

Getting it Right: Session Eight

When All Else is Wrong

Romans 8:28; 12:12; 15:13; Job 5:7; Hebrews 11:1; 1 Peter 1:3;
Isaiah 40:31

Is this not the strangest, craziest, most unsettling and scariest year all wrapped up into one, at least in our lifetime? The novel Coronavirus knocked us off our feet in the Spring, then we thought things were getting better, but, well, now it's back to strange, crazy, unsettling and scary. We pray for an effective vaccine, or for people to wear masks, or both. I use the word *pray* because as people of faith that's what we can do, should do and let's face it, know how to do. Some say it's our best offering to society and while I won't argue that point, I will suggest a larger, bolder option.

Let us counter the long term, ongoing poor theology that tends to permeate difficult times and which has gained strength as this pandemic has taken control. Forever and a day (or two) people have offered these type words to those who have suffered loss or are going through difficult times.

It'll be O.K., it happened for a reason

If God did not have a purpose this would not have happened.

God needed a new angel.

It was God's will, that's why it happened.

As a pastor and chaplain I've heard each of these far too many times and I've seen the damage left behind, often to the recipient, almost always to their views of God. Let me say that no one utters these words with the intention of doing harm. Quite the opposite in fact. These phrases seem to be the best things to say when speaking to people who are suffering. In reality, saying little to nothing is best. Our presence is always better than words. Hard to get presence wrong. We can get words wrong and when we do, we can mangle theology in the process.

Theology is hard, but it's not as hard as building a rocket ship that can travel to Mars on one tank of fuel. With the rocket ship you can't say *I don't know* and get by, but in theology you can and often should. In theology there are more things we do not know than things we are certain of. "Silver Lining Theology" is in the "not certain" category. Yes, "In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purposes" (Romans 8:28). But, does *good* mean now, in this life, or in the life to come? This is the sticky wicket that is our theology. And what if it's both? And what if it's both but the majority of the *good* will be in the next life. See? Figuring out that whole rocket ship thing is looking better right now, huh?

Take the book of Job. We can read it multiple times and come away with the reality that all explanations of suffering are inadequate. We will undoubtedly gain some level of insight into human suffering from the entirety of scripture, but we won't become definitive experts.

We do know that sin entered our life-equation when the first created people entered into a moral conversation with the serpent with the gist being "Don't you want to know as God knows?" Intellectual and moral equivalency with God could not have been on the table absent evil, thus evil came before us.

Apparently God placed boundaries around it for our sakes, wanting a perfect relationship, but allowed for personal choice, AKA *the fruit*.

The choice was made.

Sin entered the relationship between humankind and God and the world has been going downhill since.

All of life runs unsettlingly close to the ditch. Trouble is indiscriminate in its timing and its choice of target. Job, who bore the scars to validate his wisdom, said: "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (5:7). In fact, the entire landscape of our existence is vulnerable. From health to emotions, mind, finances, marketplace, family, and friends – trouble stands at the brink of it all, waiting to make its unwelcome, untimely, usually unexpected entrance. No one is exempt.

All too often pain, suffering and tragedy are due to human error or human evil, but at times it can be distilled down to this: bad things happen and they happen indiscriminately. *No one is exempt.* So, it's not God's fault that so many bad things occur so often to so many people (like every day) or that sooner or later pain and suffering will visit each of us. Tim Keller writes:

No matter what precautions we take, no matter how well we have put together a good life, no matter how hard we have worked to be healthy, wealthy, comfortable with friends and family, and successful with our careers – something will inevitably ruin it.

Dr. Keller isn't being a party-pooper, he's a truth-teller. So that's the bad news. There's also good news and the good news is twofold: First, the bad stuff doesn't last forever; and second, while God doesn't cause it, He isn't absent from it. He's in the mix with us. Diana Butler Bass tells us: "Even a cursory knowledge of history reveals Christianity is a religion about change." This makes sense since our faith is played out in real time and real time is *constant change*.

So, during times of wholesale suffering and upheaval (now) or during seasons of private, individual suffering, we can choose to focus on the negatives or opt for the spiritual option of hope. Our faith is built upon a foundation of hope. People of faith have hope to fall back on when times are tumultuous. People outside of faith do not. And, this is the single best thing we have to share. Imagine sharing the hope of Jesus Christ with struggling people rather than cliched statements like "God must have a reason for this!"

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope (Romans 15:13).

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer (Romans 12:12).

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:31).

Excellent theology counters the pain, suffering and uncertainty with hope. This is the gift we have to offer with a world quickly giving up hope in hope itself.

Humans will find it hard to exist without hope. The opposite of hope is fear, uncertainty and ultimately despair. (Tim Kellar)

The erosion of hope is what makes suffering unbearable. (Tim Kellar)

Pain is truth serum. It tells us what we really believe. (Tim Suttle)

Simply stated, hope saves lives... but how?

1. Hope proves God's sovereign position. In church we use the term "sovereign" a lot. We say God is sovereign and we speak to God's sovereign rule and we add a little sovereign this and sovereign that, but what does all of that mean? Christianity.com says, "If you were to look up the word *sovereign* in the dictionary you would find words and phrases like *superior in power and authority, ruler, and independent of all others*. There is nothing that happens in the universe that is outside of God's authority." So did I just say God has to allow all of the suffering that goes on in the world? Yes. That's the hard to fathom part, but it makes sense when free choice is applied to our relationship with God. Back to the Garden story: Perfect environment. Perfect relationship. Perfect union. But the created order was allowed (actually had to choose) to live into their relationship with God *in* the perfect arrangement, or not. Such choices are binary. Yes or no. They chose (in hindsight poorly, but if I had been the first person I would have done the same thing) and sin entered the equation. Sin – snowballing – out of control – has led to untold misery, pain, suffering and separation. But, God is Love – God loves us – and in the throes of our existential choice, our very bad choice, God is with us. Again, on the worst day... God is with us.

So God is sovereign in His promise to be present in our suffering.

“Nowhere in scripture does God say He will keep us safe from all that is wrong in the world – not the recklessness, anger, wrong, evil, disease and violence. Atonement is God’s ultimate way of entering into the tragedy, violence and absurdity of suffering caused by human sin.” (Adam Erickson)

And in atonement God knows exactly how we feel when we face pain and suffering. Thomas Merton writes: “Don’t try to make sense of the pain and suffering apart from the cross and resurrection. It simply cannot be done.” All of which allows for the second *how*.

2. Pain, suffering and evil of all types entered their final phase at the cross and resurrection. The Passion event of Jesus neither eradicated or diminished pain and suffering, but it did put a time stamp on it – it now has a shelf life – a sell-by date – a point of extinction – a line it cannot cross.

This is why we can say with confidence that today’s suffering does not have to destroy or deny hope, rather it points to hope’s eternal presence and reality. Hope *is* our future. This is our message to the hurting world.

3. And finally, we will *finally* understand what James was talking about when he wrote all that stuff about “Count it all joy when the Coronavirus hits you and you get really sick and your 401-K takes a beating and you lose your job and you have to worry about feeding your family...” Or what he actually wrote:

Consider it a sheer gift friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides.

Count it all joy my brothers when you meet various kinds of trials and tests.

When it seems as though you are facing nothing but difficulties, see it as an invaluable opportunity to experience the greatest joy.

This is what we can share with people who are outside of a faith relationship with God. In our suffering, in our pain, in our grief, in our loss...

God is beside us. God is neither absent from our suffering or ignorant of suffering, because God has walked the path before us. The path to the cross was suffering personified. The cross was brutally ugly. So when God tells us we can find joy in the midst of our pain...we can find joy in the midst of our pain.

Suffering does not destroy hope, it points to its eternal reality.

In the midst is God.

On the other side is God.

Forever more there will be God.

I am not alone.

We are not alone.

Amen & Amen

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