

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Romans 8:13-28

“Why Pain and Suffering?” (part 3)

SEEKING THE ANSWERS

Two weeks ago we began to address the question, “*Why is there pain and suffering in the world?*” It is a question that many people, believers and nonbelievers alike, struggle with, especially when we are in the midst of it. We found in part 1 that the first reason is that **it is the result of the Fall of man**. Adam and Eve distrusted God’s word and warning, and then showed that distrust by disobeying Him. As a result, death entered the human experience as God has warned. But not just death; pain, sorrow, toil, hardship, and decay. And such things would even affect the plant kingdom and the animal kingdom. **Romans 8:22** “*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*”

A MAJOR PROBLEM

Last week, we looked at a second reason: **it is God’s way of telling us there is a major problem in our world**. It’s a wake-up call that there is a problem in the human heart, and this problem affects our relationships with one another and with God. It is what renowned Anglican theologian and writer, C.S. Lewis called, “God’s megaphone.” In his book *The Problem of Pain*, he writes “*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains...it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*”

And while our physical bodies are susceptible to pain, God gave us pain sensors to warn us that something is wrong. And not just physical pain but emotional and spiritual pain are warning signs too. The pain of loneliness and insecurity indicate that there is a breakdown somewhere in our relationship with others and with God. The pain of guilt and shame are the warning signs that we have done something wrong, and because we are under the curse sometimes those feelings can come even when we are not responsible. Such pain helps us to turn away from wrong and teaches us the importance of forgiveness - both our need and the need to receive it from the Lord.

THE ONLY SOLUTION

And so pain and suffering aren’t the real problems in our world – sin and separation from God are the real problem. And we looked at a third reason - **it points us to the only One who can provide the solution to the problem. In other words, pain and suffering call us to rely upon God**. The truth is only God can truly heal our pain and suffering because He is the only who can forgive our sin and empower us to overcome the pain and suffering of this world. And He has done it through Jesus. The law was given to protect us but also to show us that only by total reliance on God can we truly fulfill the law and be saved from death and condemnation. We are then saved by the grace given to us by Christ and then empowered by His Spirit to do His work and overcome evil, sin, and pain.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THERE DOESN’T SEEM TO BE ANY RHYME OR REASON?

Of course, there are times when we don’t understand why we are suffering or when there doesn’t seem to be any good reason for the pain we are going through. Remember Job? He experienced such a time. He lost almost everything - his livestock, his children, his health. He didn’t do anything wrong. In fact, he experienced pain and suffering because Satan asked the Lord if he could test him and God allowed it. Something else to remember:

everything we go through, God knows. He isn't taken by surprise.

Someone has said, life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond. I couldn't agree more. God is most concerned about how we respond. In other words, what do we do when the bottom falls out or the walls collapse around us? Do we continue to put our trust in Him or do we lose heart? Do we maintain our faith or do we curse God? Do we move forward or do we shrink back in fear? How do we respond? That's the key question.

In many respects, Job responded as well as any faithful person could. He didn't curse God. He didn't seek to kill himself. He still looked to the Lord. But he also got carried away with the questions. He got bogged down trying to figure out why he was suffering and what he did to deserve it. At times he even wallowed in self-pity (though I am sure none of us can blame him.) His friends? Well, they let him down big time. They may have had some good theology, but it was being used in the wrong context. They completely missed their purpose. Instead of trying to defend God and give Job reasons for his pain, they should have just shown Job love and compassion.

And we need to remember that, too. Better to say hardly a word and just be there, maybe offer up a prayer, give a hug, and be available, than to try to give reasons for the pain our loved one may be experiencing or to offer platitudes. In other words, forget about having to come up with something nice or eloquent to say. Even our most loving and caring words will not assuage the grief and pain of one who has suffered great loss or who is going through intense pain.

Job was honest with the Lord, but He didn't lose faith. In **Is. 55:8**, the Lord declares, ***“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways.”*** It's a humbling reminder that we will not understand many things in this life. As Zophar said to Job in **Job 11:7** ***“Who can fathom the mysteries of God? Who can probe the limits of the Almighty?”*** Yet, God also says that He is always with us and He will never leave us or forsake us. That is why even as Job suffered great pain and loss, he was still able to say, ***“...I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last, He will stand upon the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall God; whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes shall see and not another (ie. a stranger).”*** (**Job 19:25-27**).

The truth is whether we understand or don't understand why we are going through a trial of pain and suffering, there is something that we can seek to do in the midst of it. Remember the blind man that Jesus healed in **Jn. 9:1-3**? ***“As Jesus went along, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus replied, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”*** Do you see the key, here? How do we take what is happening to us and make it an opportunity for the work of God to be displayed in our lives? The answer lies in how we respond.

So how should we respond in times of pain and suffering? Please turn with me to **Romans 8:13-28**:

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

Romans 8:13-17: ***For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.***

FUTURE GLORY

Romans 8:18-25: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

PRESENT HELP

Romans 8:26-28: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.*

So in light of the above, how should we respond?

First, we need to remember who we are in Christ - We are God's sons! We are joint heirs of Christ. The Greek word for son meant that you had an inheritance waiting for you. It meant you had all the rights and benefits of the first-born. So what the Apostle Paul is saying is that as a son of God, men, women and children who are followers of Christ have an eternal inheritance and the eternal power that is also Christ's! But in order to experience that power it also means that we will share in His sufferings! Remember **Philippians 3:10-11**? Before I can know the power of His resurrection and glory I will at times have to go through the valley.

Second, we need to remember who it is that we have been given - The Holy Spirit. And while the Holy Spirit already is with us and in us, the only way to unleash His power and peace and joy, and confidence is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Then God will do His work in us and through us and we will see the victory. The Holy Spirit will be the One who will help us in our weaknesses.

Third, we need to remember the our future. What we suffer now can't compare to the glory that will be ours in the future. God does not lie and His promises are sure and certain. Whatever we are going through it is only for a season. As the psalmist declares, *“Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning!”* **And notice the greatest promise of all when it comes to pain and suffering? Romans 8:28.**

Fourth, we live in a world guided by this principle, a principle that is a by product of the Fall and it has often been expressed in an old saying, “No pain, no gain.” Often used to highlight the principle that if one wanted to build muscular strength and cardiovascular endurance, he or she must be willing to stress the body and endure pain. The physical hurt experienced by our muscles is necessary for their growth. The same can be said not just for physical achievement but also for mental or artistic achievement. Michelangelo spent an enormous amount of energy to give us the pleasure of seeing his artistic works. The same can be said of all the great composers, musicians, orators, scientists, etc. From the book writer to the homebuilder, there will be discomfort and hardship and even suffering before anything of value can be accomplished.

The same is true for our spiritual and emotional growth. The Bible calls this character. As I mentioned in

our first study, God is concerned first with character before He is concerned about our comfort. **Romans 5:3-5:** *And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*

James 1:2-4: *“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

How does this relate to the pain and suffering that we face in life? It can be summed up in this statement. Bad things happen to good people to make them better people. And as we grow spiritually through the hardship of life, God can use us to be a strength and comfort to others. The Apostle Paul writes in **2 Cor. 1:3-5:** *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.”*

This is the way to bring God glory. Use the good that God does through our pain and suffering to help others. Let me share an example from my own personal life.

A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

Back in 1991, my father experienced a severe heart attack. As he was being treated at Mercy Hospital in South Buffalo he heard the nurses say “His blood pressure is 60 over 30, 30 over... he is arresting.” At that point my father said he knew he was going to be with the Lord. And he began to enter another realm going through what was almost like a tunnel with a light at the end. He had a great sense of peace and joy but then he was stopped. The message he was given was that he had to go back for his family. At that point, my father who had always sought to put his family first, felt conflicted. He would much rather go on to be with Christ than to go back to be with his family. The next thing he knew he was awake back in the hospital bed and he saw the hand of our parish priest, Fr. John Smylie, coming toward him to anoint him with oil. My dad’s reaction (in his mind) was, “No, don’t do me any favors.” But my father did come back and after a long ordeal that led him to having emergency open heart surgery in Toronto General Hospital, he has been with us ever since. He hasn’t had it easy, though, since his heart is less than 50% efficient than normal. But regardless of this hardship, he has been able to use it for God’s glory.

Remember how the Lord gave him the message that he had to go back to his family? Eleven years later my younger brother, Adam, was diagnosed with cancer. This was his second bout of cancer - but a completely different kind - all because of the radiation that had been used to treat his first cancer some fifteen years earlier. He came back to live with my parents and after a difficult surgery, for the next 18 months He went through chemotherapy. My parents were able to be there for my brother. But it was my father who was able to comfort my brother when it came to facing death. Even though my brother was a believer, he had certain anxieties when it came to facing his mortality, as we all do from time to time. My father was able to comfort him in a way that no one else could. In fact, if you ask my dad today if he had to do it all over again would he change anything as it relates to his heart attack and near death experience, he would say no. He would say that the blessings that came from what God did, far out way the hardship he has had to go through. My friends, this is the good that can come from our pain and suffering when we trust God. God can take any situation and turn it around for His glory and for our good! In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!