

THE SUFFERING JESUS

Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:19-25
John 19:16b-30

In Jesus' shout from the cross, "It is finished" we have come to understand that the suffering of Jesus on the cross was not for nothing – it accomplished what God intended.

The task Jesus was sent to do had been completed – through the sacrifice of His life - God's plan for the redemption of humankind had been fulfilled.

I believe that it's on the cross where Jesus identifies with our humanity the most – as we gaze at the suffering Jesus, we are again confronted with one of the realities of life – pain and suffering.

If you have watched the movie "Passion of the Christ" - you will have some idea of just how much Jesus suffered - not just physically, but also emotionally and spiritually - there should be no doubt in our minds that Jesus understands pain and suffering – He's been there, he's got the T-shirt as it were.

Suffering is one of the aspects of human life that we really struggle with – we struggle to reconcile it with a loving and all-powerful God - and if we're honest we're often left feeling like the Psalmist (Psalm 22:1):

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?"

Friends – as the Psalmist reveals - this is not a new struggle.

Theologians and philosophers have wrestled with the problem of pain and suffering for centuries, and no-one has really come up with a complete solution – as I said - perhaps we never will as there is much mystery and complexity surrounding this experience of being human.

The best we can do is know how to deal with it in such a way that we can benefit from it - by allowing God to use it to achieve God's purposes in our lives – as He did in the life of Jesus. I really believe that pain and suffering was not God's big mistake - neither is it an indication that God lacks goodness and power – it is rather an opportunity to experience how God can use even the bad things that happen to us for our good – if we would but trust His love.

So then, how do we deal with pain and suffering?

The passage we read in Hebrews suggests three ways and all three are either made possible or confirmed by the cross of Jesus Christ.

Let's have a look.

The first way is to, "... draw near to God".

The author of Hebrews says, "Let us draw near to God and approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Friends we can approach God's throne of grace with confidence because the death of Jesus has opened the way for us.

The Jews believed that God's presence was in the Holy of Holies in the temple - and because they believed that no-one could see God and live, the Holy of Holies was separated from the rest of the temple by a thick curtain of layered material about a foot thick.

Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement and even he couldn't stay very long for fear of losing his life – they even attached a rope to his body in case he died while in the Holy of Holies so they could pull him out without having to go in.

God was not approachable by the ordinary man or woman – but Jesus changed that.

You will remember that when Jesus died this 1ft thick curtain was ripped from top to bottom – like a piece of paper - exposing the Holy of Holies.

This dramatic event symbolically indicated that Jesus through His death provides direct access to God for us – we don't need to go through a priest or minister or anyone else ever again - and we can go to God whenever we want and wherever we want - because God is present everywhere and always available.

As the Psalmist revealed - the hardest part of suffering is the temptation to believe God is not with us in it – that He is in some far-off splendor untroubled by our struggles.

Well, that is simply not true.

We can approach God's throne of grace with confidence in our time of need precisely because Jesus identifies with our pain - and because He went through His, he is able to help us through ours.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus set the example for us here – in His time of deep distress in the garden he went directly to His Father in prayer.

There's a wonderful little story that illustrates this point so well.

A doctor worked among leprosy patients in India and one night he walked in late to a patient's gathering.

They asked him to speak to them, but he was a little hesitant because he hadn't prepared anything.

As he stood in their midst, he looked at their hands, some with no fingers, some with only a few stumps and he said, "I'm a hand surgeon and so when I meet people I can't help looking at their hands. I would have liked to have met Christ and had the chance to study His hands. It hurts me to think of a nail being driven through His hands, for that would have made them appear horribly twisted and crippled."

As he said these words, the effect on the patients was electrifying. They looked at each other as if to say, "Jesus was crippled like us. He too had clawed hands like ours."

Tears flowed down their cheeks as the realization hit their hearts - they were able to draw near to God with renewed confidence because He suffered like them.

Friends, the cross of Jesus gives us the privilege to go directly to God – particularly during times of suffering – let's not neglect this privilege.

Let's draw near to God in our pain and suffering rather than letting it draw us away from God.

If we are to deal with our pain and suffering positively, we will also need to, “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess ...”

The readers of this letter were tempted to give up their hope in Jesus Christ and return to the old covenant way of worship because they were suffering tremendous persecution.

The early church believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime - and when this didn't happen they became disillusioned.

It's into this context that the writer tells them to hold fast to their faith in Jesus even though they are going through a time of great confusion and suffering.

You see another temptation we face here - is to believe that hardship is not in the will of God – everything in life is geared towards making it easier - and so when we face hardship, we may think that we are doing something wrong – that God is punishing us for not towing the line.

Friends, the point I want to make here is that the evidence in scripture shows that God will not help us bypass hardship and suffering but rather help us through it.

Paul confirmed this when he said, “we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character and character hope”.

Have you ever wondered what it is that makes some people great and other people break in times of hardship?

How can two people react so differently when faced with the same adversity?

Why do some people become the best they can be, while others become the worst they can be?

I want to suggest that the answer is “God”.

Well, I believe what Paul is saying is that with God we have a huge capacity for handling the hardships in our life – if we would take it as an opportunity for growth.

The author of Hebrews encourages us to persevere through our suffering - because He who promised through His cross the grace to finish the work He has begun in our lives - is faithful.

The Psalmist learnt of God’s faithfulness also – he found the way to deal with his suffering:

“You who fear the Lord, praise him.... For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.”

The Apostle Peter also reminds us that God uses our hardships to make our lives more fruitful.

He says, “Our trials have come so that our faith may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor, when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

So, if we hold onto the hope, we profess we will one day be able to say as Jesus did, “It is finished. I have fought the good fight. I have completed the race.”

Finally, the third way we can deal with pain and suffering is by “considering one another”.

It’s easy to drift into a kind of selfish Christianity where salvation is just about me and my ticket to heaven – we must realize that we are also saved for others.

We are told to consider how we can spur one another on to love and good works.

If the cross of Jesus Christ teaches us one thing - it’s that God helps us through pain and suffering so that we can help others – Jesus suffered for our benefit – often God can use our suffering for the benefit of others if we would be willing to consider others – that’s why we are urged to encourage one another.

I don't think we do this enough – it's often a word of praise or thanks or appreciation that keeps a person on their feet.

The world is full of discouragers – we are called to always look for the good in people to make them feel loved and supported.

One thing that 'considering others' can do for us is that it can keep us from feeling sorry for ourselves – it can keep us from falling into the dark hole of self-pity – which is very hard to get out of.

Considering others makes us turn outward at a time when turning inward by becoming self-absorbed can have dire consequences.

The flip side is also true – often the difference between giving up too soon and persevering through a hardship is the encouraging support of a brother or sister in Christ – someone who will not give up on you even if nothing is given in return.

This morning, we have been reminded through the suffering Jesus that there is a way to deal positively and effectively with our own pain and suffering.

I don't know how you have personally responded to the hardships in your life and whether you've trusted God to use them to make a difference in your life and to benefit others.

The writer to the Hebrews has invited us to respond in three ways:

- By drawing near to God and maybe for you that means you need to trust in Jesus as your Saviour or perhaps your relationship with Jesus has gone a little stale and you need to recommit yourself to His loving care
- We are also invited to respond by holding unswervingly onto the hope in Christ we profess – maybe your faith is lagging a little because of hardship and struggle and this morning you simply need to ask God for strength to persevere.

- We have also been invited to respond by allowing God to reach out to others through us – perhaps God has laid someone on your heart that needs a little encouragement.

In a short while you'll have an opportunity to respond to the suffering Jesus.

Whatever is weighing heavy on your heart this morning - whatever pain or hardship you are going through right now - let the cross of Jesus remind you that there is sufficient grace and mercy from the One who has not only created you - but through His pain and suffering identifies with you and wants to help you.

When you came to the rail during the sacrament – you're invited to use it as a time to prayerfully bring to Jesus whatever burden you are carrying now – as we remember Jesus saying:

“Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.”

Bible Study Questions

Is there anything out of Sunday's sermon you would like to comment on or ask about?

Read Mark 15:15-20 / Hebrews 12:2-4

1. What does suffering teach us about our world?
2. What does suffering teach us about our God?
3. How do you personally reconcile a God of love with suffering?
4. Why did Christ allow himself to suffer so much?
5. How does considering Christ's suffering help our own suffering?
6. How may God use suffering for a greater good?
7. How can faith help when understanding fails?