

Suffering: Is One Abandoned?

From the Midweek Lenten series:
Job and Jesus: The Mystery of Human Suffering

Job 23:3; Mark 15:34

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

As we have moved through this Lenten journey, we come to the very heart of it this evening. Actually in these meditations I am reversing the events of the narrative itself. We go to Calvary this evening, and then back again to Gethsemane next week. I do that because I want to treat as honestly as I can the sense of abandonment that Jesus experienced. But I don't want to leave the study there. I want rather to leave it with a final word of trust. So I am going to move to Calvary and back to Gethsemane, contrary to the record itself.

The whole question of God and suffering which has been our focus defies rational explanation. Human suffering puts a limit to human reasoning. Inevitably, down through the centuries people have tried to reconcile the almightiness of God and the anguish of human suffering, and there have been all kinds of schemes proposed. The technical term is *theodicy*: the justification of God in light of the reality of human suffering. There have been some grand schemes proposed, but finally there simply is no rational explanation that can remove the sense of darkness and despair, which is so very real a part of our human experience. Someone has said that all of the attempts at rational explanation and understanding are like a lecture on nutrition to a starving person.

For when one is in the anguish and in the darkness, there is no satisfactory explanation. There is only the darkness and that fragile connectedness that is the consequence of the experience of the absence of the presence. That's a rather complicated thought, isn't it? The sense of the absence of presence points to that other one that one has known, whose presence one has known. Only as one has known that presence does one become conscious of the absence. So, ironically, it is the sense of the absence that points to the presence and becomes that tenuous link between the darkness and the Living Lord.

In Job and in Jesus we see the depth of human suffering. We see it in their cry of abandonment. What an eloquent word in that Old Testament story. Can't you feel the pathos of Job's cry, "Oh that I knew where I might find him. I go forward and

he is not there. I go backward and I cannot reach him. I go to the right hand and I cannot behold him, and to the left hand and he is not there. Oh that I knew where I might find him.”

And Jesus. The words from Mark’s Gospel, the cry from the cross, borrowed from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” In the case of Job the purpose of that Old Testament book was to break the link between sin and suffering, that traditional conception of things that if one is suffering one must have sinned because God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. So the “miserable comforters” who come to be with Job, being prisoners of that scheme of things, cannot fully enter into Job’s suffering because their scheme disallows their total identity with him. They cannot hear him. His anguish is that he is suffering and he cannot figure it out because he has lived with integrity. So he knows in his present human experience that the scheme of things that is traditionally accepted, the conventional wisdom, simply doesn’t hold.

That’s part of the anguish, when our human experience doesn’t fit the mold. Some of us know what that is to get in circumstances that simply don’t fit. They don’t fit the conception of things that we had always taken for granted, that we had always assumed, that had been taught us from our childhood up. In Job’s case he suffers alone, because there is no one who will grant him that, just perhaps, there is a mystery of human suffering that shatters the conventional wisdom and the commonly accepted scheme of things. The Old Testament book is an eloquent denial of that conventional wisdom that God, the rewarder of the righteous and the punisher of the wicked, makes everything finally come out right. And that, if one is suffering, one has sinned. A denial of the conventional wisdom that suffering is the punishment for wrongdoing. No causal relationship. No necessary proportion between those two, says the Book of Job. We have in the book itself, finally, this overpowering revelation, which doesn’t answer the existential question of why, but is a revelation of God, so that Job out of his darkness and anguish is encountered by God.

Then, picking up that old tale which is at the beginning and the end of the dialogues, we have the restoration of Job in this life. So for Job there is the awful anguish and the revelation, and the restoration. But it is not so for Jesus. For Jesus we have the cry of abandonment, the darkness and death. The cry of abandonment of Jesus reaches to a brassy heaven that makes no move in reply. There is no scattering of the darkness. There is no alleviation of the pain. Jesus hangs abandoned to the public gaze. Job’s problem was difficult enough: the suffering of the innocent. One living with integrity, yet crushed. But it didn’t begin to address the anguish of Jesus. For with Jesus the absence of God at the moment of his terrible need begged the question of the whole project of his life. This is the one who had proclaimed the nearness of God, the presence of God, the grace of God. This was the one who had announced the presence of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the people. Consequently, it was not simply that he was suffering. It was the fact that everything he had staked his life on hung in the

balance. That was the depth of the anguish of Jesus. Who can begin to imagine, to conceive of the physical agony of Jesus? But I suspect he hardly was conscious of the physical suffering in light of the mental and spiritual anguish that he was undergoing.

I asked you on Sunday morning whether in your understanding of Jesus there is any room for self-doubt. I believe that that must have been the great temptation of Jesus. The temptation to lose faith. To stop trusting in the midst of that darkness when his whole life's project was on the line and the heavens were silent. Might he have been wrong? He had set himself against the whole institutionalization of religion, that whole structure – the temple and the priests, and the sacrifices – not denying the efficacy, not denying the fact that they were a part of this covenant people of God and not denying that they had been and still could be the mediators of the grace of God, and the presence of God, but relativizing all of that and announcing the presence of God for all. The inclusive concern of God. God of the abandoned. God of the outcast. God of the godless. All of that was at stake as Jesus hung there, for it was Roman power and Jewish religion collaborating to put the lie to everything for which he had lived, and for all the claims that he had made; therefore, far beyond anything that Job suffered, Jesus saw everything go up in smoke.

There are different opinions as to the citation of Psalm 22. Mark, giving us that opening cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" was reflecting his understanding, I think, of what was happening. But there are those who say that cry, which Mark gives us from Psalm 22, goes through the utter depths of human suffering, but comes through finally at the end of the Psalm to offer praise to God and express confidence in God. There are those who say that word from the cross was simply the beginning of the citation, the quotation of the Psalm. God's children have long recited the word of God in times of extremity as the source of comfort and strength. There are those who say this is what Jesus was about. And it may be so. Mark is considered to be the earliest Gospel, and it is interesting that, especially Luke and John, later Gospels, coming perhaps with the Christian interpretation of Jesus' death, soften. They don't have the word of forsakenness. They have in Luke's case the word of trust: "Into Thy hands I commend my spirit," a citation from another Psalm. Or in John's case, "It is finished," a declaration of accomplishment.

I wonder if maybe even those Gospel writers were uncomfortable leaving the raw suffering and darkness, and cry of dereliction as the last word? In any case, that's what we have in Mark. So in the cry of abandonment, in the case of Jesus according to Mark, there is suffering, and there is darkness, and there is death. In the case of Job, after the point has been made, there is revelation and restoration. In the case of Jesus, there is abandonment, darkness and death. I think sometimes we attempt to defend God and a rightness of things so that we are uncomfortable just leaving it with the darkness. But to the person who is in the darkness, it is not always a kindness to try to lighten the darkness.

William Styron, the novelist of *Sophie's Choice*, has Stengle making his sad journey from Washington to New York on the train to bury his two close friends who had committed suicide and, in his utter despair, a black woman who is a fellow traveler, offers him Psalm 88, the one Psalm that we began with at the beginning of this series and in which there is no alleviation of the darkness.

Again, paradoxically, Psalm 88, which is unrelenting darkness, becomes a source of comfort to one who has no eyes but for the darkness in the present circumstance. The cross gives us a true, an honest, and an awful insight into our human existence, which is historical existence, which means that we move one step at a time, and one day at a time. Therefore, we walk by faith and not by sight, and at the cross we see that sometimes there is a sense of abandonment with no alleviation, no relief, and no final resolution. That's a hard word, but it's honest, and it is true to human experience.

Henry Nouwen says that we resist being with people in their pain. We do, don't we? We would love to fix it. We resist simply being there with care. We would go there with a cure. It is an act of tremendous grace to go there with care and identify with the darkness and not try to explain it away. I think we pastors are probably the most vulnerable to that temptation to try to make it better. But the cross and the cry of dereliction is testimony to the fact that within the parameters of our life, our human experience sometimes is an experience of abandonment, darkness and death.

But that dismal word is not my last word, thank God. I mentioned to begin with that it is that sense of absence that points to the presence. Even that cry of dereliction was a cry to God: "My God, my God." The link. The fragile link between the darkness and the living Lord is the cry. And, for us, we cannot talk about the cross without at least pointing ahead two weeks hence to Easter. If it is the cross, and only the cross, then there is only bad news. For there was no alleviation of the sense of abandonment for Jesus.

But the one to whom he cried, we believe, had not abandoned him, but was present with him and not unaffected by him. That's bald-faced trust. That is an affirmation of faith that comes from Easter faith, but in no way does that take away from the darkness. Yet our darkness can never compare with his darkness. For if we have lingered with him in his darkness, then we have learned with him to cry, even to sing, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." But if we have been with him in the darkness, we also will know now and again what it is to steal away to Jesus.