

Christ Presbyterian Church

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"Reason for Hope: Bad Things"

Acts 16

I was listening once to a seminary professor who talked about being a visitor to the church where he was preaching. He said he asked the preacher, "How long can I go?" and the preacher said, "You can go as long as you want." "Really?" he asked. "Yeah, they're all leaving at noon, but you can go as long as you want." I tell that story because today I am sure we are going to go 10 or 12 minutes over. Let God speak to you in these times, partly because this seems like one of these topics that is of most concern to most of us.

We're finishing this series on apologetics. That is, defending our beliefs to a skeptical world by trying to address the objection: if there is a good God, He wouldn't allow this kind of pain and suffering in the world. Now I think those of you who are asking why does God allow pain and suffering—you're among the 25 people who in that list of 175 questions basically asked the same thing—I need to say to you today that the question of why God allows suffering is not ignored in the Bible. But the Bible seems much less concerned with *why* and much more concerned with *how*. How can you get through suffering? It's not like it ignores the why does God allow suffering part, that is at its peak in the Book of Job. For instance, Job's God ends by saying to Job, "You want to understand why? Okay, you're an ant. Explain to me nuclear fusion, *then* we can talk about why I allow suffering in this world." It's just that we are not ready for all the answers yet. We don't have the capacity.

That said, the last week of July, David Stark is going to give what I think will be a good theological starter kit on why God allows suffering. Today I'm going to say I think we need a theology, a way to think Christian-like, about suffering. I think even more important, we need to show the world that we need a path *through* suffering. You've got a brain, but if you have a heart, you need to try to understand why you need to have a path *through* suffering.

Rich once said to me when I was trying to counsel somebody and explain suffering, "Even if you could tell them exactly why, wouldn't they hurt just as much the next day?" "Why is not the most important thing," Rich said. "They need to discover that God works in broken bodies." We need to see how suffering can change us even when we can't change what happens to us. One of the ways that we learn that is by seeing it happen. The first church, the church of Luke and the church of Acts, was filled with suffering. It happened in the Book of Acts, Chapter 16, with Paul's first venture, the first time the Gospel of Jesus goes to Europe. The Gospel goes to Turkey and Greece, and a small eastern Greek town, a colony of the Roman Empire called Philippi. This is where the first followers of Jesus in Europe originated. This is what it says in Chapter 16.

One day in Philippi, we (probably Luke and the rest of his merry men), met a slave girl possessed by the Spirit who predicted the future. She made her owners rich by fortune telling. She followed us around day after day shouting, "These men serve God. Here's how you can be saved." (Probably not something you want to use as a conversation starter.) Finally Paul got so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the Name of Jesus Christ, come out of her!" Instantly the spirit left the young girl.

When her owners realized their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas, and dragged them into the marketplace. They said, "These men are Jews." (It started back then, blaming the Jews.) "These men are Jews, throwing the city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." Well, the crowd joined in the attack, and the judges ordered Paul and Silas stripped and then beaten with rods. After they had been beaten severely, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded, "Guard them securely," so he put them in the deepest dungeon and chained their feet.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns, and the other prisoners were listening to them. I mean, what else could they do? Suddenly a violent earthquake shook the prison. The doors all flew open. Everyone's chains came loose. Interesting kind of earthquake! The foundation shakes, but doors fly open, and the chains fall off. The jailer woke up, saw the open doors, and drew his sword to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted out, "Don't do it! We are all still here!"

The jailer called for lights and fell down in front of Paul and Silas. He brought them out of the dungeon and asked, "What do I need to do to be saved?" They told him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you and your whole household will be saved." Then they spoke the Word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his household. In the middle of the night, the jailer took them into his home, washed their wounds, and he and all his household were baptized.

Well, at daylight the judges sent some officers to the jailer with the order, "Release those men," and the jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered you to be freed. You can leave. Go in peace." But Paul told the officers, "No way. They beat us publicly without even a trial even though we are Roman citizens, and they threw us into prison. Now they want to get rid of us quietly. No! Let them come themselves and escort us out of town." Afraid that they had persecuted real Roman citizens, the judges came and released Paul and Silas.

It is a story of suffering and pain. Stories like this fill the Bible. Prominent men and women you never hear of suffer and bleed and sometimes do not get better, but sometimes they are rescued. It's an incredibly realistic Book. The stories don't all end this positively.

The reason I told this story is because it's dramatic! It shows how we suffer. This week I have been reminded that many of us have different ways of suffering. There is divorce, and there is depression. There is infidelity, and there is infertility. Some of you have been fired, and some of you are in danger of losing your good reputations. Some of you have been picked on at school, and some of you are afraid that you are not getting the grades that you need to keep anybody happy. Some of you are trapped by addictions, and some of you feel like you will never be loved. We all suffer. We all look good. You all look very good. Trust me, nobody suspects what is going on in your life, but nobody is immune from suffering.

We just don't talk about it because too often, the response of the Christian church is what a friend of mine talked about this week. A little boy had died. She and I were talking, and I said, "You know, part of the problem with this is that Christians just don't know how to help. They come up to this poor woman whose kid is dying and they quote the Bible. They say, 'God works all things for the good. Don't worry.'" Even if that is true, it's a terrible thing to say to somebody who is watching their little boy die.

I'm not sure that that's actually what the passage means. I think it's not so much, "God works all things for good," as "In all things, good and terrible, God is at work." In other words, God didn't make the bridge collapse three years ago. I don't think that's what this verse says. I think it really means, "Sometimes we contort ourselves and make people feel worse, trying to explain why God made this happen instead of discovering a God who is *at work* in a broken bridge and in a broken body and who loves people with broken lives. So today, I guess, I want to look at this passage and say to you, "I think there are four words in here that might help you suffer better and that might put someone whom you love a little further along the path through suffering."

The first word, actually, is right there at the beginning, ***we!*** It says, "One day as we...." The first word in suffering is *we!* They are in this together. We feel like we suffer alone, don't we? Nobody would understand so we often don't tell anybody how it is really going. It really ticks me off when somebody says to me, "Oh, I was in the hospital for 10 days. I just didn't want to bother you." Because when we are celebrating, we are fine, but when we suffer, "I want to be by myself."

Luke and Silas and Paul say suffering together is crucial. "I really want to be alone when I suffer because I'm proud. I don't want to have somebody see me looking like this. It's ugly. I am not at my best when I suffer." A friend of mine says, "You know, when I suffer, it's like the fuzz wears off." We push people away when we need them most. Friends, the first path through suffering is *we*. The gift of God to you is the people of God *with* you. *We* are in this together.

The second word is ***endurance***. I think this is to say, we should start by admitting we all suffer. *We will suffer*. The people we love are suffering. Get us out of this. That is the temptation. Get us out of this. Run away from the pain. I think the first thing that this story teaches us is, sometimes we will *not* get out of the pain. We have to learn to *endure* the pain. Don't pretend like it doesn't happen, acknowledge it. I think my first thought as I look at this story is that endurance comes from the picture of Paul and Silas at midnight singing the songs. I've always thought, "Wow!" But that is not about endurance. Endurance is hanging through the hard times and not stopping until it's complete. They *reach out* to the slave girl. They *stay* in the jail. They *preach* to the jailer. Then even when they are freed from jail, they do not slink out of their mission and sneak out of town. They endure the embarrassment so that they can defend Christ by demanding to leave out in the open.

By endurance what I think God has for you if you are in the middle of suffering is what Winston Churchill said. It's on bumper stickers all over, haven't you seen it? "When you are going through hell, keep on going." When you are going through hell, don't stop and wallow in the pain, but don't try to run away from it either because you can't get away from it. When you are going through hell, keep on going. The most decorated officer in the Vietnam War was a man named James Stockdale, an admiral who was shot down over Vietnam and the highest-ranking prisoner of war in Vietnam. In the book that he writes about his experience, he says there were

two kinds of prisoners. There were the prisoners who could hang on because they had a date when they knew the war was going to be over. In the fall of 1969, the peace talks were going well, and they said, "It'll be over by Christmas, Easter at the latest, and we're outta here." They hung on, they looked good, and they endured anything that could come to them. But Christmas of 1969 came, and if you were around, you remember that the talks collapsed and the war ground on. Those guys who had fixed their endurance to a date lost heart and, literally, started to die.

But endurance that comes *from God* means that we will be like those who endure in the confidence of an end that is certain. You know, I think it's not until you suffer that you realize how far you can go and how much you need help. Some of you who are suffering today just need to hear somebody else say, "Hang on! You are not alone. Hang on! Just one day at a time." That's how Jesus says it, right? Jesus says, "Don't worry about tomorrow. It's got enough trouble. Just for today. Let's get through today together." And Jesus didn't just preach about that. He lived out that. That's why it says in the Bible, "Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross and sat down at the right hand of the Father." Consider the One who endured so much so you won't grow weary and lose heart or, in other words, bail out.

It's not just about, "Try harder." It's not just about, "Hang in there." Endurance says, "Figure out what can keep you going." So if the first word is **we**, and the second word is **endure**, the third word that I believe will keep you going is **hope**. I think the only thing that keeps people going long-term in suffering is hope. In our passage today, two idiots at midnight, badly beaten, singing hymns and praying out loud while everybody else watches them.

Have you ever noticed that two friends who go through exactly the same experience come out of that experience completely different? It doesn't matter whether it's being fired or divorced or sick or failing a class. Two people, completely different. How many of you have seen the movie *Chariots of Fire*? Anybody seen *Chariots of Fire*? A long time ago? The Olympic thing, Eric Liddell, the missionary who runs so fast? After winning the Olympics, he ends up going to China. Between World War I and World War II he experiences this phenomenal ministry in China. At the beginning of World War II, he is rounded up along with thousands of other Westerners and sent to a place called Shantung Compound. Shantung is the place in China where three out of four people in captivity died. In the book *Shantung Compound*, you saw the difference between people who had hope and people who didn't.

Shantung Compound was actually written by the dean of the divinity school at the University of Chicago who said, "I just graduated from Yale after graduating from Harvard. I was the best and brightest, and I was about to go and tell people all about Jesus, and then I get kidnapped by the Chinese and put into a prison camp where I can't tell anybody about Jesus." He had this quote, "My faith lasted a couple of weeks because I lost my answers, and I wanted to curse God." He starts just trying to survive, forgetting about God. "But I looked around," he said, "and the hope of the Catholic fathers" (it would be well for us to hear this in a year when it's a tough time for the Catholic fathers) "and the hope of Eric Liddell seemed to grow stronger and stronger, and the joy that came out of them not only kept them going but was shared with others." The hope that kept them going, not only grew stronger but was strong enough to share.

What does hope look like? Probably like swearing or pornography. I can't define it, but I know it when I see it. Hope is usually best shown. I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine. All of you look very nice today, by the way, nobody would ever know what is going on in your life. That's the point. Nobody will know what is going on in your life unless you tell somebody. I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine who has the courage to say what is going on in her life. In 2001 she was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had surgery where they opened her skull and took out the tumor and discovered it was the kind of tumor that had little tentacles that go into the other part of the brain so you can't get the whole tumor out. So she had surgery again in 2004 and again in 2006. The third time they open the skull, go in, and at the end of 2006's surgery, they say, "We didn't get it all, but we can't do any more because if we take more out, we get to the speech and the motor section of the brain." So she had chemotherapy all through 2007 and now lives with the idea that it's not gone. The tumor is still there, and she and her family live with it. How? Can I give you just five minutes of how.

(Video clip begins)

It was nine years ago in April 2001 when I was diagnosed with a non-curable and recurring brain tumor. At the time our kids were 5, 3 years old, and 8 months. And so today my prognosis is just, we go every three months, and I get scanned, and we just live in three-month increments. At this point that is just sort of what life holds right now. I've just seen so much good in this process. I've seen it in my kids and in my husband and in our friends and just life around me. I'm so thankful for my husband. He's just an amazing rock of a solid man, and I can't imagine going through this without him.

When I was first diagnosed, I remember saying to him, it's a very selfish comment, but I remember saying, "I'm so glad it's me and not you or one of the kids because I don't know what I would do." I know what I can handle, and God's given me peace and He's given me the comfort to deal with this, but if it were my husband or my kids, it wouldn't be very easy at all.

You can laugh a lot through a journey with cancer. There were times after the surgery where they said, "You will have short-term memory problems." There would be something I would forget. I would turn on the water; I would walk away. I would open the oven door; I would walk away. I'd open the fridge; I would walk away. People would just come into the room after me and just go, "Clearly, she is living here" and go through shutting everything. I remember getting out of the car and thinking, "Okay, I am going to shut the door this time" and walked off into the grocery store. My mom who went to the store with me and was like, "The door!" I'm like, "Great! The door!" You know, just little bitty stuff like that.

I have a different perspective on life. For me I look at life eternally now. I look at life as if it's just a blip on the radar screen, and it's so small and so short compared to eternity. I look at my kids, and I look the sports and things we are involved in, and sometimes I get frustrated with life on this earth, and the aspects of that, but I just think, really, eternally, does some of this stuff really matter? There is so much on this earth that makes no sense to us. You know, we see children die every day. We see things happen over in Africa, and I just hold strong to the fact that God has a plan for all of it, and when we are in heaven, it's all going to make sense.

When I look at life, at my story, I have to really say, God is the hero of my story. He is the hero of everyone's story. In every story in the Bible, He is the hero, and He is the hero in my story. There are so many verses in Scripture that are so meaningful to me in this process and this journey, but there are a couple that come to mind, one in particular is Philippians 4:6 and 7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God so that the peace of God transcends all understanding."

Through this journey I realize that we all struggle with things. We all have pain in our lives, and a lot of people have pain that we can't see. Cancer is not a socially acceptable word to talk about, but people want to help you and they want to provide meals and they want to do this and they want to do that. There are people who struggle with addictions, depressions, so much. I mean we have seen so much in the last couple of years, I think with the economy, and there is just a lot of pain in this world, and I just sometimes feel that it's not fair. I feel like, you know, people who are sick, maybe, get this, not undeserved attention but attention where there are so many other people who are hurting in many worse ways who need just as much.

You know, today we just live every day as we can, and every day is truly a gift. I have learned that through this process, and I treasure life more than I ever have. It's almost not a wish for anyone but I just wish everyone could have glimpse of the life of cancer because it gives you such a great appreciation for life.

(End of video clip)

How can she say that? That's what hope looks like, hope that comes from God. Leif and Joelle and the kids are not Pollyannas. "Oh, the worst is over. It's going to get better tomorrow." That's not the hope that God's talking about. They are not Pollyannas. They recognize that we are in this together until the end with a God who will never let go--the God who goes before us and holds on to us, not just in jail, not just in an operating room, not just in a classroom, but *all through life* wherever you are.

That's the hope that Paul and Silas experienced, too. I've got to tell you, you read the story of Paul as we are going to next year, it does not get better and better. At one point he writes down his career path, and this is what he said, "Okay, so five different times I was lashed 40 lashes by the Jews. I have been beaten with rods three times by the Romans. I have been stoned once and left for dead. I have been shipwrecked three times. I have spent a day and a night adrift in the open sea. I have been chased from town to town by bandits, by Jews, by my own countrymen, by false believers." This is not a good luck guy! You put this on your résumé, but do you lose hope?

At the beginning of his career, he is hope-filled, singing in jail. What is it like at the end? Toward the end, Paul reflects on all this, and he talks to the church at Rome and says that what keeps him going is hope. Romans 5, "Since we," (again we) "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have obtained access to the grace in which we now stand, and we rejoice. More than that even, we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces endurance, we endure, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and our hope does not disappoint us

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." We endure with hope and God's love is poured into our hearts through that Spirit. Remember that word that Jesus uses for that Spirit? The Spirit is the Comforter, poured into our hearts. That's the fourth word. We endure with hope and with **compassion!**

Paul and Silas are on the edge of a Divinely-inspired jail break with the earthquake. They see the jailer about to kill himself, and they say, "Good riddance! You're going down, sucker!" But wait, that's not what they say. They say, "Stop! We're all here! You've had us whipped and beaten and shackled. Don't kill yourself." They show compassion. Paul will say later, "Praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, the Father of Compassion, the God of all Comfort, who comforts us in all of our troubles so we can comfort those in any trouble with the same comfort we have received from God." God's love poured into our hearts to share.

I think that is one of the reasons that God allows people to suffer, so they will share comfort. Because if you hadn't suffered, you would never know who is suffering right around you. Someone is. You just may not be seeing it yet. I talked last Sunday about a little boy, Grant, and I asked you to pray with him. I had just baptized him, a week ago yesterday, and last Sunday afternoon Grant died. We did a service here this past Thursday, and that's when it struck me. When you do a funeral here, you cannot believe, people come out of the woodwork. Whether it's making cookies or sitting in the Fireside Room helping, or being an usher, or just hanging around. You would not believe how many of the ushers or flower gatherers here are widows and widowers, who want to help other people.

Pam and Ryan, the mom and dad, were sitting right here, and sitting right back there were Jay and Libby who seven months earlier had lost their little boy, Timmy, to a very similar cancer. There are only about a dozen of these cancers in the whole country. I've got to think, how could two of these cancers happen in the same year in the same church? These folks have already met for meals and gone on long walks because Jay and Libby have said, "We don't have all the answers, but we're just a little further down the journey."

Remember how Joelle talked about how the tumor can actually produce things that are pretty humorous like leaving car doors open and forgetting things all over the place. I think God has produced in them the compassion that says, "Let's laugh at that tumor together. Let's not let it win. Let's laugh at it." For the last seven years, Joelle has spearheaded a fundraiser called Humor to Fight the Tumor. Over 500 people a year for the last seven years have raised over a million dollars and distributed three-quarters of a million of those dollars to people who are fighting brain tumors. We endure with hope and share it with compassion.

Can we explain why bad things happen to good people? We'll take a theological crack at that next month. We certainly can't explain all of it, but can we offer something to a world in pain? By the grace of God, this church is the fellowship of the bleeding heart. By the grace of God, it can be a place of endurance and hope and compassion for all who suffer.

Lord Jesus, thank You that You don't pretend like it doesn't hurt, and You don't say something is wrong with us when we hurt. Thank You that You have hurt, too, so that You know what it feels like. And, Lord, as we suffer, I ask that You will make us a community, filled not with people who have gotten their acts together but with people who have felt pain and grace together, and I ask that those in pain today would find others to

help so that they might endure to the end. I pray that You would bring hope, hope enough to experience and hope enough to share, by planting Your love in our hearts, and that You will make this a group of sisters and brothers who have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to love the least and the lost and the left behind. Bless all those who suffer, Lord Jesus. And all God's people said...

(All) Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.