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## Where Is God When It Hurts -- Part 1: The Up-Side of Suffering

### Introduction

Do you ever find yourself struggling to figure out what God is up to when people suffer? Where were you and what was happening in your life the last time you wondered: Where is God when it hurts?

Whenever I ask that question, my mind goes back to my junior year in college. At the time, I was sharing an apartment with one of my best friends (a guy named Mike)...and one evening (about this time of year) we got back to the apartment late because we had been out at a movie.

- We were greeted at the door by a man from Mike's church...who told us that Mike's younger sister—a beautiful young woman who was a cheerleader and a straight-A student and a committed Christian—had been riding home with some friends after a high-school football game...and their car had been hit by a drunk driver...and she was in the hospital in a coma.
- But as bad as that news was, it wasn't the hardest pill to swallow that evening...because it turns out that when Mike's father was told about his daughter's accident; he suffered a massive heart-attack and died. In one instant, Mike had gone from being a relatively care-free college kid...to being a hurting young man, trying to make sense of tragic and pointless loss. Where is God when it hurts?

If Mike's story sounds vaguely familiar, maybe that's because it bears a striking resemblance to another story—a biblical story—in which suffering comes tragically and unexpectedly. When you get right down to it, Mike's story isn't all that different from Job's story, which begins like this:

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had 7 sons and 3 daughters...he owned sheep and camels and oxen and donkeys...and he had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

How do you bless the Lord in the face of circumstances like that? Of course, we don't have to lose family members in an unexpected tragedy to feel the sting of suffering. Pain and hardship come at us in a thousand different ways—the stress of job loss and financial crisis...breakdowns in our most intimate relationships...the ravages of disease and the trials of aging.

- All of us have dealt (or are dealing) with the cruel realities of loss and illness and heartache...and in those times, it's only natural to ask: Where is God when it hurts?

So we're going to spend some time with that question this month. Beginning today and for the next two Sundays, we're going to use the story of Job as a 'jumping-off' point...to dive into the problem of pain...and to discover some of the resources that God's Word gives us to deal with it.

Of course, I don't want to suggest that we're going to find answers to all our questions. After all, from the start of recorded history right up to the present day...philosophers & thinkers & theologians have wrestled with the challenges that pain and suffering create for us...and to the best of my knowledge, nobody has found one grand solution that settles all our issues and calms all our fears.

- But perhaps...in these few weeks...we can get some perspective. Maybe we can find a few trustworthy guideposts...that will lead us through the valley of the shadow the next time we find ourselves asking: Where is God when it hurts?

### **Theological Versus Pastoral Response**

Now before we dive too deeply into that question, I do want to offer a very important observation. In these messages, we're going to look at some of the resources that scripture gives us to deal with our suffering. We'll consider some of the "why's" and "wherefore's" that allow us to find meaning in the hurts that come our way... and to find strength to deal with those hurts.

- But while it's both natural and appropriate for us to want to 'get some handles' on suffering...so that we can understand it a little better...it's a very different thing to respond to suffering in our lives and the lives of others. Put another way: there's a big difference between 'philosophizing' about hurt...and offering support and encouragement to those who are dealing with hurt...

And sometimes we Christians—maybe because we're trying to offer comfort but haven't really thought it through...maybe because we don't know what else to say—sometimes we Christians 'speak into' people's suffering in ways that are 'theologically questionable' at best...and downright hurtful at worst.

- For example, you can build a fairly reasonable biblical argument that at least some of the hurts that we encounter come as a consequence of or as punishment for our sin. In fact, we'll talk along the way about how scripture does and doesn't point to this as a reason behind suffering.
- However, if a good friend of yours finds himself or herself in the middle of some severe and unexpected crisis...it would be neither helpful nor biblical to put your arm around them and say, "What kind of sin did you commit? You'd better repent before God really gets angry."

There's actually a powerful example of this in the story of Job itself. After tragedy hits Job and his family, the Bible says that Job's friends heard about his troubles...and they set out from their homes and met together to go and comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; so they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then (and this is the heart of it) they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights...and no one said a word...because they saw how great his suffering was (Job 2). Now that's the way to come alongside a friend who's hurting.

- Of course, then they had to go and open their mouths and try to tell Job why he was suffering...which eventually led God to tell them, "I am angry with you...because you have not spoken of me what is right" (Job 42:7). In the end, you see, the best thing we can offer to someone who's hurting isn't our explanation for their pain...it's our presence in their pain. When we show up...and help and care and grieve with our friends...God's love gets communicated far more powerfully than when we try to explain why God is allowing them to suffer.

That's not to say, of course, that our questions about 'why' don't matter. They matter to us...and probably (at an appropriate time) they'll matter to those friends who encounter times of hurt. And part of our task in the weeks ahead will be to think through some of those 'why' questions. Where is God when it hurts?

But before we do that, I think we need to ask ourselves today: Could there be an ‘up-side’ to suffering? Don’t get me wrong: we should never minimize how terrible it is to go through an unexpected and painful crisis...and I don’t want to suggest that those times of hurting are a ‘good thing’...or that we ought to seek them out. But let’s face it: times of hurting will come...and it could be that those times produce in our lives ‘spiritual fruit’ that will not grow in any other way.

### **Suffering as an Expected Reality**

To see what I’m talking about, let’s begin by acknowledging—that regardless of how we answer the question “Where is God when it hurts?”—there’s almost no doubt that we are going to hurt at some point...and we really shouldn’t be surprised when suffering comes our way. After all, Jesus said that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good...and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”<sup>i</sup>...and far from suggesting that we’re going to get some kind of a ‘pass’ on hardship just because we’re followers of Christ...the New Testament actually teaches that trials are part of the package.

- Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”<sup>ii</sup>
- Paul wrote, “It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.”<sup>iii</sup> And what’s more—when Paul tries to describe the heart of what he longs for as a believer—he says “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection...and participation in his sufferings... becoming like him in his death, and so (somehow) attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”<sup>iv</sup>

Isn’t it just a little ironic that people like us...people who claim a faith in which the primary symbol is a cross (an instrument of suffering and death)...would ever respond to hardship by asking, “Why me?” Perhaps instead, we ought to ask, “Why not me?” We of all people ought to understand that suffering is an expected part of this broken and sinful world—the world in which we live and for which Christ died.

But, of course, the deeper reality goes beyond the notion that suffering is something we should expect. (It’s not just that hurting happens.) The deeper truth is that suffering plays an indispensable part in making us the people God wants us to be. If we take scripture seriously, then we should never fall prey to the illusion that God’s goal is to wrap us in ‘bubble wrap’ and set us high on a heavenly shelf somewhere...so that we never get nicked or dinged and can (instead) just sit around all day and soak up blessings.

- No, God aims to produce certain qualities within us. He aims to make us the kind of people who trust Him...even when it’s not easy to do so. He aims to help us live out of the Spirit’s strength so that we can accomplish through the Spirit things that we could never do on our own. God aims to make us people who care...and who reach out to each other in our times of suffering and brokenness.
- And if these are the things that God wants to do in us and through us, then we should anticipate that the world in which we live will be a place that forces us to exercise those emotional and spiritual muscles. We should expect that life won’t be a long and uninterrupted stream of care-free happiness. Instead, it will be a workshop for ‘soul-making’—an environment in which trust and reliance on God and compassion for one another not only thrive—but are essential to survive.

Author Philip Yancey finds a great example of the dynamic I’m describing in family life. He observes that a father...who was determined to exclude all pain from his daughter’s life...could choose to protect her by never allowing her to take a step. After all, she might fall down! So he could pick her up and carry her everywhere she went. Over time, of course, a child pampered like that would become an invalid...unable to take a step.

- And so this father...no matter how loving his intentions were...would end up failing in his most important duty: to help his child grow up...to help his daughter become a strong and competent adult. It would be far better for the daughter herself if her father would choose instead to stand back and let her walk...even if that means allowing her to stumble on occasion.<sup>v</sup> Sometimes, there’s an up-side to hurting.
- So what might some of those ‘up-sides’ be?

## The Up-Sides of Suffering

Well for starters, some of the hurts that we encounter actually save us from even greater suffering. In a book I've been reading to prepare for these sermons, Philip Yancey devotes several chapters to what he describes as the "gift" of pain.

Now obviously, we might not be inclined to think of pain as a gift...at least, not a gift that anyone would want. And yet, as Yancey observes, "Pain is not an after-thought...or God's great goof. Rather, it reveals a marvelous design that serves our bodies well. Without pain...our lives would be fraught with danger, and devoid of many basic pleasures."<sup>vi</sup>

- Yancy bases his reflections on research conducted by a Christian physician named Paul Brand. Dr. Brand worked with lepers in a leper colony down in Louisiana...trying to develop an artificial pain system for them. Because you see, the terrible disfigurement that leprosy causes—the skin lesions and the missing fingers and limbs—aren't really caused by the disease itself. They're caused by the fact that the disease 'turns off' the body's pain sensors. And so, people with leprosy can be cut by sharp objects or burned by hot ones...and never realize that they've been injured. Over time, their wounds get infected...and their flesh dies...and things start falling off.
- It's a terrible disease! And yet, it demonstrates how important the gift of pain is. Of course hurting is unpleasant. But "that very quality saves us from destruction. Unless the warning signal demands response, we might not heed it."<sup>vii</sup>

And if you stop and think about it, what's true of physical suffering is true about emotional and spiritual suffering as well. If we never felt the pain of loneliness...we might never reach beyond our comfort zone to discover the relationships that give us support and joy and love. If we never experienced the burden of guilt, we might thoughtlessly commit sins that lead us farther and farther away from God.

- None of us want to hurt...but there can be an up-side to suffering...because some suffering protects us.

In addition, some suffering nurtures godly qualities in our lives. The apostle Paul wrote, "We glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance [produces] character; and character [produces] hope."<sup>viii</sup> If anything, the book of James puts it even more strongly: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, when you face trials of various kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And perseverance must finish its work so that you will be mature and complete, not lacking anything."<sup>ix</sup>

- Now we do need to be a little cautious here...because a careless reading of those verses might lead us to think that the Bible is asking us to be happy about suffering itself—to celebrate the pain and the hurt that we or others have to go through. But that's not what the Bible is asking us to do.
- The value that we find in suffering doesn't come from the pain itself. It comes from the hope that even our pain can be redeemed. Our joy grows—not out of our hurts—but out of confidence in God...and out of our faith that He can take our hurts (even our tragic and unexpected ones) and bring good out of them. He can take even the darkness of a cross...and turn it into the light of a resurrection morning.

Of course, precisely because our hurts and our suffering have this capacity to produce growth within us...they also have the capacity to help us minister to others. That's another potential 'up-side' of suffering. At the beginning of his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort...who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the same comfort that we ourselves receive from God."<sup>x</sup>

- Let's face it: No one understands what it's like to lose a spouse or a child—to disease or some accident—better than a person who's dealt with that same loss. Nobody can support someone struggling through divorce better than a person else who's faced a crisis in their own marriage.

- Maybe that's why some of the most powerful and life-changing ministries that many churches offer are their support groups and recovery groups—places where people can use even their pain...and make it a source of blessing to others.

Finally—and this is the thought I'd like to leave you with today—one of the potential 'up-sides' of suffering is that it hints at the truth that we were made for something better.

When you stop and think about it, if the atheists and the materialists are right...then suffering shouldn't really bother us that much. After all, if the atheists and materialists are right...then we are just an accident...just a random assortment of atoms...hurtling through an uncaring cosmos that neither knows about our lives nor cares what we do with them.

- If the atheists and materialists are right, then we should just accept...that life will be nothing more than “a tale told by an idiot—full of sound and fury—signifying nothing.”

But we don't accept that, do we? No, we sense that there is some purpose to this grand experiment. We cling to the belief that our actions and efforts (and even our pain and suffering) can't be just meaningless interactions of cosmic dust. They must contribute to something. We may not know exactly what that something is...but we cannot escape the conviction that (somehow) it matters.

- And what's more, we cannot escape the conviction that (somehow) it will all work out in the end.
- There is a longing in us—that one day—justice will roll like a river...and righteousness like a never-failing stream. One day, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. One day there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away and all things will have become new.

The skeptics, of course, will say that longing is just a fantasy. They'll say we're projecting our wishes out onto an unthinking and unfeeling universe. But what if those longings are there for a reason? What if those longings are there to point us toward the deepest truth of all?

- The great thinker C. S. Lewis once said: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy...the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it...that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it...but only to arouse it...to suggest the real thing. If that is so...then I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country...which I shall not find till after death. I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside. I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country...and to help others to do the same.”<sup>xi</sup>

Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (John 14:1-3)

Look. I think we all know that there's plenty of hurting going on in our church family these days. We're suffering through diseases and injuries and financial pressures. And of course, we know there's plenty more hurting going on in our community and our nation and our world. And where is God when it hurts?

- Well, I've seen God help people grow through their hurt, using it as a stepping stone to nurture them—in faith and prayer and perseverance. I've seen God help people serve through their hurt, using it as a way that lets them understand and comfort and minister to others who are dealing with similar suffering.
- But more than anything today, I want us to see that God waits for us in our hurt...and He promises us that our longing—for health and peace and wholeness—is there for reason. It's there because it's meant to be satisfied in Him.

And if you will place your trust in him today...if you'll believe that Jesus died on the cross to offer forgiveness for your sin...if you'll believe that he suffered to free you from suffering...and that he rose again to release you from death...then he will make good on his promise.

- Does that mean that you won't experience any more hurt in this life? No it doesn't. But it does mean that hurt won't have the last word. Instead, suffering will become a door that leads to life.
- Where is God when it hurts? He is here—with His arms open wide—waiting to satisfy your longing for wholeness. Won't you put your trust in Him?

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 5:45.

<sup>ii</sup> John 16:33.

<sup>iii</sup> Philippians 1:29.

<sup>iv</sup> Philippians 3:10.

<sup>v</sup> Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Zondervan, 1990), p. 92.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>viii</sup> Romans 5:3.

<sup>ix</sup> James 1:2-4.

<sup>x</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

<sup>xi</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.