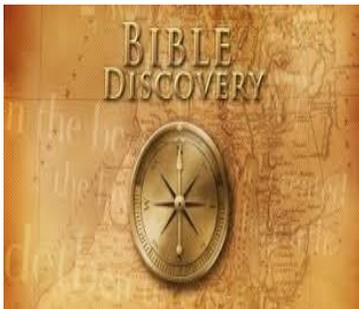


August 21, 2016

## When Pain & Suffering have No Earthly Answer

<sup>5</sup> I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, <sup>7</sup> or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. ~ 2 Corinthians 12:5-10



Just days before a little boy dreaming of becoming a police officer died of leukemia, members of Arizona's Police made his wish come true making him an honorary officer—including his own police uniform. That launched *Make-A-Wish*, an international organization which has granted wishes to more than 254,000 seriously ill children afflicted with life-threatening medical conditions since 1980. Sadly, there's one wish no one can grant—the wish to get better. Regardless of age, it's the wish we all pray for when illness, pain or suffering threatens our lives. Sickness wasn't a part of God's original creation. So it's only natural we cry to

God to make us well. The reality is we all suffer! But listen, the truth is you've either suffered in the past, you're suffering now, or you will suffer; or in fact experience a combination of all. We're reminded we've not reached the New Jerusalem with no tears and no pain, no mourning and no death. Pain and suffering from transitions and uncertainty of life, from the pitfalls of change, through onset of illness, injury, even aging, often leave us bewildered, confused, angry, in a state of grief. Those times when pain and suffering have seemingly no earthly answer, add to our deep sense of helplessness. But just because we experience suffering doesn't mean our suffering is without purpose. And neither does it mean Scripture doesn't tell us how to think about our suffering now. Rather than asking why God allows bad things to happen to good people, let's ask...



### IS PAIN NECESSARY?

If you've ever endured sleepless nights & agonizing days because of unending pain, insecurity, deep loss, anxiety, you're acutely aware of pain and suffering's reality. We cry out, "*Life wasn't meant to be this way!*" It's true - life in the Garden of Eden, was free of pain, suffering, uncertainty and fear. Suffering entered the world because of sin. We suffer because we live among sinful people – we're sinful people – but God desires to transform our sufferings from living in this fallen world – whether at the hands of others or as a result of living in the confines of a physical body cursed by the fall. God calls us to turn to Christ; to build relationship in Him.

Even pain, with its negative emotional responses, if we let them, can draw us to God in things eternal rather than anger, forgetting God, denying He exists. That's better than seeking comfort from those making empty promises. One thing about pain and suffering, we may suffer alone but we're never without plenty of advice – people facing infirmity and pain often become magnets for all sorts of advice. Maybe that's why at times, when in pain, we seek solitude: crying "*I just want to be left alone!*". Other times because of lingering afflictions we cry out for a true friend – one who'll listen and understand. Still, at other times friends and family, cry out as they watch helpless to help. As a new father I watched as my newborn daughter was poked and prodded. Born premature with underdeveloped lungs she'd "forget" to breath, had difficulty swallowing and was terribly allergic. Thankfully the painful experience's been

**God desires to transform our sufferings from living in this fallen world**

out grown. Alison doesn't recall but it remains firmly planted right here – in my heart! In another personal experience, at Christmas 2006, my sister Karen joined us for celebrations as a family as we'd often done before. Everything was great. We buried her from aggressive cancer in April 2007 with her leaving behind a loving husband and three young boys who'd lost their Mom. To see Karen suffer those months, to see the weight loss, the inability to care for herself, the total wasting away was heart-breaking. In times like that we're all left with questions – questions such as, "Why isn't God answering our prayers?"

The story's also told of a young woman experiencing pain throughout her body to where it distracted her from studies for missionary work. She underwent painful tests. With results in hand the doctor told her clearly, though gently, her condition had no known cure. The talk was no longer what the problem was, not what could be done to rid the pain, it focused managing her pain – pain likely to increase as she grew older. That day she left her doctor's office loaded down with printed information, a referral to a pain specialist, a multitude of nagging, unanswerable questions - and fear for her future.

The Lord did answer King Hezekiah's desperate prayer for healing allowing him 15 more years [Isaiah 38:1-5] yet the apostle Paul got a different response when he "begged" Jesus three times to remove the pain from his life—perhaps a physical affliction. Instead of healing Paul, as he too sought relief from pain and suffering, Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." [2 Corinthians 12:8-9] The Bible doesn't whitewash our experience of suffering by saying it's all of one stripe or we can miss the pain gene. Rather, it recognizes there's many ways suffering comes; it testifies to the trials and tribulations common to all.

**"My grace is  
sufficient for you,  
for my power is  
made perfect in  
weakness."**

[2 Corinthians 12:8-9]

The apostle Paul wrote, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" [2 Corinthians 4:8-9]. In these verses, Paul lists several types of suffering — mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Each of these is a different way we suffer, each demonstrates the pain and agony of life endured in this plain we call earth, and often several are involved. *Can you relate?*



## **"DOES PAIN HAVE A PURPOSE?"**

If we've wrapped our minds around pain's necessary, though unpleasant, part of life reminding us of our sin-centred state caused by our fallen nature can we not then ask such a question? Romans 8 equates the suffering of creation with childbirth – not death. Maybe that's a clue about pain's purpose. The physical pain a mother endures during childbirth, though intensely painful, fades amid the joy and celebration when a healthy, loving baby is born and placed in the mother's outstretched arms. The pain is temporary; the outpouring of a new love is everlasting. So too our pain exists for what comes after the suffering. It allows us to discover God's presence in its midst. When we as believers turn together to God, as we share each other's pain, God transforms this shared chronic pain and illness into stepping stones to righteousness.

Now there's nothing more senseless than purposeless pain. The daily news reports senseless violence; we witness the shock of pain and suffering meted out for personal gain, personal vengeance, or because of fear, anger, jealousy, greed, and lust. Even then, I pray, we'll find in the grand scheme of things there's an ultimate purpose for suffering and pain. When we consider the affliction Jesus suffered we're given perspective for our own. For those rejoicing in salvation through Him as Lord and Saviour, the fear and question brought by chronic pain, suffering, illness and grief will lose their grip as we step before Christ knowing submission to God, His victory over pain and suffering, His victory over sin, His conquering of the enemy results in our readiness to meet the Master! Being in Christ, following Jesus along the path to eternity prepares us for a day when we shall rest in Him knowing He will banish our distress, destroy our pain, and vanquish our suffering forevermore!



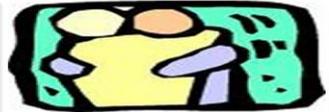
## “HOW DO WE ENDURE PAIN & SUFFERING WHILE WAITING GLORY?”

“These are wonderful platitudes”, you say, as I speak of eternity, of a New Jerusalem without pain, “but what do I do now, how do I handle my pain and suffering? What remedy is there?” When we turn to Him, in our suffering, God forges a sibling relationship between us and our Suffering Saviour knowing He delights to identify Himself with us in suffering. When we let go of our pain and suffering and give it to God through His Son Jesus Christ, we’re released from the negative attitudes we otherwise hold on to. One day He’ll wipe every tear. Today we endure because Jesus continues His amazing cleansing work through the presence and power of His Spirit in the midst of our tears. Not only that – we’re His body! The church, the body of Christ, is a refuge for those suffering. When one of us hurts, bleeds, pains or suffers, Christ’s body is called to apply the salve and bandages; when one is down, we’re called to encourage; when one is in need, we’re called to come alongside to help. Are you part of Christ’s body today? Are you one of those who’ve been called?

Firsthand experience in suffering is essential for equipping us in ministry. Paul writes God “comforts us in all afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by God.” [2 Corinthians 1:4] What’s the link between experiencing suffering and equipping for ministry? David Powlison, a popular speaker, writer and teacher of Christian counselling answers this way:

**“When you’ve passed through your own fiery trials, and found God to be true to what He says, you have real help to offer. You have firsthand experience of both his sustaining grace and his purposeful design. He has kept you through pain; He has reshaped you more into His image. What you are experiencing from God, you can give away in increasing measure to others. You are learning both the tenderness and the clarity necessary to help sanctify another person’s deepest distress.”** (Suffering and the Sovereignty of God, 166)

As difficult as it is to endure I want you to be assured you are never alone with your pain and suffering. Our Heavenly Father has given us His Son Jesus to walk with us; He has given us His Holy Spirit to undergird and strengthen us – always! For our friend studying for missionary work, diagnosed with an illness without any known cure, it’s meant surrendering herself, her pain; her fears to Christ, and walking daily with Him, discovering how God allows her sufficient strength in the midst of pain to finish college and serve Him on the mission field. Her pain calls her to trust Christ with the unknowns of the future. She trusts Him, follows His Word, and loves others. Her pain has become a stepping stone that leads her to a greater knowledge of Christ and an increased capacity to reflect His glory. This woman and many suffering like her, including some of you, have discovered as did Paul that we have been given the inner strength in Christ to “delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties” knowing that “when I am weak, then I am strong”.



**Christ’s body is called to apply the salve and bandages!**

**2 Ways to Respond...**



**Curse God because of suffering,**



**Praise God, even in the midst of suffering.**

Let me leave you however, with this caution! Where there’s pain and suffering, there’s a battle – a battle for your soul! The book of Job shows 2 ways to respond [Job 2:9-10]:

- One that curses God because of suffering, and
- One that praises God, even in the midst of suffering.

Without Christ, without the perspective of God’s Word, without the power of God’s Spirit, chronic pain and suffering will derail us. With commitment in faith to God, walking with Jesus, following His example, knowing He too endured pain and suffering, we, together with Him, can follow – putting one foot in front of the other, linked arm in arm with others on a glorious path that leads us home – a home

waiting where righteousness abounds and in His wonderful presence we'll have neither pain or suffering. May our response join with Paul, *"My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."* [Philippians 4:19] In the end, that's what suffering prepares us for – His GLORY!

The good news is Jesus declares a day is coming when there'll be no more sickness or death [Revelation 21:4]. Until then, it's okay to hope, pray and long for healing. Until then Jesus provides the grace we need to live faithfully until our full and permanent healing is realized. It's one of the counter-intuitive truths in our modern-era about suffering that it prepares us as Christians for glory. Paul writes,

***"This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."*** [2 Corinthians 4:17-18]

These verses are like sandpaper on our modern sentiments about suffering. There's nothing "light" about our afflictions when we're suffering. We try to avoid suffering at all costs but listen = life-dominating behaviours that shift our focus from God leave us *dependent* on others, *dependent* on ourselves, or *dependent* on no one at all. Contrary to such despair, God brings suffering in our lives for the sake of our eternal joy – yes, even glory. That's why it's important we bring our pain and suffering to God. When we do it's essential we pray in a way acknowledging God's compassion and sovereignty for His work in our lives and the lives of our loved ones. So we do have a choice. This week will we choose someone who suffers with chronic pain and illness – will we pray for them holding to the truth of God's Word, will we come alongside of them and support and encourage them, will we be a brother or sister with them alongside Christ our Saviour? This week will we choose *"boast all the more gladly about (our) weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on (us)"*. With God's help let it be so!

If today, as you're reading this blog, your thoughts are that you are not in any position to choose to help others because you too know all too well the agony of suffering, the reality of chronic pain, then I encourage you to say a simple prayer just asking Jesus to refresh you, to strengthen you – yes even to heal you if it be His will. And I ask that you give everything to God for His glory. It may not change your circumstances, but it will change your response to your circumstances and you can find what Paul discovered – that the grace of Christ is sufficient for all your needs.

***Blessings,***

***Pastor Dave***

