Good morning, Moon Valley!

We continue the sermon series we started last week titled, ▶ “Suffering Embraced.” It is designed to help us think through and live through suffering.

Today, we are going to consider ▶ “Distorted Christian Conceptions of Our Suffering.”

I have first-hand experience with this topic. My late father-in-law carried to his grave a bitterness toward evangelical churches. And it’s understandable. Growing up, some disease took the life of his young sister. The minister of the rural, West Virginia church they attended told his mother that she must have committed some sin which caused the child’s death. Overwhelmed with guilt, his mother committed suicide. My father-in-law, still in his teens, was the first to find his mother’s lifeless body.

Even closer to home, some of you know that our first-born has had numerous brain surgeries, starting when she was only four years old. Early on, in the midst of it, some older lady in the Christian community came to our home and told my wife, Cathy, then in her mid-twenties, that we must have some sin in our lives that caused our daughter’s trouble.

The assumption that suffering must be tied to some personal sin is not new. The thinking goes that if you struggle in one way or another, there must be a personal sin issue at the root of it.

But in a biblical story we are about to consider, Jesus challenges this way of thinking, even among his own disciples. Bad ideas and bad theology hurt people. And Jesus corrects it. And he does it in a way that is encouraging and helpful to those of us who may be baffled by our own hardship.

The place is Jerusalem. The date is late AD 31, shortly after the Feast of Booth's celebration. It is the Sabbath. Jesus is with his disciples and is probably headed to or from the temple. ▶ John 9:1 says,

> ESV John 9:1 As he [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.

In Jesus's day, it was common for people with disabilities to take up spots along main streets leading to the temple in the hopes of receiving some charity. The man in our text is blind, not from disease or injury, but from birth. ▶ Verse 2 continues:

> ESV John 9:2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Here we see the assumption still prevalent today: the disciples assume that the man must be blind as a direct result of some personal sin, either his own sin or that of his parents. I suspect this is such a prevalent assumption, not only because it is our nature to assign blame, but also because there is some confusion about the source of suffering.

Last week we learned that if we suffer, it is because of evil. But it is not necessarily a result of personal sin.

Of course, we can and do suffer for our own sin. When we commit adultery, we suffer marriage problems. When we drink excessively, we suffer social and health problems. When we drive recklessly, we suffer injuries. This kind of suffering is avoidable to the extent we can avoid personal sin.

But not all hardship we face is a result of personal sin. Even if we avoid personal sin, we can never escape the evil of the fallen world. And,

therefore, we can never really escape suffering, pain, and injustice this side of heaven.

The distinction between generalized evil and our personal sin is an important one as it relates to suffering. Sadly, some people fail to make the distinction, and they like to pin all suffering on personal sin. You got cancer? You must have messed up! Is there a birth defect such as blindness? Must be a moral problem with the parents! This is wrong, hurtful thinking. And such thinking is reflected in the question posed by the disciples back in verse 2:

> ESV John 9:2 . . . "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus corrects this faulty thinking in ▶ verse 3:

> ESV John 9:3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

Jesus flatly denies any connection between this man's blindness and some personal sin of the man or his parents. The man born blind is not to blame for his blindness, nor are his parents. Neither the man nor his parents deserved the blindness nor did they themselves do anything to cause it.

Jesus is not denying that the sin of the fallen world is behind the blindness; it most certainly is. Jesus is merely ruling out the family's personal sin as the cause.

The suffering was not their fault, but it had a purpose: "that the works of God might be displayed in him." God healed the blind man, displaying his power.

Yet another story in Scripture proves that suffering is not necessarily a result of personal sin.

As recorded in the Bible book that bears his name, Job suffered horribly through the tragic loss of his possessions, his children, and his health. Job's religious friends came to "comfort" him.

- Job's friend, Eliphaz told Job he must have had it coming.
- Another friend, Bildad told Job that his children must have had it coming.
- Yet another friend, Zophar floated the idea that Job is probably experiencing less suffering than he actually deserves.

All three friends assumed that because Job was suffering terribly, he must have sinned terribly.

But they were terribly wrong.

In the face of his friends' accusations, Job maintained that he had done nothing to deserve such suffering.

When the Lord finally speaks, he sides with Job, not his friends. ▶ Job 42:7 says,

> ESV Job 42:7 After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."

That Eliphaz and the other friends assumed Job must have deserved to suffer is not a harmless mistake. It is a hurtful one. And notice that God is upset about the abuse, saying "My anger burns against you."

Quite often, suffering is not a consequence of our own sinfulness. And when that's the case, it is no sin to believe and to say that your suffering is undeserved.

There is also the prevalent misconception that we suffer illness and disease and disorders because we don't have enough faith to be healed. The general idea is that God never wants believers to suffer any kind of illness. In fact, God has promised physical well-being in this life to every believer. It is our right to be healthy. If we do suffer illness, it is our fault for being too ignorant or having too little faith to claim the authority we have over illness.[1]

This way of thinking is characteristic of what has been dubbed the word-of-faith movement, also called the health-and-wealth gospel or the name-it-and-claim-it gospel.

One pastor and author who reflects this thinking recounts a time early in his ministry when a couple in his church had a child born with Down syndrome, significant brain damage, and a compromised immune system. Despite the prayers of the parents and their pastor, the child died at the age of four.

The pastor told the parents, "I don't believe this was God's will. . . . He did now allow this to happen. . . . It's either my fault, your fault, both of our faults, or things that we don't understand."

[1] Moo, D.J. (1988). "Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel. *Trinity Journal*, 9(2), 189-209.

The pastor went on to explain, “Because I told these people the truth, they prayed and God showed them some areas where they had allowed fear, doubt, and unbelief in. This had hindered their faith and kept them from receiving the miracle they needed.”[2]

The unspoken-but-unmistakable conclusion is that it was the parents’ fault for not having enough faith.

The pastor calls this telling the truth.

I call it pastoral abuse based on bad theology.

Another pastor of one of the largest churches in America reflects much the same thinking when he writes, “Maybe Alzheimer’s disease runs in your family genes, but don’t succumb to it. Instead, say every day, ‘My mind is alert. I have clarity of thought. I have a good memory. Every cell in my body is increasing and getting healthier.’ If you’ll rise up in your authority, you can be the one to put stop to the negative things in your family line. . . . Start boldly declaring, ‘God is restoring health unto me. I am getting better every day in every way.’”[3]

The unspoken-but-unmistakable suggestion is that if you do get Alzheimer’s or any other disease, then you needlessly succumbed to it, you didn’t rise up in your authority to put a stop to it, you didn’t declare boldly enough the truth of the wellness to which you have a God-given right.

I bumped up against this kind of thinking in the early years of being a pastor. I received a call from the mother of a 30-something-year-old daughter who was dying of cancer. The daughter had belonged to a church

---

[2] Womack, Andrew, *God Wants You Well: What the Bible Really Says About Walking in Divine Health* (Colorado Springs, CO: Harrison House Publishers, 2010) 44-46.
[3] Osteen, Joel, *Become a Better You* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 45, 114, quoted by Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good* (New York: Multnomah, 2014), 382.

that believed that you could be healed of any illness if you simply had enough faith. But because this young woman had not been healed, her name-it-and-claim-it church stepped away from her in her dying days. The mother asked me to step in. I was able to meet with the young woman. She suffered not only the ravages of cancer, but also the ostracism of her church family for not having enough faith. She died shortly after.

In an excellent book titled *If God Is Good*, noted author Randy Alcorn observes, "Some churches today have no place for pain. Those who say God has healed them get the microphone, while those who continue to suffer are shamed into silence or ushered out the back door."[4]

The health-and-wealth gospel does not square with the suffering of Job. According to God, Job did not suffer for lack of faith. In fact, according to God, there wasn't a more faithful person on the planet than Job. ▶ Job 1:8 says,

> ESV Job 1:8 And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"

And consider the apostle Paul. In the beginning of 2 Corinthians 12, he speaks of some wonderful revelations he was given from God. Then in ▶ 2 Corinthians 12:7, he says,

> ESV 2 Corinthians 12:7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

[4] Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good* (New York: Multnomah, 2014), 378.

The surpassing greatness of what was revealed to Paul did not usher him into a pain-free life of greater prosperity with a Gulfstream jet. Instead, it brought him suffering.

Paul says, “a thorn was given me in the flesh.”

The term, “thorn” literally describes an injurious sharp object. But Paul is using the term figuratively to describe a sharply painful affliction.

There has been all manner of speculation about what exactly Paul’s thorn was. The truth is we don’t know for sure because Paul doesn’t say. The preponderance of evidence suggests, and many scholars believe that Paul’s thorn was most likely a physical incapacity.[5]

There is nothing to suggest that Paul’s thorn was a kind of punishment he had coming. Paul did not receive the thorn because he did something wrong. Quite the contrary, he received it because something wonderful happened to him.

The purpose was to keep him from becoming conceited.

In ▶ verse 8, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Corinthians 12:8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

It is absolutely normal to want to alleviate pain. Thorns are painful. Paul repeatedly pleads with the Lord to remove his thorn.

In ▶ verse 9, Paul explains God’s response to his prayers.

[5] Moo, D.J. (1988). “Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel. *Trinity Journal*, 9(2), 189-209.

> ESV 2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” . . .

That would be a no.

I am not suggesting that God always says no to healing. God can and does heal today, according to his sovereign purposes. But sometimes suffering serves a higher purpose than healing in this life, even if we can’t see what that purpose is.

As far as we know, Paul suffered with this thorn for the rest of his life.

- Was it because Paul didn’t have enough faith?
- Was it because he didn’t rise up in his authority to remove the thorn?
- Was it because he didn’t declare boldly enough the truth of the wellness God wanted for him?

Of course not.

And what about Paul’s ministry partners?

According to 2 Timothy 4:20, Paul had to leave his ministry partner Trophimus behind because of illness.

According to Philippians 2:25-30, another partner of Paul named Epaphroditus became gravely ill.

According to 1 Timothy 5:23, Paul’s protégé Timothy had frequent stomach problems for which Paul prescribed a little wine for medicinal purposes.

Why doesn't Paul coach them to have more faith, to boldly claim their God-given right to be healthy, to take back the health Satan stole from them?

By the way, someone else in Scripture prayed to God that he would be spared suffering. And he also got a "no."

That would be Jesus.

On the eve of his big thorn, his torture and crucifixion, Jesus prayed fervently to the Father.

Guess how many times? Three times.

He prayed "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." In saying "this cup" Jesus is referring to another type of thorn: the horrible suffering of the cross.

He was simply asking if there was another way to accomplish God's purposes—an easier way, a less painful way, a way that didn't include the crown of thorns and the nails in his hands and feet.

Not only was the thorn itself painful, but the prayers to remove the thorn were agonizing as well. Jesus sweat blood praying about his thorn. There was nothing easy about the whole thorny experience.

We know the answer the Father gave the Son.

He said no.

Was it because Jesus was too ignorant or didn't have enough faith?

Sometimes the greatest faith is to trust God with your suffering.

There is yet another misconception about suffering that is perhaps more prevalent among professing Christians than the ones I've already mentioned. It is the idea that the Christian life is not supposed to be so hard. It is the expectation that, with God on our side, things should be easier than they are.

One daughter of a pastor—not mine—said, "I was never taught the Christian life was going to be difficult. I've discovered it is, and I wasn't ready."[6]

Another young Christian woman battling cancer says, "I was surprised that when it happened, it was hard and it hurt and I was sad and I couldn't find anything good or redeeming about my losses. I never expected that a Christian who had access to God could feel so empty and alone."[7]

When we are not expecting to suffer, it can be a disillusioning shock when we do. We can be tempted to turn against ourselves, thinking that we must have done something wrong because good Christians shouldn't suffer like this. Or we can turn against God, thinking that he has done us wrong.

But the teachings of Scripture make it clear that believers should expect to suffer. Suffering is normative. As one scholar puts it, "Blessing is promised and experienced, but suffering is never eliminated."[8]

In ▶ John 16:33, Jesus says unambiguously,

---

[6] Alcorn, Randy, *If God Is Good* (New York: Multnomah, 2014), 14.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Waters, Larry J., "Missio Dei in the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166, no. 661 (January-March 2009), 32.

ESV John 16:33 “. . . In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

In ▶ Philippians 1:29, Paul affirms,

ESV Philippians 1:29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,

In ▶ 1 Peter 4:12-13, Peter corroborates,

ESV 1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ▶ 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

And the lives of the faithful testify to a common thread of suffering.[9]

- In the very first biblical story after the fall of humankind, Cain murders his brother Abel. Abel was the one who was righteous and pleasing to God. He suffered for it.

- Throughout the Old Testament, prophets suffer for doing the right thing.

- Over in the New Testament, Jesus describes John the Baptist as the greatest of men. He was imprisoned and beheaded for no good reason.

- An early follower of Christ named Stephen is described as being full of grace and power. He was stoned to death.

[9] Alcorn, Randy, *If God Is Good* (New York: Multnomah, 2014), 379.

- The apostle James was beheaded by Herod Aprippa.
- Paul was imprisoned and then beheaded by Nero.
- Tradition has it that Peter and Andrew were crucified.
- Matthew was martyred.
- Thomas was impaled with a lance.
- James the son of Alphaeus had his brains dashed out with a club.

The late Larry Crabb, a noted Christian psychologist, author, Bible teacher, and disciple-maker who succumbed to cancer at age 76 says,

> *Live long enough, and dreams important to you will shatter. Some will remain shattered. God will not glue together the pieces of every Humpty Dumpty who takes a great fall in your life.*
>
> *The divorce will go through, the cancer will claim a loved one's life, the Alzheimer's will not be arrested (let alone reversed) by the latest drug. The broken friendship will not be restored despite your best efforts to reconcile. Your marriage will not be satisfying no matter how many counselors you consult or seminars you attend. Your singleness will be an intolerable burden. The budding ministry will never materialize. The lost income will not be replaced by money pouring out of heaven's windows.*
>
> *You'll feel low for a long time; the dark tunnel will lengthen with no light visible at its end. Your sense of adventure will yield to dutiful drudgery. You will be miserable. Your dream of feeling alive, captivated by beauty and passionately free, will die.*
>
> *And God won't do a thing. For a long time. Maybe till heaven.*

That is my problem with Him.[10]

How's that for a pep talk?

Crabb is not trying to be a downer. He's a realist portraying the reality of suffering and the feelings that can come with it. This is a normal part of the Christian life. You are not amiss to experience it.

Crabb points to a common source of our disillusionment, saying, "We naturally and wrongly assume we're here to experience something God has never promised."[11]

Nevertheless, Crabb remains unwaveringly hopeful, joyful, faithful, and confident that God is still at work for good in and through our shattered dreams and suffering.

Crabb says of God, "He tells us He is our most responsive friend. He insists that, after giving us His Son, he would never withhold anything good."[12]

Crabb goes on to say, "God will never allow suffering to come into our lives that is not necessary to achieve his good purposes."[13]

That last part happens to be a paraphrase of something God does promise in ▶ Romans 8:28.

> ESV Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

[10] Crabb, Larry, *Shattered Dreams* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 22-23.
[11] Ibid, 31.
[12] Ibid, 23.
[13] Ibid, 44.

The big idea—the idea I want you to remember is this: ▶ Suffering is an inescapable and indispensable part of a believer's ultimate well-being.

Today, we have dealt mostly with how suffering is inescapable. In the coming weeks, we will talk more about how it is indispensable to our well-being, starting with the suffering of Jesus, then moving to our own suffering. So, stay tuned. It'll be worth it.

Let's pray. Lord, help us to think rightly about suffering and to learn to embrace it as an inescapable and indispensable part of our ultimate well-being. Amen.