called us with a holy calling, not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. Do you cherish the grace that came to you through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ? Guess when it came to you? Before the ages began. Therefore, Adam's sin was part of God's plan so that God could reveal mercy, grace, justice, wrath, patience, wisdom in ways he could never have revealed them if there were no sin, no savior, no history of salvation in the world.

God's aim for this fallen, terrorized, troubled world is that he be known more fully. Because knowing God most fully is what it means for us to be loved most fully. Let me say that again.

If we know God most fully, including mercy, judgment, wrath, holiness, patience with sinners, if we know him most fully, we are most fully loved. Because to be loved is to be able to know God and be satisfied with God forever. Therefore, the greater and the more full the revelation of God, the more we may be loved if we will accept love.

Number two, the reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is because God subjected the natural world to futility. That is, God put the natural world under a curse so that the physical horrors we see around us in diseases and calamities would become a vivid picture of how horrible sin is. In other words, natural evil, natural evil, like hurricanes, is a signpost pointing to the horrors of moral evil.

Let me say, before I read a text even, a clarifying word. Some of the sweetest, most humble, godly, Christ-exalting, heaven-bound people are assigned to carry those signs. Do you hear me? Not saying that a deformity, a disease, a disability, a loss means that person is bearing the sign of their sin.

I do not say that, and I do not believe that. I'm saying that wearing the sign of a physical horror speaks about sin in the universe and its horror, even if you are the most godly person bearing that sign. Listen to Romans 8.18. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him, this is God, Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself would be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. What we are experiencing in the world are birth pangs, Paul says.

A new age is to be born, and the heaving of the natural order in this world is a testimony to the disorder of the moral world, namely, my sin. Adam's sin, your sin. And here's the reason for it.

Who in this world gives a hoot about sin? Who in this world sheds tears because of the repugnance and the horror and the dishonor done to God because of their sin? Nobody. How is God to speak when we are so morally dead, so spiritually blind, that the ultimately moral ugliness of the world fazes us not one bit? He does it with the world. This they can feel.

Pain they can feel. So I will subject the whole creation to futility until they get the message, sin is horrible. And it fills New Orleans and Minneapolis and my heart too often.

Of course I deserve to go under the water in New Orleans. All of us do. That's the way Jesus said it.

Unless we repent, we will all likewise perish under the water. The reason this terrorized world exists is so that God might shout in our physical pain about the horror of sin. Diseases and deformities are God's portraits of what sin is like in the spiritual realm.

And that's true even if the most godly people bear those deformities. Calamities are God's previews of what sin deserves and will one day receive in judgment a thousand times worse than New Orleans or 9-11. And that is true even when Christ followers are swept away in the mercy laden judgment.

Oh Bethlehem, that God would give us eyes to see the repugnance, the horror, the offensiveness, how abominable is sin. How abominable it is to black ball our maker, to ignore him, distrust him, demean him, give him less attention and emotional engagement than you have for the carpet in your living room. That deserves a thousand New Orleans for just me.

But we don't feel it. We don't feel sin to be repugnant. We only feel disease to be repugnant.

Well, if that's the way we must be spoken to, then let us listen. Number three, the reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is so that the followers of Christ can experience and display that no pleasure and no treasure compares to knowing Christ. That is, the loss of every good thing in this world is meant to reveal that Christ is more than able to compensate for all the losses.

Listen to the Old Testament statement and the New Testament statement of this truth. Philippians 3. I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, the apostle Paul says, and count them as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ.

What's going on there? The superior worth of Christ is magnified in Paul's losses because Christ is seen to be all satisfying when everything else goes. That's why we experience losses so that we may experience and display the all satisfying worth of Christ when there is nothing else but him. And here's the Old Testament statement of it that Noel and I had read at our wedding 36 years ago.

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

Amazing. Famines, pestilence, persecution, these happen so that the world would see that the followers of Jesus count Christ more precious than everything they've lost. And discover that he can be that for them.

Because one day they're going to lose everything. Everybody loses everything on earth someday. Finally, number four, the reason this terrorized and troubled world exists is to make a place for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to suffer and die for our sins.

The reason there is terror in the world is so that Christ could be terrorized. The reason there is trouble in the world is so that Christ could be troubled. The reason there is pain in the world is so that Christ, the Son of God, could feel pain.

This is the world God prepared specifically for the suffering, agony, and death of his Son. This is the world where God made the deepest display of his love known in the suffering of his Son, Jesus Christ. Romans 5.8, God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

His suffering was the plan of God to reveal redeeming love to us. The sovereignty of God, the evil of the world, the love of God meet at the cross. Sovereignty, evil, love meet at the cross.

Listen to this amazing statement from Acts 4 concerning God's plan for the suffering of his Son. Truly in this city, Jerusalem, there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. All the scheming of Judas, all the flogging, all the spitting in his face, all the beating with rods, all the mockery, all the abandonment by his friends, all the thorns in his head and the nails in his hands and the sword up between his ribs, all the weight of the sins of the world on his back, all in according to God's plan for you, that you might see what love is, and could have never seen if there were not a world of terror in which Christ could be terrorized on your behalf.

God's deepest answer to terrorism and calamity is the suffering and death of his Son. He entered into our fallen world of sin and misery and death. He bore in himself the cause of it all, sin, and he bought the cure of it all, forgiveness and everlasting joy in the age to come.

And therefore, on behalf of God and in the name of Jesus, I invite you, I urge you to receive him as your Savior and Lord and the supreme treasure of your life. Father, receive our worship that we have sung and that we have preached and that we have listened. And grant, I pray, that those who hear my voice would hear the voice of God, both in threatening judgment and in indescribable compassion, mingling at the cross where the most clear demonstration of love was ever made.

Draw people to yourself, I pray, in Jesus' great name. Amen. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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