

Suffering: God's Purposes

Jeannette and I were in The Whole Foods Market in Ann Arbor one day when I overheard two ladies talking. Apparently one of them had experienced some misfortune. What caught my ear was the response of one of the women: "I just know that everything happens for a reason so I move on."

I've heard similar thoughts expressed by others. It's too glib—a generalized assumption about life's purposefulness, a virtual leap of faith, plucked out of thin air, asserting some meaning behind all events without any supporting evidence. We can't know what it is, but since there is a purpose for everything—we hope—we keep on with life.

Generic belief wears thin in the presence of acute suffering. 'Virtual faith' has no foundation in reality, no substance. It functions more as a feel-better, rationalized wish than a confident hope.

And yet, it shouts out loud about our desperate longing for meaning. When we hurt, when we suffer deeply, we want to know why, and we want to know that it's not for nothing. Does pain have a purpose?

We talked about the reasons why we suffer in our first study in this series, *The Roots of Suffering*. We suffer because we live in a fallen world where death and all its processes work indiscriminately and indeterminately. We suffer because of the instrumentality of others in our world: their evil, their mistakes, their carelessness. And we suffer the consequences of our own failures.

You noticed the damage done to our church canopy as you came in this morning. A college student driving a truck didn't think about the clearance when he went through. He was with a team of engineering students from the University of Pittsburgh taking a race car to MIS. In one moment of thoughtlessness, he had an accident. He was one incredibly sad young man. He hadn't done anything evil, but he was suffering the consequences of his lack of awareness.

But what about the purpose—that other kind of 'why'? Do you think that student driver would have been much encouraged if I had told him, "Everything happens for a reason"? We want to know: what reason? What purpose is there in this horrible, rotten, awful, very bad event?

Christ-followers are not exempt from those questions. We affirm our belief in a personal God who watches over us and loves us. But that faith may only increase our anguish. If God loves us, why does he allow such pain to touch us? Why do we hurt so badly?

There is enough mystery in the problem of evil to keep philosophers in business for thousands of years. When we ask our questions, we find ourselves trying to penetrate what the Bible calls the secret things of God. Solomon calls that a futile, impossible task: "...you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things" (Ecclesiastes 11:5).

We cannot know life's purposes with the clarity and certainty we crave, but God has revealed to us purposes for his children when we suffer. Some of those purposes have to do with us, and some of them have to do with God himself. We begin with what is perhaps the most familiar:

To Make us like Jesus

"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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:28-29).

How many of you have had someone toss this verse at you in ways that felt like superficial God-talk? We have been so badly abused by this that we have reacted by tossing it back—dismissing it altogether. It's the baby we have thrown out with the bath water.

Unpack this verse and we discover the foundation for our confidence that God doesn't waste pain. God takes even the worst, the most tragic events in our lives and says: "I can use that." He weaves suffering into a tapestry of redemption. He makes the broken places in our lives fit into a larger pattern of glory.

Understand, God is not telling us that he *causes* our suffering. Nor does this verse imply that the evil we experience is good. That would be a horrific distortion. What God affirms is his creative capacity to salvage from our distressing experiences something very good.

What good? What is God doing?

From eternity past, before God made anything that is, he determined to make his children like Jesus. He *predestined* us "...to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." And note the words, "...that he [Jesus] might be the firstborn among many *brothers*." God makes us like Jesus so his entire family will share the family resemblance, so we will be brothers and sisters, recognizable as God's kids. And nothing can get in the way of that—not even suffering.

In sorrow we discover a hope that anchors our soul. God forges that hope into a way of grieving that is unlike anything the world offers or experiences. God comforts us, and he works grace and patience, compassion and kindness, mercy and humility—all these virtues that are so attractive in Jesus and so foreign to us until God weaves them into our lives on the loom of suffering.

God is absolutely committed to accomplishing this. Paul spoke of "...being confident...that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

Solomon spoke of being trapped by evil times that fall suddenly on us. *We're* caught off-guard. God isn't. He knows how to take the tough things we fall into, even the evil done to us by others, and use it to shape Jesus in us.

What about our own failures? How does God use our sin to make us like Jesus. Listen to the writer of Hebrews: "'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:5-11).

If you suffered physical abuse as a child, you may struggle with these words. God is the good, loving Father we all wished we had. And like all fathers, God invests himself in our moral training. But we misconstrue discipline if we assume it always means a beating.

Think about how you train your kids, parents. If you are wise, corporal discipline is a means of last resort. It's rare. It's a significant part of your parenting toolkit, but the greater part of training your kids is explanation, verbal rebuke, warning, letting them taste natural consequences, time out, etc. Sometimes all you have to say is something like this: "Did you learn your lesson?" They get it.

God does not protect us from the consequences of our sin, but he uses those consequences to shape Jesus in us. If we let him, he will make us hungry and thirsty for doing right. He will

make evil distasteful. He will work in such a way that we share his holiness.

And just like with his comfort, God uses means: He uses his words in Scripture. He uses other believers who love us enough to speak into our immaturity, our failure, our misconduct. He uses preaching and teaching. He might even use the criminal justice system to get our attention. But he uses all of it to make us like Jesus. God doesn't waste pain.

To Advance our Witness

Not only does God shape Jesus in us, he sometimes uses our suffering to show Jesus to the world. Paul wrote: "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a *sign* to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:27-29).

Our non-reactive, non-anxious response to persecution—evil done to us by others—is a witness to them of the authenticity of our faith. Jesus told us to bless our persecutors and to pray for them. The Apostle Peter calls us to gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience. Why? Because God may use our Christ-like response to bring conviction to those who wrongly slander Christ-followers and their faith.

Sometimes suffering isn't about us. It's about Christ and his Kingdom. When it is, we become expendable for God's glory. That's why Paul wrote: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'"

Doesn't that bless your heart? There's a promise to put up on your walls. But Paul continues: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39).

God's purposes for us include advancing the Gospel. As we do, sometimes we pay a price. For most of us in America it is shaming ridicule. That can cut deep when the words come from family and friends. It's OK. God is using it and us for his own purposes and glory.

One more thought—and this deserves its own series. The Book of Job teaches us that sometimes our sufferings have to do with God's glory before his holy angels, and Satan and his demons. All that Job suffered was the result of Satan's accusation before God that people serve him because God is good to them. Stop being good and people will curse God to his face.

God allowed Job to be a test case. Job suffered to demonstrate that love for God could be independent of God's blessings.

When we are faithful to our heavenly Father in the face of unimaginable pain, sometimes God is making a point in realms we can't penetrate. We may never know why this side of eternity. We embrace faith's confidence that God is at work. And, like Job, we trust God's promise to reward us for our faithfulness. That brings us to God's third purpose in suffering.

To Bring us Glory

Paul put it this way: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Romans 8:18).

This is Peter's take on it: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:2-9).

Is it really possible “...that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us”? Being earthbound we are time limited. It's hard for us to fully comprehend that our life's context extends to eternity. Now matters most and our present sufferings fill our horizons. Life isn't supposed to be this way! Exactly. Some day it won't be. Some day, as the old hymn says, “It will be worth it all when we see Jesus!” This isn't all that is.

It's hard to sustain our grip on that hope in the middle of significant pain. Hope is something we both cling to and move toward. It usually takes a process of time and faith to get our arms around God's promises of a glory that far outweighs our suffering.

But the promises are true, and God is faithful. We can trust God's determination to overcompensate us for those things which we suffer now, especially for what we endure for the sake of his kingdom and glory.

We will never fully unravel the mysteries of why our lives unfold the way they do now. But neither are we left with the empty hope that “...everything happens for a reason.”

God doesn't waste pain. We are not abandoned to our misery. God has unshakeable purposes to make us like Jesus, to advance our witness and his glory, and to lay up rewards for us in glory we can't possibly imagine, not even in our wildest dreams!

May you embrace that hope as an anchor for your soul. And when suffering comes, as it certainly will, may you cling to God's purposes for you, knowing that your suffering matters—and you matter. We are never separated from his loving purposes for us—never.