

Suffering: What Can We Do?

(PART 3)

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If you have been with us over the last several weeks, then you know that we have been looking together at the topic of suffering. Two weeks ago, we started by looking at how some people will use the existence of pain and suffering in the world to try to prove that God does not exist. We learned, though, that God has given us freedom of choice, and with the freedom to make our own decisions also comes the freedom to make wrong decisions. We learned, therefore, that much (if not all) of the suffering we experience in this world can in some way be traced back to wrong decisions, even if we do not understand that connection at the time.

Last week, we moved ahead by doing just a brief overview of some of the benefits of suffering. Obviously, we do not always appreciate suffering when we are in the middle of it, but often there is some kind of an upside. We learned that suffering has a way of building character – it often makes us stronger. We learned that suffering often leads to much greater blessings in the future. We learned that some suffering is able to prevent much greater suffering further on down the line. We learned that some forms of suffering allow us to more effectively share the love of God with those around us. We learned that suffering often has a way of reminding us to appreciate our blessings. And we also learned that suffering has a way of reminding us that this world is not our home, that we are headed for a place where all suffering will come to an end.

This morning, I would like for us to conclude this brief series of lessons by asking the “So what?” question, as we often do. What does all of this really mean for those of us who are gathered together right here in this room? And again, as I have pointed out at the beginning of each of these lessons, some of the comments that are made this morning may or may not apply to your specific situation. Suffering is a broad topic, so I would once again offer that disclaimer here at the beginning. This morning, though, I want us to look at this subject from a very practical point of view, and to do this, I want us to split the lesson in half. First of all, some words from God for those who may be going through a difficult time right now. And then secondly, some words for those who want to help in some way. And again, some of this might overlap, and some of this might not apply to every situation, but I would like to bring some very broad and very general principles from the word of God on this subject.

- I. **And again, I want us to begin this morning by looking for some advice from God’s word for those who may be going through a difficult time.**
 - A. And as we back up and look at everything the Bible has to say concerning those who hurt, I hope you will agree with me that there is tremendous value in LEANING ON GOD.

As Christians, when we hurt, when we suffer, when we lose a loved one, we have the ability to take it to God. And as we think about this for just a moment, I would invite you to turn with me to Hebrews 4:14-16 (p. 1873). The book of Hebrews, of course, was written to the Hebrews! We don’t know the author of this book, but it was written to Christians who had come out of Judaism who were tempted to go back to the Jewish faith. Christians were starting to face some intense persecution, so many of those who were Jews were tempted to go back, “Let’s just skip this and go back to what we know.” The author of Hebrews, though, goes through and outlines some of the many advantages of the Christian faith. The theme of the book, in fact, is “Jesus is Better.” And in the last few verses of Hebrews 4, the author is making the point that Jesus is a better High Priest. He is perfect, but he also knows exactly what we are going through. Notice, please, Hebrews 4:14-16,

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The author of Hebrews, then, tells us that Jesus can “***sympathize with our weaknesses.***” In other words, Jesus knows what we are going through. The word “***sympathize***” literally refers to being able to “feel with” somebody. We learn, then, that Jesus can “feel with” us; he has been here; God has lived on earth as a man; therefore, Jesus as our great High Priest knows what it is like to suffer. He can “***sympathize with our weaknesses.***” And for this reason, we can “***draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.***” Sometimes when we are in the middle of something, we wonder whether anyone can really understand. God does.

- Jesus knows the pain of losing a loved one (John 11:35).
- Jesus knows what it is like to have close members of the family who do not believe in God (John 7:5).
- Jesus knows what it is like to be hungry and thirsty (Matthew 4:2).
- He knows what it is like to be overwhelmed with grief (Matthew 26:38).
- He knows what it is like to be homeless (Luke 9:58).
- He knows what it is like to grow up poor (Luke 2:22-24).
- He knows what it is like to be slandered and gossiped about (Matthew 12:24 and John 7:20).
- He knows what it is like to be betrayed and stabbed in the back by a friend (John 18:2-6).
- He knows what it is like to suffer and face the most painful death known to mankind (Luke 22:44).

In all ways, Jesus knows what it means to suffer. We understand, then, why the author of Hebrews tells us to approach God in prayer, knowing that our High Priest is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. As the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 5:6-7, “***Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.***” First of all, then, when bad things happen, let us turn to God. Let us turn to God’s word. Let us go to God in prayer. God knows what we are going through, and he cares.

- B. There is a second encouragement from God's word for those who suffer, and that is: We are encouraged to LEAN ON OUR CHRISTIAN FAMILY FOR SUPPORT – Galatians 6:2 (p. 1826).

Sometimes it is easier to give love and support than to receive it (and we will get to giving love in just a moment), but the Bible does teach that as we are going through something, it is good to get help. It is good to be on the receiving end. In Galatians 6:2, Paul said, ***“Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”*** With just a little bit of logic thrown in there: If we are bear each others burdens, then it is only reasonable that when we have a burden in need of bearing, that we must allow somebody to help us bear it! In other words, not only are we to dump our cares and concerns on the Lord, but we should also be able to dump those concerns on our brothers and sisters in the church; otherwise, our brothers and sisters would not be able to carry out Paul's command to ***“bear one another's burdens.”*** A wise man has said, “Share with your friends. They cannot bear if you do not share.”

We think of how Paul described the church as a body in 1 Corinthians 12:26, where he said, ***“And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”*** This is very similar to Romans 12:15, where Paul told us to, ***“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”*** Yes, we must do the rejoicing and weeping with others (and again, we will get to that in just a moment), but the emphasis here is: If we do not let others know that we are weeping, if we keep that bottled up on the inside, then we are actually denying our Christian family the opportunity to follow God's law as they should. Some people make the mistake of pulling away and basically hiding during a time of suffering, but there is a value to letting others help us through it.

- C. I would point out a third instruction from God's word for those who go through some kind of suffering, and that is: Often, our suffering puts us in a position to HELP OTHERS WHO MAY BE GOING THROUGH SOMETHING SIMILAR – 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (p. 1804).

In Ephesians 4:29, Paul tells us to be kind to one another, tender-hearted, and forgiving. In Colossians 3:12-14, we are told to put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. We are told to bear with one another, we are told to forgive one another. Sometimes, going through some kind of suffering is able to put us in a very special position. Perhaps you have heard somebody referred to as being a “wounded healer.” That is what we are talking about here. Suffering gives us a new perspective on life, and that new outlook often allows us to help others in a way that we might not have been able to do before. If we have lost a loved one, we may be in a unique position to offer comfort. If we have ever stumbled into sin, we may be in a unique position to encourage. If we have ever experienced chronic pain, we may be in a unique position to empathize. The same goes for those who have suffered through divorce, or cancer, or raising up challenging children. Last week we talked about the “advantage of disadvantage.” One more advantage to suffering is that we can more effectively help those who suffer.

And that brings us to 2 Corinthians 1, a passage we actually read together as one of our members asked for the prayers of the church to deal with some struggles. Notice, please, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, ***“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.”***

As Paul said in verse 4, when we suffer, God comforts us ***“so that we will be able to comfort”*** others. God helps us so that we will help others. And for those of you who may be suffering right now, I don't know whether you realize this: But there are people here this morning in your Christian family who are watching

you. There are those of us here this morning who can see what you are going through and how you react to it, and we are encouraged. We see just a tiny part of the pain that you are in, and we are in awe. So, whether we realize it or not, suffering allows us to help others.

- II. **For the rest of our time together this morning, I want us to take a few moments to look at this from the other side, and that is: As those who would like to help, WHAT CAN WE ACTUALLY DO? Does the Bible give us any inspired advice? And the answer, of course, is “Yes!” The Bible does have something to say to those who would like to help others through a time of suffering.**
- A. And here at the beginning, one of the most basic things we can do is to simply BE THERE FOR THE OTHER PERSON.

If you will, please turn with me to Job 2 (p. 805). Over the past two weeks, we have thought about Job several times. In many ways, Job serves as an example. In Job 1, Job loses all of his flocks and herds to a brutal attack by an enemy. He also loses all ten of his children in a freak windstorm that causes the building they are in to collapse. And then, in the opening verses of Job 2, we find that Job loses his health. He is covered in painful boils from head to foot. He is totally miserable. Job’s wife sees what his happening, and her advice comes in Job 2:9, **“Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!”** Job, then, is completely miserable and has no support, not even from his own wife. All of this brings us to Job 2:11-13. I want us to notice what Job’s friends actually did at the beginning. Notice, please, Job 2:11-13,

¹¹ Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him. ¹² When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. ¹³ Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.

So, as we look back at these three verses, we see several things that Job’s friends did right. First of all, as soon as they heard what was happening, they left their own homes and came to be with their friend. At the end of verse 11, we also see that when they arrived they **“sympathized with him and comforted him.”** The word that is translated here as **“sympathize”** literally means (in Hebrew) “to move to and fro, to wander, to flutter.” The idea I get is of somebody pacing, of somebody rocking back and forth in grief. The word **“comfort”** literally refers to being “sorry.” They felt sorry for what their friend was going through, “I am sorry that these terrible things have happened.” Then, notice what happens in verse 12 – from a distance, **“they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky.”** Now, I don’t necessarily recommend the tearing of clothing and the throwing of dust as you visit a friend up in St. Mary’s Hospital, but we understand what they were doing here, right? They were expressing their sorrow. They were expressing their grief. They were showing their support. They were doing the ancient equivalent of sending flowers. As Paul said in Romans 12:15 (as we referred to earlier), they were weeping with those who weep. Sometimes just crying with someone is one of the best things we can do. And then notice what happens in verse 13, **“...they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.”** As I see it, this is one of the best things that Job’s friends could have done at this point – they just sat there without saying anything. They sat there for an entire week!

Of course, we know what happens next. In Chapter 3 (at the end of those seven days), Job speaks, and Job 3 is rather dark (to say the least). We read Job 3, and we find that Job is just burdened down in pain. He can hardly stand to live. He is confused. He hurts. And then from there, starting in Chapter 4, the rest of the book is basically a record of Job's friends pretty much blaming Job for what he is going through. And that is why I say that Job 2:13 is pretty much the high point of the book of Job. If the friends had stopped right there, if they had just come in and kept their mouths shut, they would have done a good thing. As it happened, though, they made it worse. Up to Job 2:13, though, Job's friends give us a pretty good example to follow: When we have a friend going through a difficult time, one of the best things we can do is simply to be there.

B. Beyond just being there, we might also be in a position to offer some kind of ENCOURAGEMENT.

And yet, even here, we do need to be careful. At the loss of a child, for example, it is probably not helpful to suggest, "Well, God apparently needed this child in heaven more than you needed him here." I have heard things like that said. If we think about it, though, that statement says that God took the child. God killed your baby – not a very encouraging statement, and certainly not accurate, either. Sometimes, we need to be careful in other ways. It is easy make a situation about us instead of about them. It is easy to minimize what somebody is going through. Let me give several examples:

- Somebody says, "I'm having a difficult time having lost my father." And somebody responds by saying, "Oh yeah, well just wait until you've lost BOTH of your parents!" What has that statement done? It has minimized what the other person is going through.
- Or maybe somebody says, "I'm having a hard time dealing with my 2-year old." "Oh yeah, well wait until you have THREE kids!" What has that statement done? It has taken away all hope.
- Or maybe somebody says, "This broken arm is really painful." And somebody responds, "Oh yeah, well that's nothing. When I was a kid I broke both of my ankles." Again, we have minimized what the other person is going through.
- Or maybe somebody is in the hospital with pneumonia, and we say, "Oh, that's not good – a lot of people die of pneumonia."

It is also easy to discourage by wrongfully blaming someone for something that happened. The picture on the wall up here is a picture of our van. Keola was t-boned by another car when she was 10 weeks pregnant. She was on her way back home after visiting one of the seniors at church. The other driver is in the picture here. Everybody was okay, but at church a few days later, one of the men said something like, "Well, I guess you just need to pay more attention." Not good! Not good at all!

I think we see that there are thousands of possibilities here, and many of them are not good at all! When somebody suffers, we are not to minimize it, we are not to make it about ourselves, we are not to blame them for what they are going through. Instead, like Job's friends in Job 2, we might do better to just sit there in silence for a while, weeping with those who weep. If we do say something, let us encourage; literally, let us in some way give them courage to face what they are facing.

- C. There are so many other things we could say here, but I would close by suggesting that we PRACTICE THE GOLDEN RULE, and in many cases, there is SOMETHING VERY PRACTICAL THAT WE CAN ACTUALLY DO.

I would invite you to turn with me to Matthew 25 (p. 1548). In this passage, Jesus is talking about the coming judgment. And thankfully, the Lord tells us beforehand what that judgment will be based on. In school, I loved it when teachers would give us a study guide before a big test – right? It is great to know what we will be tested on before test is given. And that is what happens here. Notice, please, Matthew 25:31-46,

³¹ ***“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³ and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. ³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ³⁸ And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹ When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’ ⁴¹ “Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ ⁴⁵ Then He will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.***

There is so much in this paragraph, but what I want us to get out of it is this: When a friend or when a member of our Christian family goes through some kind of suffering, let us ask, “If I were in his or her situation, what would I want to have done for me?” The Golden Rule, of course, is found in Matthew 7:12, where Jesus said, ***“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”*** Looking at the examples Jesus gave: If I were suffering from hunger, what would I want to have done for me? If I were suffering from thirst, what would I want somebody to do for me? Would I want a lecture on the causes of thirst? Would I want somebody to say, “Oh, you think you’re thirsty? You just think you’re thirsty! Let me tell you about the time I was REALLY thirsty”? If I were in prison, what would I want somebody to do for me? I would want somebody to study the Bible with me. I would want somebody to write to me (as some of you are doing for various prisoners here in Wisconsin). If I could not afford proper clothing, what would I want somebody to do for me? If I were in the hospital, if I were sick at home, if my house burned down, if my spouse died, if some other terrible thing happened, what would I want done for me if I were in that situation? The Golden Rule tells us to go out and do for others as we would like to have done for us – not AS HAS BEEN DONE FOR US, but as we would WANT to have done for us.

If I were a college student living far away from home, I would want a place to crash from time to time, a place to do laundry, a home-cooked meal. We have college students here at Four Lakes. Are we doing for them what we would like to have done for us? If I am sick at home for a week, I know what I would want. I would want some food. Maybe something homemade, or maybe a gift card to Topper's Pizza down the street. I might want somebody to come shovel my driveway or mow my grass. If that is what I might want, then shouldn't I be doing that for others?

I didn't tell you about this earlier, but at the time of the accident, that was our only car, and I normally walked a little over a mile to work each day. So, I was stranded at the church building on the other side of town with no car when the fire department called to tell me that my wife had been in an accident. It just so happened, though, that a member of the church had just showed up at the church building to make some copies for a Bible class. He heard me take the call, he took me to the scene of the accident, he gave me the keys to his van, he said, "Baxter, this is your van now, until you get something worked out," and then he walked home as I sat there in the ambulance with my wife. This Christian man did for us what he would have wanted done for him if he and his wife were in that situation. We thank God for our Christian family!

Conclusion:

As we close, I want to thank you for your kind attention over the past three weeks. I hope we have learned that God is not to be blamed for all of the suffering we see around us. I hope we've learned that there are some benefits to some of the tough situations we go through. And I hope we have learned that there are some very practical things we can do when we suffer and when we want to help those who may need it.

Also, as we close, we want to offer an invitation to all who are here to obey the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We obey the gospel by having a change of heart concerning sin. We then allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. When we come up out of the water, our sins are forgiven, we have a fresh start, and the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, we hope you will pull one of us aside after the service this morning, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com