

Suffering: Our Response

To be human is to suffer. That is the melancholy reality we looked at last week as we began this four-part series on suffering. Job, writing out of his own intense pain, observed that "...man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7).

We noted that suffering, this universal human reality, comes from three primary roots:

- the chaos resulting from humankind's fall into sin—death and all its processes began to work indiscriminately and indeterminately. In our world there is something wrong with everything.
- the evil done to us by others: our spiritual enemies; our personal and spiritual enemies; those close to us who betray our trust; systemic evil in our governments and institutions.
- our own personal failures: the consequences of those things we do (or fail to do) that are by turns careless, stupid, foolish or sinful, and sometimes all four.

To be human is to suffer. It is inescapable. And yet it is entirely human to try. Pain hurts, and our goal when we are in pain is to get out of pain.

I have a scar on my wrist that came from loading my lawnmower into a pickup while the muffler was still hot. I wrapped my arms around the mower, bringing my wrist into contact with the muffler. The nerve endings in my wrist sent a sharp message to my brain: "You idiot! You're touching a hot muffler. Drop it immediately!" And I did—and then ran my seared skin under cool water. Our goal in pain is to get out of pain.

But what do you do when you can't 'drop it'—when you can't escape the pain? We can't reverse death. We can't go back in time and undo an accident. We can't flip a switch in the heart of a mate who has chosen to leave. What do we do when we can't do anything, and the pain doesn't go away?

When we suffer because of our own sinful folly, we have only one recourse: repentance and confession. We humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God whose only currency is truth and grace. We receive mercy and forgiveness, and we do what we can to reconcile with those against whom we have sinned.

But what do we do when our suffering is not self-inflicted; when it isn't fair; when, in the words of King Solomon, we "...are trapped by evil times that fall *unexpectedly* upon [us]." That's where we want to focus our attention this morning.

Lament

We miss the most obvious. We're all about fixing things, regaining control, crisis management. The surprising, immediate, biblical response to suffering is lament. Following his long prophetic book, Jeremiah wrote an extended outpouring of grief we know as the Book of Lamentations. As many as one-third of the Psalms are Psalms of lament. Even Jesus, when he stood by the grave of his friend Lazarus, wept.

Lament is the outpouring of our pain in God's presence. It is not afraid to ask hard questions. For instance, David cried out: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart" (Psalm 13:1-2)?

The tortured soul of Heman the Ezrahite cried out: "Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me" (Psalm 88:14)?

The Book of Job chronicles the lament of a man who never did find out why he suffered

as cruelly as he did. After suffering in silence for an entire week, "...Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said: 'May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, 'A boy is born!' That day—may it turn to darkness; may God above not care about it; may no light shine upon it. May darkness and deep shadow claim it once more; may a cloud settle over it; may blackness overwhelm its light. That night—may thick darkness seize it; may it not be included among the days of the year nor be entered in any of the months. May that night be barren; may no shout of joy be heard in it. May those who curse days curse that day... Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? Or why was I not hidden in the ground like a stillborn child, like an infant who never saw the light of day'" (Job 3:1ff)?

These saints were eloquent in their lament. They poured out primal screams well-rehearsed in their hearts. And they weren't afraid to cry out their lament to God.

We don't do lament well. We somehow think it is sub-Christian to give voice to our pain—somehow a failure of faith. Or perhaps it is that we feel the discomfort others have with the depths of our pain. They would rather deal in platitudes than enter profoundly into our grief. They want to know that we're handling things well. When they do that, they give the not so subtle message that honest lament is unacceptable because it reduces those around us to embarrassing inadequacy.

Years ago I was part of an intervention team that came along side a broken church. As part of the healing process we called them to a solemn assembly. We invited them to fast, to skip dinner before they came. And during the course of the evening we invited them to lament.

I'll never forget one man who stood weeping and said, "God, I lost my kids in this church. They saw what went on and turned their backs on Jesus." That night was a significant step in the healing of that church. They opened their pain to God.

We do not do God or ourselves any favors by pretense. The Psalms, what we call the hymn book of Israel, are filled with raw emotion. The Psalmists voiced their complaints *because* they believed God heard and God cared. The circumstances of their lives may have been chaotic but they somehow sustained their grip on God's goodness. And they did it by lament.

After David voiced his complaint that God seemingly had forgotten him, he added: "But I trust in your unfailing love" (Psalm 13:5).

Lament is not antithetical to faith. It is sometimes its most profound and powerful expression.

If you could voice your own lament to God this morning, what might you want to say?

Prayer

A second essential response to suffering is prayer: "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray" (James 5:13).

We're on more familiar ground here. Prayer walks hand in hand with lament. It might be fair to observe that we will not pray well until we have quieted our hearts through lament, fully acknowledging our grief to God.

The problem with prayer is knowing what to ask God for. It's not as obvious as we might think. After all, we're in pain. What's our goal? To get out of pain. We want desperately for God to change our circumstances: stop the hurt, heal the disease, restore our finances, turn back an alienated relationship, provide justice. And it is certainly right to ask God for all these things. Our Father longs to hear from the hearts of his kids.

We get sidetracked when God doesn't respond immediately, or when God doesn't fix things to our satisfaction. Then it's easy for us to become angry, or demanding. Especially when we're expecting God to do something he never promised to do. Even Job slipped into that error. Halfway through his lament we find him demanding that God explain himself. He wants God to

stop being God long enough for Job to interrogate him without being terrified.

More than anything, God wants to change us. We'll talk about this more in two weeks when we think through God's purposes in our suffering. Sometimes we learn the patience of unanswered prayer. Sometimes we learn simply to rest quietly in God's presence.

David learned that: "...I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Psalm 131:2). David likens himself to a child no longer nursing, no longer demanding something from his mother; content simply to be close to her.

When Paul wrote the Philippians about prayer he reminded them: "The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:5-7). I wonder if he was getting at the same thing. Prayer quiets us. We learn to be content with whatever God chooses to provide. Being near to God means more than anything.

That's what the Psalmist Asaph learned. He ends his laments with these words: "I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:23-26).

Sometimes God intervenes dramatically. We crave the immediate, the miraculous. More often God's response to our prayers stretches us into much larger people.

When we suffer, we pray. It's instinctive for God's kids to run to their Father.

Endurance

When the Apostle Paul prayed for the little church in Colosse, one of his requests was that they might be "...strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience" (Col. 1:11).

This isn't what we want to hear and it isn't what we want to do. I was in the emergency room one day waiting to visit one of our folks who had been admitted. A young woman was also there waiting for a doctor to look at her arm. She was not handling the waiting well. She began shouting her demands for pain meds and tried to push her way back into the treatment area. She punctuated her insistence with ugly profanity. She wanted immediate relief. Patient endurance was obviously not in her character.

Christ-followers are called to hold out and hold on under pressure. But endurance is much more than keeping the upper lip stiff. It is a supernatural capacity God gives us by his Spirit that enables us to stay the course, to bear up under unimaginable circumstances. It comes from knowing we are held secure in God's grip when we can't hold on to anything and everything seems to be slipping away.

Joy

This is a real head-slapper. Nothing sounds more Pollyannaish than asking a suffering person to choose joy. How do you *choose* joy anyway? Emotions are. We don't get to pick them!

Or do we. Time and again Scripture invites us to choose joy. Listen:

- "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice" (Phil. 4:3)!
- "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2).

Notice that both of these verses invite us to *choose* joy. On what basis?

- "...we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our

sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:1-5).

The one unique possession Christ-followers have in suffering is hope. Hope is not a collective wish that things will get better. Hope is a real, faith-based anticipation that God will fulfill his purposes for us—both his near purposes to make us like Jesus and his far purposes to take us home to be with him forever.

Hope is why Christians can smile through their tears. We don’t get there in a single step. Getting our arms around hope tightly enough to choose joy is a process. When suffering comes and threatens to crush us under its pain, it may be all we can do to just breathe. We cry out our lament and offer God our prayers. Bit by bit we experience his strength seeping into our souls. And as we sustain our grip on faith, we experience enough of hope to choose joy.

Acute suffering infuses our lives with a chaos of emotions. It takes time for our good Shepherd to restore our souls, restore order, strengthen our hearts and whisper hope. And it takes time for us to quiet ourselves enough to hear God’s voice.

At the end of his life, David wrote: “...let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always” (1 Chron. 16:10-11).

A believing response to suffering always turns its face toward Jesus. In the craziness of searing, paralyzing pain, we begin with lament—faith’s scream. We pray, desperate for God’s face. We endure, clinging by faith to the strength God provides. And we move toward hope-filled joy—not in a single bound. We are not super-Christians, not any of us. We choose joy in fits and starts, bits and pieces, until we are surprised by its depth and reality.

These four things describe our response to suffering: lament, prayer, endurance and joy. Next week we want to talk about our resources in suffering.