

# Christ Presbyterian Church

Edina, Minnesota

July 21 & 25, 2010

Dave Stark

**"Glad You Asked - Pain and Suffering: 'Why Does God Let It Happen?'"**

**2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10**

Well, to those who know me, it's good to be back. I'm excited today to try to tackle this question of pain and suffering. I think it's something that's asked by all people all over the world, Christian and non-Christian, believers and non-believers. **Why is there pain and suffering in the world?** We are going to try to do some answering today, although my fear is that we won't like the answer. I am reminded of a story I heard about a man who was running away from some folk and, actually, ran right off a cliff. He grabbed a branch on the way down and held on to it. He wasn't really a religious guy, but it's amazing how fast religion flows back in that circumstance. He yells out, "Help! Is anybody up there?" And God yells back, "Let go of the branch, and I'll help you." The guy hanging on to the branch thinks about it and yells, "Is there anybody else up there?"

I want to start out by having us open up to Corinthians II, Chapter 4. Let's read a few verses, starting at verse 16, "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

"For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling—if indeed when we have taken it off, we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that which is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, Who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee." Let's pray together.

Lord, I pray that these texts and my words and our thoughts would help us in this whole arena of pain and suffering. In Your Name, we pray, Jesus. Amen.

Well, I think the first thing to say about this question is that for most of us, it is not theoretical. For most of us, it is our own pain or the pain of somebody that we love, and the reason that it is so critical is because when you start to give answers, it doesn't even come close to the depth of the place in your soul that is asking the question. In other words, as I try to look at answers today, I am very aware that for those who have gone through pain and suffering, or who have a loved one who has, that really it is a deeper part of your soul that is asking the question.

I attended Princeton Seminary. When Janet and I got there, we didn't have any furniture at all. A woman named Aunt Sally would mark down her furniture when we got there, and she sold us almost everything we owned. Well, anyway in my senior year, I go up there and she has bought me these old Bibles. I thought this was a wonderful gift from Sally. As I am paying for them, she said, "Dave, I need to ask you a question. Three years ago I was in a car accident and my husband was killed instantly, but I wasn't hurt and I'd like to know why that happened." The first thing I am thinking is, "One of my professors at Princeton called her and this is really my final exam I didn't know I was going to have." So I said, "Sally, is this a real question?" Sally said, "Yes, it's real."

The first thing I said to her was, "Sally, you know any intellectual answer to that question isn't even going to come close to the part of your soul that is asking that question." I'd like to return to that at the end of the sermon. But given that, let's look at this question.

The first thing I want to say is that this not heaven. This is earth. Let me try to explain what that means. When God made the decision to create beings in His own image, it was an enormous risk, an enormous movement and decision by God. Why? Because God had to create this place called earth, and we now know, having looked at the universe what a rare place it is, a place where there can be *people like God*. What does that mean? We are most like God when we choose. We are choosing agents and, therefore, there has to be this sphere where it's possible for you and me to choose, and not just you and me but also for the angelic realm to choose. In order to choose, of course, I have to have *real choice*. I have to have the possibility of choosing evil, or bad, and not just choosing good. So God created a sphere and created us with a lot of limitations. Have you noticed the earthly tent? It needs oxygen. It needs food. It needs water. It needs heat. In other words, the way we have been created is limited. Now why is that important? Because the way that God has been able to create a sphere where we can be like God and yet not challenge the sovereignty of God is by creating us with limitations.

Let me tell you what I mean. In four or five thousand years of human history, the best we have been able to do is go to the rock next to earth. Why? Because we have all these limitations that keep us from going places or doing these kinds of things which means that the sovereignty of God is not going to get challenged any time soon even though you and I have free agency. Does that make sense? We are limited beings. Like a kindergarten teacher over a kindergarten, God is sovereign over the earth, but that does not mean that everything that happens in the classroom is the teacher's choice. In fact, there are lots of things that happen in the classroom that the teacher doesn't want to have happen or worse yet, that the teacher thinks are awful or horrible.

This place called earth is a place where there are many actors, and God's action and Satan's action and our own actions, good and bad, are institutionalized into governments, into structures. What happens is, this place called earth is a place of suffering. Jesus said, "In this world you are going to have tribulation." Or you think of the wise and foolish builders. It says, "It's not *if* the storms come, it's *when* the storms come." In fact, I did a study one time and found there are 17 different categories of suffering in the Bible, lots of types of suffering.

To get at the question, though, on one level, here is part of the answer to that. Why does a good God allow suffering in the world? **Well, the reality is, God has two choices. Choice No. 1 is just not to create beings who have free agency**, either in the angelic realm or in the

human realm. That is one possibility. In fact, you may know in the Old Testament that the whole point of the Noah story is, "I'm sorry I did this thing." God was going to wipe them all out, starting with Noah, but of course, the rainbow says, "I'm not going to do that any more." Probably one of the hardest texts in the Bible is the text where God said, "I repent of creating people."

When you see the level of suffering and pain, sometimes in our lives, sometimes in other people's lives, you understand the radical choice that God was making in creation to share this world. God wanted beings He could be in a relationship with and reveal His glory, but the reality is, you either don't create so it doesn't happen **or the realm you create like that is going to have suffering and pain.** That's the reality of what earth is and what you and I deal with on earth.

But that's not the end of the story. In that sphere where God allows free agency and creates multiple actors, some for good, some not for good, what God has given us is the ministries of the Holy Spirit, and the whole point of the ministries of the Holy Spirit, at least a big point, is to help you and me deal with pain and suffering. You see, the truth is that when God says, "I want to comfort those in despair. I want to bring beauty out of actors or joy out of mourning and give the gift of feeling, the gift of helps, the gift of mercy," you think about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to bind up the broken-hearted, to set the captive free. In all of those cases, the good news is that we have a God who helps us get *through* the storms but not a God who necessarily protects us *from* the storms. As Jesus put it, "It's going to rain on the just and the unjust." It is going to have that reality within this realm called earth.

Praise God that we have not been left alone in that pain and suffering. God has given us the ministries of the Holy Spirit, and God has given us the Body of Christ, and one another to help us *through* the pain and suffering of this world. The reality is, now we begin to understand Paul's text here because Paul knows, front and center, of all of the pain and suffering of the world. He talks about this momentary affliction we have and an eternal weight of glory because that which is now is temporary but that which is eternal is forever. Paul knows that in this life there is going to be pain and suffering. It is very real for every one of us, but praise God, there is the Holy Spirit and the redemption of God, whose purpose is to help us through that pain and suffering and surround us with grace and mercy and healing and hope and the things that allow us to deal with the fact that this world *is* full of pain, and it *is* full of suffering.

So what I'm saying so far is this. No. 1., I know for most of us this question is much deeper than an explanation, and I'm going to come back and talk about that in just a minute, but No. 2., the reality is that God either had the choice not to create or God had to create a realm where there is genuine choice by the angelic realm and by the human realm. In the wake of that came many, many, many categories of suffering. **The third thing I am saying is, we have not been left alone. God's Spirit is here to minister to that.** The whole point of redemption, of reconciliation, of all those words that God brings into the world is for the Holy Spirit to minister to us and help us through the pain and suffering that we face in our lives.

Let me return now to the opening question, which is the question of, "Dave, you know, my pain is much deeper than concepts," and that is true for many of us. I remember the first time that I read the Book of Job which, of course, is a giant questioning. How could God do a bad thing to a good guy? Don't you love his friends? His friends are really helpful. "Well, either you sinned or your dad sinned." Twenty-eight chapters of "You sinned or your dad sinned" and Job saying, "Nah, you don't understand. You don't understand what I'm going through."

I remember the first time I read the Book of Job, and I got to the chapter where God was going to speak. I remember sitting down with my Bible thinking, "This is going to be great." Confession of sin: I threw my Bible across the room after I read it. "That isn't an answer, God. That is a bunch of questions." "Where were you when...." and "What about...." and as God worked on me, I realized what that Job chapter was doing. That Job chapter was making me realize there are a lot of questions I don't have the answer to, not just this one. I can't answer that one or that one or that one or that one, and what I think it does is, it quiets the explainer within our minds. It quiets that part of our minds and opens us up to being encountered by God because what we really need when we are talking about pain and suffering that is personal is not an explanation although, fundamentally, that may help some. What we really need is for God to be present to us, for God to meet us in ways that allow us to bring hope and courage et cetera.

In Sally's case, I looked at her and I said, "You want me to tell you that the devil attacked the car? You want me to say it was the injustice of the other person driving or that it was mechanical failure?" I said, "I'm not even getting close to the place in your soul that is asking that question, but Sally, let me ask you something. Has there been anything that God has done that has helped you move on from what it was that you were facing?" She said, "Dave, it is really odd because about three weeks ago, I was down at the shore," which is what they call the beach on the east coast, "and I was cleaning up our cabin, and I felt my husband's hand on my shoulder, and I heard in my head, 'It's okay.' Ever since then I've felt a new hope. I've felt as if God is in control."

I can't tell you how many stories like that I've heard, story after story that are not explanations because they don't come to the place where I feel like I'm *satisfied* with an answer because this mystery called suffering needs something much deeper than an answer. What it needs is, encounters with God, over and over again, and what it needs is, the ministries of the Holy Spirit.

So you and I are in a world of pain and suffering. In choosing to love this world and create this very unique place called earth that does have tribulation and suffering and pain and brokenness, praise God that all of us some day will say, "You know what? This momentary affliction is going to point to an eternal weight of glory." That suffering will push all of us into the reality and the hope of eternity, not to what is seen but that which is unseen because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Let's pray together. Lord when we are tackling a mystery, it is difficult to know the depth and breadth of this question, but thank you that You haven't left us alone. You've given us the Spirit, and You've given us one another, Lord, and You've come, and You are the one Who ministers over against what we face in this world. Through Jesus Christ, we pray. 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.*