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## **Pain 2 – 9.27.9**

The review

**The world contains so much evil, appalling injustice, and senseless suffering. In light of that, how can you believe in a loving and all-powerful God?** That's the essence of the problem of pain, a great stumbling block to compassionate and thoughtful people everywhere.

**However: If we declare suffering to be meaningless or pain to be senseless, we're placing way too much faith in our ability to see all things clearly.**

From Timothy Keller's *The Reason For God*, chapter 3 "I knew a man...who had lost most of his eyesight after he was shot in the face during a drug deal gone bad. He told me that he had been an extremely selfish and cruel person, but he had blamed his constant legal and relational problems on others. The loss of his eyesight had devastated him, but it had also profoundly humbled him. 'As my physical eyes were closed, my spiritual eyes were opened...I finally saw how I had been treating people. I changed, and for the first time in my life, I have friends, real friends. It was a terrible price to pay, and yet I must say it was worth it. I finally have what makes life worthwhile.'"

We can see good reasons for some of the tragedy in life. Could it be possible that God sees good reasons for all of it?

**But be careful! God doesn't need you or me to come up with explanations for suffering if they aren't obvious.** A spouse dies. "God needed him in heaven more than you and your kids needed him here." Prove it! Or someone loses their job. "God has a better one waiting for you." Maybe, maybe not. Or: "If you had been a better worker, this wouldn't have happened". But that's the kind of advice Job's friends came up with. The point is that we don't have to be God's defense attorney and come up with imaginative explanations for tragedy. Now sometimes there's an obvious connection: A guy repeatedly gets drunk and drives, and finally has a wreck and loses the use of his legs. "Why did God let this happen?" We can help connect the dots without a whole lot of spiritual insight. But sometimes when folks suffer, we have to admit with them that we don't know why God allowed it, but we can cry with them.

**AND: We can point to Romans 8:28 - 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.** What someone else meant for evil, God meant for good, or God can untangle and turn to good. We may not see it completely in this life, and it is an act of faith to believe.

**And this: The very fact that practically everyone in the world thinks that there ought to be more justice and less suffering indicates that there actually is some standard of right and wrong, justice and injustice that we didn't invent and we can't get away from.** The **Problem of Pain** says that suffering and injustice must mean there is no God. But the fact that nearly everyone worries about this is a clue that there actually IS a God who put eternity in our hearts (**Ecclesiastes 3:11**), and who made known to us through Creation his invisible qualities (**Romans 1:20**).

One additional thought, from C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* is that, since the universe is cruel and unjust, and since life for generations was brutal and short for most people (finally improving for some of us in the 1900s, with penicillin and air conditioning Novocain and Taco Bell), then how in the world did we ever come to attribute all of this to a wise and loving and all-powerful Creator? That idea didn't come from life. It must have come from somewhere else!

The simple things I know about suffering:

1. We grow more through the bad times than the good ones. That's what **James 1:2-3** is getting at when it says: **Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.**

When I was in Jr. High, our wrestling team would practice after school for an hour or more, and then we would roll up the mats and put them under the stage in the cafeteria and we would run the stairs of our school. Up to the third floor, down to the basement, up to the third floor, down to the basement. I hated it. And occasionally, we ran out of time and we didn't do it. I loved it when that happened. I never wanted to run those stairs, especially since we had to do it wearing sweats and our wrestling headgear. I wished that we never had to run, and while I was wishing, I wanted to skip the calisthenics we did at the start of every practice too. Now we were a pretty good team (I wasn't good but WE were!) What kind of team do you suppose we would have been without running? Exactly.

It's an obvious point, but in the same way, we grow more through tough times. Not having enough money is tough, but it can help you value money and work. Having a life-threatening disease isn't something I'd wish on anyone (least of all me) but for many folks it's a game-changer that makes them turn back to God and value their family. In **Philippians 4**, Paul said that he had learned the secret to being content, and the secret was: **I can do everything through him who gives me strength (4:13)**. How did he learn that? By being in need and by having plenty, by being well-fed and by being hungry.

Our greatest spiritual need is to surrender our self-will to God, but most of us won't even begin to do that until we suffer some crisis. C. S. Lewis puts it like this: *"We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities...but pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world...Pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul."* (*The Problem of Pain*). That's where my title "God's megaphone" comes from.

So pain is not necessarily an enemy, because we tend to grow more in tough times than in good.

2. We deserve worse than we get. As unpopular as it is to say it these days, this is the diagnosis of Scripture. "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... **Romans 3:23**. **"For the wages of sin is death..." Romans 6:23**. Each of those verses goes on to say that God paid the price, but let's not miss the diagnosis. Our sin is rebellion against God and makes us deserving of his judgment.

Now I understand (and I hope that you do) that this isn't something you spew out at the bedside of a young person suffering from brain cancer. "Hey, at least you're not getting what you really deserve!" But when we stand back and think about life, about suffering, about OUR suffering, it's a good thing to remember: We deserve God's judgment. The many, MANY joys of this life come as gifts. We really do not want to demand justice from God, because we are sinners and justice for us means judgment.

When Christ was first preached in the pagan world, preachers had no trouble convincing pagans of the reality of divine judgment. Every culture that worshipped idols in the traditional sense did so because they feared that the gods were angry.

Modern hearers have trouble with it though. We grew up thinking that kindness is the only true virtue and cruelty is the only true vice. If someone is lazy or dishonest or a gossip or stingy, those are flaws to be sure, but if they are a genuinely nice person, we say that their heart is in the

right place and how could a loving God send them to hell? They're kind! Last year, I said to Ray Pate (about a friend) "His heart is in the right place" and Ray jumped in and said, "It's the rest of his body that gets him in trouble"!

Understand: Kindness IS a virtue, one the NT honors many times, and we can't avoid our duty to be kind. But I also want to mention that the great moral code of history, the Ten Commandments, doesn't say anything about being kind, at least not directly. Honor your father and mother has something to do with kindness of course, and thou shall not murder is at least a good start toward kindness, but if God can list his top ten virtues and none of them is "be excellent to one another", maybe we should admit that there are virtues other than kindness by which to measure our faithfulness. So if pain seems like a gross injustice to us, let's remember the Biblical diagnosis that we deserve far worse than we get, or (to be positive) we are blessed more richly than we deserve!

3. Tragedy reminds us to be ready to meet God. We tend to live in a blur of death denial most of the time, and yet we have this acute need to be ready to meet God. When someone dies suddenly in an accident, that funeral scene or that empty desk at work reminds us that we need to be ready to go at any time.

In **Luke 13**, Jesus dealt with this. Some people came to Jesus and told him about how the governor Pilate had killed some Galileans and mixed their blood with the blood of their animal sacrifices. Jesus knew that these people saw the world in black and white, where people suffered because they deserved it. Jesus wanted to correct that, so he said **"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? <sup>3</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."** It isn't a very comforting way to speak. We'd probably say: "Those people who died in the tower collapse – they didn't deserve it. God should have spared them such an end." Jesus actually says the opposite. "Do you think they died because they deserved it? Don't kid yourself that you DON'T deserve it! Repent or perish!" And he took the opportunity to remind them to be ready to meet their maker. Tragedy has a way of doing that for us. We have a tendency to ignore the possibility of our untimely death and we therefore ignore God. Pain and tragedy, if it wakes us up from that slumber, can be used by God for our good.

4. This world is not our home. After recounting the trouble that has come his way because of the Gospel, Paul says in **2 Corinthians 4 - <sup>16</sup>Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup>So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.** In the same vein, he says in **Romans 8:18 - <sup>18</sup>I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.** What happens to us in this life is temporary, and our faith claims the promise that it isn't the last word, not by a long way.

C. S. Lewis says that, even though we'd like a world where everything was always pleasant, *"The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends...have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home."* From: *The Problem of Pain*.

We think of pain as an enemy to be resisted, but what if it brings us back to face the reality that this world is not our home? What if, in the absence of suffering, we grow so accustomed to this place that we forget God? Pain can be the friend that reminds us that our citizenship is above.

5. The best question to ask about pain isn't "Why?" but "To what end?" - Not "Why did God allow it?" but "What am I going to allow God to do through it?" If it seems arrogant to speak of allowing God to do something, remember that this is the result of the freedom he grants us. We can stifle his work in us, and fail to do his work for those around us, although we cannot derail his ultimate will. So: To what end? What will I allow God to teach me, to make of me through this?

This is where we return to the foundation of faith expressed in **Romans 8:28 - 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.** All things. Even suffering. If we let him, God can untwist what Satan has twisted and work it for good to bless the world.