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WHEN GOD IS USING A MEGAPHONE

1 Peter 4:12-19

Last weekend Laurie and I spent two nights in the Comfort Inn of Port Orchard, Washington. We were in that area to celebrate Laurie’s Dad’s 90th birthday. In the middle of the night of our first night there Laurie woke up and had to go to the bathroom. When you wake up in the middle of the night you typically are not at your sharpest and most alert. In that groggy state she was finding her way through a strange place in the dark. She had a momentarily terrifying experience. As she made her way through the dark to the bathroom she was confronted by another person in our room! She knew I was in bed, so who was this shadowy intruder and what evil was this frightening person intent on doing? It turned out the intruder wasn’t seeking to do any evil. Actually it wasn’t an intruder at all. Laurie herself was the scary intruder. She just saw her own reflection in a full length mirror that she hadn’t realized was there.

There was obviously nothing for her to fear. It’s too bad that is not true of the rest of life. There are many terrible things that can show up and intrude in our lives. Our world is full of many threats, and all of us have had the experience of some suffering or pain that we feared becoming a reality in our lives. We struggle with why God would let such things happen to us. Why should we suffer if we really are God’s people? Peter wrote a lot about suffering in this letter. It is one of the main themes. The word “suffer” shows up 16 times in the letter. It is helpful for us to remember what G. K. Chesterton wrote about real followers of Jesus Christ. He said they are promised three things, “To be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble.”

At times like this with what is happening in Afghanistan I feel like we don’t know about real suffering. The kind of suffering that caused Peter to write this letter was suffering for the sake of Christ. His readers were being seriously persecuted because of their faith in Jesus. That is happening right now in Afghanistan. Christians are being hunted down. We know of pastors who are in hiding because they have been told the Taliban knows who they are and are coming after them, intent on killing them. They are committed to serving Christ even if they must die for their faith, which is a real possibility. We are not facing anything in that league. Nevertheless, pain and suffering are very real in our lives, and hard to understand. As we think about this topic, it will be helpful if we keep our circumstances in perspective, given what our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan are experiencing. Let’s look at 1 Peter 4:12-19.

DO NOT BE SURPRISED BY SUFFERING: WHY NOT?

Laurie is following on line the story of the grandchild of some friends of ours. This child is in the neonatal intensive care unit at Children’s Hospital. She has been there for more than a year, ever since she was born. She has not experienced a day outside the hospital. The catalogue of physical issues she has is too long to recite. The doctors can’t even understand much of what is happening to this poor child. At times she has been in such pain that they have had to put her in a medically induced coma. After more than a year of all of that, there still is no light at the end of the tunnel, no path to her finally getting better. Recently after Laurie related some of the recent developments in that tragic saga to me, all I could say was, “There is so much pain in the world.”

We see what is happening in Afghanistan and what has happened in Haiti where new misery and suffering have been heaped on a nation already known for poverty and hardship and we wonder, why do these things happen? The Scriptures say God loves us, but if this is true, why is there so much pain here?

One of the strangest law suits in court history was filed on September 13, 2007 by Nebraska senator Ernie Chambers. He filed a suit against God, seeking a permanent injunction demanding he stop interfering in this world. Citing floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, disease, birth defects and wars, he charged that God has allowed “catastrophes resulting in the widespread death, destruction and terrorization of millions upon millions of Earth’s inhabitants, including infants, children, the aged and infirm without mercy or distinction.” The suit was dismissed because the court ruled they did not have God’s address, thus could not properly notify him of the suit. That’s a good thing, because given the state of the legal profession I wonder if God could have found good lawyers who know him to represent him in court.

The problem of pain is perhaps the deepest and most difficult of all theological problems. Scholars have pondered it and debated it for centuries. The oldest book in the Bible, Job, is about the problem of suffering and pain, so this has been going on for a long time. I’m not going to give you the solution to the problem of pain today, because I don’t have it. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t have wisdom about the subject that enables us to gain some perspective on it.

Any time we ask, “Why does God…” we are going to finally land on “We don’t really know.” His thoughts are not our thoughts, his ways are not our ways. Having said that, there are a few things we can know about the seeming conundrum of a loving God who allows pain. The first thing we must remember is that as 1 John 4:8 tells us, God is love. God always loves us. Love is behind everything he does. Furthermore, God is wise. He is wise beyond human understanding. That means that God always chooses the best possible course of action for those he loves. That means that, while we cannot understand how this could be, what God allows is always the best and most loving thing. We don’t have his knowledge and wisdom, so we can’t see how that could possibly be. However, we get some inkling that this is certainly possible from our own experiences.

Recently I was watching with our grandson, Wesley, an episode of his favorite TV show, *Trash Truck*. In it the main characters are playing hide and seek. Hank, the main character, and his friend Trash Truck hide in some bushes. Soon they begin itching. They’ve gotten into some poison oak. Their friend, Miss Mona, says they need to go to see the doctor. Hank refuses. He tells Trash Truck about all the terrible things the doctor does and says he’s not going to the doctor no matter what. Just so you won’t be concerned, he eventually does give in and the doctor helps them. But why did Hank fear the doctor? Because he’s been to a doctor and the doctor hurt him. The doc stuck a needle in him and it hurt. Our granddaughter Cara just had some shots. She did not like it. It hurt and she cried. Kids wonder why parents who love them would inflict that upon them. Why make them go to a place where they intentionally inflict pain? The kids don’t understand, but it is because the parents, and the doctor, love them and want the best for them. I get it now. I even willingly took myself to get a shot of the Moderna vaccine. Twice. I did it because I love myself. But I still don’t want to see the urologist. Just like kids don’t understand how loving parents could do that to them, we don’t understand how a loving God could allow such pain in life. But we can know he does love us, and if we could see all the alternatives we would know he chooses the best.

One aspect of that is something we vaguely sense. What would happen if this world was perfect, completely free of pain and suffering? We would not think about eternity, and we would likely give little thought to spiritual things. We wouldn’t seek God. We would focus on the great stuff of this life. Our pain and our suffering force us to think beyond this world, to think about the Lord and about spiritual things and eternity. In other words, God allows pain and suffering at least in part because they cause us to realize our need for him and for hope. C.S. Lewis wrote, “Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Suffering will be a part of life for every single one of us. Peter wrote, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” Why would you be surprised? Peter says this is what you should expect to happen in a broken world. Writer Philip Yancey said, “The kingdom of suffering is a democracy, and we all stand in it with nothing but our naked humanity.” In other words, it is going to happen in all of our lives, so we should expect it.

When I was in seminary one day on my way to school my car just quit running. I had been having trouble with the car, but it had never just stopped while I was driving. My roommate was a car guy who could fix anything. Unfortunately, this was in the stone age before cell phones had been invented. So I sent up smoke signals calling for help. Just kidding. I was able to find a pay phone near by and I called, hoping and praying my roommate would be home. My prayer was answered. He told me he would drive to my location and see if he could fix the problem. When he showed up, I was surprised that he didn’t immediately lift the hood. First, he got in the car and turned on the ignition. I figured he was testing to see if he could make it work even though I couldn’t. Of course, it didn’t work. But he got out of the car and said, “I know what the problem is.” I said, “Already? Just from that? That’s amazing. Can you fix it?” He said, “Well, you can.” I said, “How can I fix it?” He said, “Put gas in it. Rick, your car won’t run if you don’t put gas in it.” I said, “What?” He said, “Your car is fine, but it’s out of gas.” I learned that if you live in the world of failing to put gas in your car, you should not be surprised if it stops running. You should expect that. Parallel to that, if you live in this world you should expect to suffer. It is what comes with living here. You shouldn’t think that something unusual and unfair has happened to you. You shouldn’t feel like you are being singled out or punished, or feel like God has abandoned you. If you live in this world, you are going to experience some suffering.

Romans 8:20 says creation has been subjected to frustration. In verse 21 Paul said there is hope that, “creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay.” In other words, as it exists creation is full of decay and needs liberation. In 8:22-23 Paul said, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruit of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.”

Everybody knows in childbirth there is a lot of groaning that goes on because it hurts, and it hurts a lot. Actually groaning would be an understated description of what goes on. Paul says creation is in pain because it is subjected to fallenness. Evil has entered, and evil brings suffering. In this world we are going to groan. We are going to hurt. It is going to be so pronounced, Paul says, that we eagerly look forward to the time when it ends and all is put right. When you live in a broken world that is subject to decay, you are going to experience suffering. If you take a swim in the ocean, you are going to get some salt on your skin because you are immersing yourself in salt water. If you live in this world, you are going to get some suffering and pain because you are immersing yourself in a world where evil exists.

We complain about suffering and feel it is unfair. But what causes pain and suffering? It is evil. The definition of evil is that it is something that causes suffering and pain. A day at the spa doesn’t cause suffering so it is not evil. A day at Disneyland might cause suffering so it could be evil. Where evil is, there is always suffering. That’s what evil does. Every time we choose our way rather than God’s way, we introduce evil into our world. Every time we choose our will, choose self rather that God, we are doing evil. What is the result of evil? It is pain and suffering. In other words, we are the cause of pain and suffering. Be careful what you wish for. If you wish God would get rid of pain and suffering then you want him to eliminate evil, which means getting rid of you!

One last reminder. There is an evil force at work in the world. It is our enemy, the devil. He is evil, meaning he wants to harm others. He especially wants to hurt you if you follow Jesus. One of his most common tactics is to inflict pain on you, to make you suffer. He tried it on Job, he’ll try it on you. So we should not be surprised when this happens to us.

Well, thank you very much, Rick. That’s depressing. You’re saying we’re going to suffer so don’t be surprised and stop whining. When I’m in agony that doesn’t help very much. I know that’s true, but Peter tells us how to think about suffering.

REJOICE IN SUFFERING: WHY?

Poet John Keats once wrote, “Do you not see how necessary a world of pains is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?” Um, no I don’t see that. Neither do I rejoice when I suffer. I just want it to stop, immediately, if not sooner. Why should we rejoice in suffering?

**Rejoice because you’re sharing in Jesus’ work**

The kingdom of God will be opposed in this world. If you join with Jesus in working to expand that kingdom, then you will be opposed. You will certainly be opposed by our enemy, Satan, but you might also be opposed by people as well.

A lot of the suffering we experience is not due to our faith. It is suffering that every human being goes through. But even in that you can rejoice because you are sharing in Jesus’ work. In 2 Corinthians 4:7-8 Paul said that we are displaying the power of God when we are pressed down, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair. In other words, when we demonstrate our faith by having hope and joy even when life gives us no reason to do so, we point people to the source of that hope and peace and joy. We glorify our Lord, and in so doing further his kingdom.

In his book *Celebrating The Wrath Of God*, Jim McGuigan said that if we insist on God only giving us a bed of roses we’re “laying the foundation for a religion of sulk rather than gallantry.” He goes on to say that we are at our best when we say, “We won’t join the peevish deserters who serve God (only) as long as they see him as the best meal ticket in the universe…In our better moments we don’t want God to be a heavenly sweetheart. We want him to wage war, however he sees fit, against all the wickedness within us and around us, and if that means we share in the pain of this world that is condemned and in need of rescue, we’ll take it on.”

When my son, Toby, was in high school he roped me into coaching his high school hockey team. It turned out to be a terrific team that surprised a lot of people. They won the championship two years in a row. They had games in which they were so much better than their opponent that it was basically over after 10 minutes. Routs like that were fun, but not memorable. Then there were a couple of games that were tense, hard fought battles that came down to the final minutes. They were happiest about those games and remember them most because they were so difficult. They had accomplished something hard. There is something inspiring and ennobling about facing pain and obstacles with courage and hope because we are doing something that is eternally important. That is why we can rejoice.

**Rejoice because it is an investment in eternity**

We rejoice in our suffering while doing all we can to glorify God and further his kingdom because it is piling up great glory for us. 2 Corinthians 4:17 says, “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” We all long for glory. Our standing fast, trusting God, rejoicing in him no matter what is happening in our lives, even suffering for his name sake, is storing up a glory for us that we can’t even imagine, but that we have dreamed of all our lives.

**Rejoice because it is the only way to become mature**

In James 1:2 we are told to consider it pure joy when we go through trials. There it is again, that thing about rejoicing when we suffer. James went on in verse 3 to say the reason we should see it as joy is because that is how we gain perseverance. Then in verse 4 he said, “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.” So how do we become mature? By going through hardships. By suffering through painful trials.

Thomas Merton said tribulation “teaches us that our philosophy in which everything is centered on ourselves is false and deadly.” There is no other way to become mature. Throughout my years of ministry I have found myself bemused at the many programs and efforts churches make to “help people grow” so that they can become mature. Those programs can communicate information and give people knowledge. That’s good. They need the information. But we should remember that Paul said knowledge puffs us up. It makes us proud. It doesn’t make us mature. We only get mature in our faith in one way. Persevere through trials.

How do you get stronger physically? You exercise, you work, you have some pain. Should we be surprised if that general principle also applies to us spiritually? We all know that’s true. The Christians I have respected the most have all been people who were battle tested, who had been through the fire, often more than once. There is a depth to them, a reality, a peace and confidence to them that only comes through struggle.

There are things that we will know about God by going through hardship. We will only truly know God for who he is by going through times of hardship and suffering. It is going through suffering that takes head knowledge and makes it become real in our soul. Writer David Brooks, who is not a Jesus follower as far as I know, has recognized this. He wrote, “People who have suffered almost always have this sense of calling…They want to turn suffering into holiness…People don’t heal from suffering. They come out changed.”

Last fall Laurie and I had a mini-vacation, spending 3 days in La Quinta out in the desert. In the town it is quite pretty. There is lovely landscaping and a lot of greenery, with a dramatic backdrop of rugged mountains. But when you drive out of town just a short distance what you see is the real desert. Some people love the desert. I am not of that tribe. You see vast stretches of nothing but sand and dirt, pockmarked by a few rocks and scraggly bushes that are somehow surviving. It is barren, desolate, and in my opinion, ugly and unappealing. How does a desert get that way? It rarely, if ever, rains. Continuous sun with no rain makes a barren desert. That is also true of lives. For them to be verdant and full of life there has to be some rain.

**Rejoice because the Spirit is with you**

Verse 14 says when we suffer, especially those who are persecuted, we are blessed. Why would Peter say that? It sure doesn’t feel like a blessing to me. Yippee, my life is a dumpster fire! Isn’t that great? Don’t you wish you had my life? I’m living the dream! Yeah, if by dream you mean nightmare. Here’s why Peter said you are blessed if you suffer for Christ’s sake. The Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. There is a sense in which you can experience God’s presence and his Spirit in a special way during difficult times.

Years ago there was a speaker named Ron Dunn who was terrific. He often said that we hear about how Jesus is all we need. He said you’ll never know Jesus is all you need until he is all you’ve got. Again I want to quote Jim McGuigan. He wrote that there will be times when it feels like everyone and everything is against us. I’ve seen so much heartache in the lives of brothers and sisters, so much hurt and loss, I’ve seen so much disappointment in the way their lives have gone. McGuigan says, “In our saner moments we know all that’s true. Everyone and everything *is* against us. When was it any different? When *wasn’t* the world against us? The people of God who hold out hope for a harassed humanity have never triumphed over evil powers or adversity because they had political clout or a monopoly on wisdom or brilliance. They have triumphed because they had something better. They had God.”

**Rejoice because it is the way to be powerful**

This is a truth we rarely grasp. We glimpse it in Philippians 3:10 where Paul wrote, “I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” It is easy to grab onto the first two phrases of that verse and stop there. Right, we want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. Sounds good to me. I’m not all that enthusiastic about that participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. But those things are all linked. If you want to experience the power of the resurrection, the road to it is participating in Christ’s suffering.

In his book, *Authentic Power*, John Avant wrote, “God will give you all the strength you will ever need, but the channel he uses is suffering.” How does suffering produce power? Typically when I am suffering I don’t feel powerful, I feel weak. If I was powerful I would make the suffering stop. The suffering exists because I don’t have the power to make it stop.

So how does suffering make us powerful? When we suffer what do we often do? We turn to the Lord for help. We ask him to intervene and make the suffering stop, or barring that, to give us the strength to endure. That is when we can experience his power. As Paul described it In 2 Corinthians 12:9, his power is made complete in our weakness. In other words, when we are weak, then we are strong.

You might say you don’t feel strong. But when you depend on the Lord when you are being tested you have the opportunity to win a huge victory in the spiritual battle. What person in the Bible other than Jesus would you say suffered the most? That would be Job. His suffering was immense. But let’s look at that another way. Job was a very wealthy man who had a wonderful family. Suppose his life had continued like that, becoming one long story of success. What effect would he have had on us today? Pretty much zero. We would never have heard of him and his life would have had no impact through the centuries. Job’s life was powerful specifically because he suffered. Satan did everything he could to destroy Job. By staying faithful to God through the horror his life became Job routed Satan, and had massive, powerful impact on millions of lives over thousands of years.

I recently read an interesting story. You might recall a book written by Rabbi Harold Kushner on the problem of suffering titled *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. It became a best seller and had touched many people. At the time he published his book there was a psychologist who wrote his own book on the same topic. He had done a lot of study on the subject. His book was well written, full of insight and good information, and it basically fizzled while Kushner’s soared. The author was frustrated and didn’t understand why his book did so poorly and Kushner’s was such a hit. Here’s the difference. Kushner and his wife had a son who had a terrible disease called progeria that caused him to age at an exceedingly accelerated rate. They had to watch him grow old and the die s an old man at the age of14. His book came from the depths of enormous pain. He wrote as he agonized, seeing a horrible disease destroy his beloved son, helpless to do anything to stop it. That is what made it powerful. We all know that when we encounter a person who has genuinely and deeply suffered, we stand humbled and mute before them. Their life has power, specifically because they have suffered.

In his book John Avant said this is the definition of a powerful life. I die, and Christ lives through me. He says he knows persecuted Christians in many places in the world who have nothing, are desperately poor, are rejected, have great possibility of imprisonment or beatings, and yet they radiate joy. One friend of his lives in an Islamic country where he has a bold and powerful ministry. He shares Christ with everyone. Avant said to him, “Don’t you worry about what will happen to you?” His friend said, “No, I don’t worry. I know that one day I will probably just disappear. But until then, what a life!” That is real power.

APPLICATION

We have seen that we can rejoice when we suffer because in so doing we share Christ’s work, we store up glory in eternity, we become mature, we experience the Holy Spirit and we have power. That’s wonderful. So who would like to volunteer to suffer? Anyone? Everyone still tries to do everything they can to avoid it if at all possible. I certainly do. Usually I am eager to do things I rejoice in. Suffering? Not so much. Is there anything that can help us get through suffering when it comes?

PRAISE

Verse 16 says, “if you should suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.” This is one of the most important things we can do. When we are suffering, praise God. Give thanks that you bear the name Christian, that you belong to him. Yes, it is counterintuitive. We don’t naturally praise and thank God when we are suffering. But choosing that has several powerful effects on us.

First, it reminds us of the priceless good that we have in Christ. When we are in pain it is common for the pain to be all we see. It takes over our minds and emotions. Last week we flew to Seattle. Going through TSA was an ordeal. We did survive that, then we eventually boarded our plane. At one point I was feeling irked because the seats frankly were uncomfortable. But, hey, you could recline your seat. Yeah, about an inch and a half. And as I mentioned last week, we had some very unpleasant people seated behind us. So I was feeling a bit grumpy. Then it hit me. I’m sitting in a tube 34,000 feet above the earth, hurtling through the air at 590 miles per hour. We are taking a trip of 1255 miles that 100 years ago would have taken days or even weeks, and we are going to do it in 2 hours and 17 minutes! This is a marvel! Yeah, there were some annoying parts to that day, but the big picture is a thing of wonder. It helped reset my mind. And that’s what praise does for us. It resets our minds

Praise reminds us that God is with us, that he loves us, that our situation is not hopeless because he is there. It reminds us that he is using this to transform us and to make us powerful. It changes how we think. So praise is huge.

COMMIT YOURSELF TO THE LORD

The last verse says those who suffer according to God’s will, “Should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” There is powerful truth there. It reminds us that this isn’t something out of God’s control. We are suffering according to his will. Hey, God is love, if this is his will then it is because he has some good and loving point to it. Peter also reminds us that God is faithful. So knowing that he is faithful we should commit ourselves to him. That means accept what his plan is and be willing to go where he is taking you, and do it with calmness and peace.

Michael, our son in law, is a terrific pilot, one of the best. On our recent trip to Seattle after we arrived, I texted him about our landing. It was the hardest landing I’ve ever experienced. When we hit it felt like we’d made a belly landing, otherwise known as a crash, except it didn’t have the sound of a crash and we kept rolling. We hit so hard the overhead bins were jarred open. When we exited the aircraft I wanted to tell the pilot, “Nice landing, Ace. And thanks for taxiing what’s left of the airplane to the terminal.” When I told Michael about it he immediately responded, “Was it a 737?” He was right. He knows his stuff. Later he explained to me why that can happen with some versions of that particular airplane.

Michael told us this week about a trip he flew that required them to play hide and seek with thunderstorms. At one point he said the controllers got them into a situation they seriously try to avoid. They were boxed in. On the radar there was red everywhere with no way out. They had no choice but to fly through it, which is not a great thing to do. He said he’s never gone through turbulence like this. He said they were bouncing around so violently he couldn’t see the instruments clearly, and at one point he got vertigo. This was not your father’s turbulence. I asked him how the passengers fared. He said he didn’t really want to know but he imagined they weren’t very happy. But the most important thing is, they landed that plane safely, because he’s good at what he does. If you ever fly with him you can confidently commit yourself in his hands, because he is the best. And when you have turbulence in life, you can commit yourself to God, because he has it all in his control and he loves you.