

CROSSWAY CHAPEL
29 JUNE 2017
11:30 A.M.-12:15 P.M.
(15-20 MINUTES)

I want us to think about suffering for a few minutes this morning—in particular, about the suffering of Christians. My aim in getting us thinking about Christian suffering is to counter the conventional wisdom. Both Christians and nonChristians tend to believe that the presence of suffering and evil in our world tells against the existence, power, or goodness of God. But that is not Scripture’s view. Indeed, passages like Hebrews 12:3-14, with its claim that God disciplines all those whom he loves, say quite the opposite.

Now brace yourselves! We are going to do some really careful thinking for a few minutes. Of course, God expects all Christians to learn to think well, as passages like Romans 12:1-2, Hebrews 5:11-6:3, and 1 Peter 3:15¹ all suggest. To quote an Old Testament passage that says the same: “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. *Though it cost all you have, get understanding*” (Prov. 4:7 NIV). The best I can hope to accomplish this morning is simply to get you thinking a bit differently about suffering. I don’t have time to give you any really complete answer to what Scripture says about it.

So here is a question, which happens to be one, I’ve found, that neither Christians nor nonChristians tend to ask: What is suffering? We can all give examples of suffering, such as losing a spouse, being gassed to death in a concentration camp by the Nazis during World War II, being deeply depressed, or suffering a crippling automobile accident. But virtually no one tries to answer the fundamental question of what suffering

¹ “[B]ut in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.” Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version. All emphasis in the biblical quotations is mine.

in general is. Hebrews 12:3-14 assumes that being chastised or disciplined by our heavenly Father is also suffering. So is having a painful hangnail. So (for many people at least) is preparing and delivering a talk in public. In fact, if you are bored enough—“bored out of your mind,” as we sometimes say—that’s a form of mild suffering. So what is suffering in general? What do all of these examples have in common?

I’d suggest this: *Suffering involves anyone experiencing anything that is unpleasant enough that, everything else being equal, they’d like it to end.* This can involve minor aches and pains—such as having a mild headache—or major kinds of profound suffering—such as having a child commit suicide. It can cover both what hurts physically and what hurts psychologically or spiritually. The common factor in all suffering is its unpleasantness. But it has to be more than merely unpleasant, since we don’t consider everything unpleasant to be suffering. The unpleasantness has to cross a certain threshold: It has to be unpleasant enough that, considering the whole situation, we’d like it to end. Some experiences are unpleasant enough that, considered by themselves, we’d like them to end, but considered in context, we wouldn’t want that. One example for most of us is hard physical exercise, which is unpleasant but which we know is good for us over the long run. Read Hebrews 12:3-14 and you’ll realize that Hebrews’ author is talking about experiences like that. He is not denying the unpleasantness of suffering—indeed, he says at verse 11: “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”²—but he encourages us to bear up under it because

² For reasons I can’t go into right now, I’d suggest that even though the ESV’s translation of the Greek is accurate, substituting *is* for *seems* in this verse would be good, giving us a translation like the one found in the NLT: “No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it’s painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.” The *seems* can make it seem that these experiences aren’t really painful or unpleasant, but that’s not what Scripture conveys overall. Christians aren’t Christian Scientists who deny the reality of evil and suffering. We just believe that for us as God’s children, no matter how bad some experience is right now, God will use that suffering to produce an even greater good: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28; cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

through the unpleasantness our heavenly Father is disciplining us “for our good, that we may share his holiness” (v. 10).

Nobody in his or her right mind likes to suffer or to see others suffering. We recognize that unless there are overriding reasons, we are obliged to relieve as much suffering as we can. And we assume it is the same for God: We assume he has the same obligation to relieve as much suffering as he can. Consequently, since we often cannot understand why we ourselves or other people are suffering in the ways we are, we tend to assume there is in fact no good reason for it—and thus that our suffering and their suffering is evidence against God’s existence, power, or goodness.

But Scripture assumes no such thing. It assumes we will encounter a great deal of suffering in our world, given how it has gone wrong. And it claims outright, in more than one place, that all of the suffering of God’s children is ultimately good because God uses it to produce good things. So where have we gone wrong in assuming that if the God Christians believe in exists, our world should contain a lot less suffering?

First, we have gone wrong because while we quite properly believe the Christian life is the best life, we tend to think that means our lives will be triumphant lives free from much suffering. But thinking like this means we are overlooking all of the suffering recorded in Scripture. The suffering of God’s saints runs like a red thread throughout Scripture. Yet often it isn’t until we ourselves are suffering that we begin to notice how much suffering Scripture records. Until then, we read books like Ruth or Jeremiah or the psalms of lament and we simply miss their overwhelming witness to the intense suffering of many of God’s saints.

Second, we don’t read Scripture carefully enough to realize how it conceives of God and suffering. For example, look at Genesis 3:14-19, which records what God said and did right after our first parents disobeyed his command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil. Try to identify which phrases I'm emphasizing and then ask yourself why I'm emphasizing those phrases:

The Lord God said to the serpent,
“Because you have done this,
 cursed are you above all livestock
 and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.
I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
 and you shall bruise his heel.”

To the woman he said,
“*I will surely multiply* your pain in childbearing;
 in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be contrary to your husband,
 but he shall rule over you.”

And to Adam he said,
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
 and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
 ‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
 in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
 and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
 you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
 for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
 and to dust you shall return.”

I emphasized three phrases: first, God’s announcement to the serpent that he would *put enmity* between him and the woman; second, God’s telling the woman that he would *multiply her pain* in childbirth; and, third, his telling the man that he would *curse the ground* because of what the man had done. Each phrase identifies something God has now done. Each involves God declaring to our first parents ways in which he was going to increase—and *not* decrease or minimize—the amount of suffering our world would contain.

Why? Because it is an essential part of human life that we must live by stories that project us into some hopeful future, where we think we will get what we want and need. You wouldn’t be here now if you didn’t accept a story that portrays it as in some way good for you to have come to work today. But sinners that we are, we all tend to believe stories that to one degree or another distort the truth. For instance, even we Christians tend to believe the false story that one important measure of human life is how much someone owns. We also tend to assume that our lives are under our control in ways they are not.

Our suffering is intended at least in part to discredit such stories. And so, for instance, at one point in his earthly ministry, our Lord warned his listeners against both of these kinds of false stories:

Then someone called from the crowd, “Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father’s estate with me.”

Jesus replied, “Friend, who made me a judge over you to decide such things as that?” Then he said, “Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. *Life is not measured by how much you own.*”

Then he told them a story: “A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, ‘What should I do? I don’t have room for all my crops.’ Then he said, ‘I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I’ll sit back and say to myself, “My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!”’”

“But God said to him, ‘*You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?*’

“Yes, a person is a fool [our Lord affirmed] to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.” (Luke 12:13-21 NLT)

In case we missed our Lord’s point that we don’t always get to lead the lives we choose to live, James wrote this to some Christians in his day:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet *you do not know what tomorrow will bring*. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. *Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”* As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16)

Prosperity and good fortune tempt us to think we control our own well-being.³ But now think about how having a cluster of increasingly painful headaches could make you suspect you have a brain tumor, and how that would tend to make you reconsider the false story of never-ending life that you and I and everyone else are naturally and sinfully prone to accept.

As Proverbs says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Prov. 14:12). Part of what Genesis 3:14-19 is telling us is that much of the suffering God has added to our world is

³ Deuteronomy 8:11-14a, 17-18 gives us some sense of what can go wrong when life is pleasant and relatively bump free:

Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, *lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’* You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

everyday suffering. It even involves the kind of mundane suffering that coming to work every day and doing a good job consists in. God gifts us with such suffering to wake us up and keep us awake so that we get off the wrong path. Indeed, as should be clear from Moses' prayer in Psalm 90, this is the kind of suffering we most need: We need regular reminders that we depend entirely on God for every good thing.

From the moment our first parents sinned, every human being was destined to be born spiritually dead.⁴ We are now, unless we have been born again (see John 3:3), exactly like zombies. Until then, we are just “animated corpses” who continue moving about, even though from the moment our first parents were banished from the garden, we have all been cut off from loving, fully obedient fellowship with God, which is our hope for real, everlasting life. And given our tendency to believe false stories, it seems that only suffering—only some real unpleasantness that hits us at a deeper, more fundamental level than mere thinking—is likely to be powerful enough to help us realize how dire our condition is. Suffering, then, is intended by God as a prompt to our embracing saving and sanctifying grace. As the apostle Paul said, in a somewhat different context, “[T]he kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away

⁴ Alienation from God cuts us off from life's true source. Gordon Wenham says this about the serpent's denial that Adam and Eve will die if they eat of the tree:

[T]here are two meanings of “you shall die.” . . . [T]he garden of Eden narrative is full of symbols suggesting the presence of God and his life-giving power—trees, gold, rivers, and jewels used to adorn the holy of holies. *In Israelite worship, true life was experienced when one went to the sanctuary. There God was present. There he gave life. But to be expelled from the camp, as lepers were, was to enter the realm of death.* Those unfortunates had to behave like mourners, with their clothes torn and their hair disheveled (Lev 13:45). *If to be expelled from the camp of Israel was to “die,” expulsion from the garden was an even more drastic kind of death. In this sense they did die on the day they ate of the tree: they were no longer able to have daily conversation with God, enjoy his bounteous provision, and eat of the tree of life; instead they had to toil for food, suffer, and eventually return to the dust from which they were taken.* (Genesis, 74, on 3:4-5; my emphases)

from sin and results in salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10a).⁵ Thank God, then, for suffering!⁶

Of course, in saying this, I am leaving many questions unanswered. Perhaps I have started to answer the question of why there is so much suffering, why suffering is so pervasive. But why is some of it so excruciating? And why does so much of it seem to challenge rather than to engender and encourage faith? These questions have answers, I assure you. But it doesn't make sense to try to answer them until we have understood what I have brought you from Scripture this morning.

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⁵ Cf. Deut. 4:30-31.

⁶ See Terence E. Fretheim in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2.127 on *hîl*—pain, pangs—and *hyl*—the pain of childbirth:

The vb. *hyl* (47x) refers to any stage of the birthing process (Isa. 26:17), with its spasms of pain that are not consciously controllable, during which the woman writhes in pain, expresses anxiety, and groans. The root thus functions well as a metaphor for the pain or anguish of individuals (Ps. 55:4[5]), peoples (Jer 4:31), the nonhuman (Ps 97:4), the underworld (Job 26:5), and even God (Isa 66:7-8; cf. Deut 32:18; Ps 90:2). Both external symptoms (e.g., trembling; often parallel with *r's* [Jer 51:29], *rgz* [Ps 77:17], and *r'd* [Ps 55:5] and internal fears (Esth 4:4) are often manifest. *No distinction seems to be made between physical pain and psychic pain.*

The word is associated with both negative experiences, especially judgment (Joel 2:6), and positive, especially new life (Deut 32:18; Isa 54:1). Yet, as with birthing, the pain associated with judgment is not finally negative, but a necessary preliminary to God's life-giving deed (see Isa. 26:17-19; Mic 4:10). *No birth or new birth comes without travail, for people or for God. Exiled Israel is barren and has no power to create a future, but God will bring that future to birth on the far side of judgment (Isa 54:1, 6-8; 66:7-8).* (my emphasis of whole sentences)