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Where Is God In The Midst of Suffering?

Romans 5:1-5

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In talking about suffering, I will tell you upfront, I cannot speak from personal experience because I don't feel I have suffered at all. However, the Apostle Paul writes about suffering from the depths of extensive personal experience having endured among other things "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger." He survived "countless floggings, often near death, five times received 39 lashes, three times he was beaten with rods, he received a stoning, three times shipwrecked, constantly in danger, enduring many sleepless nights, hungry, and thirsty, often without food, cold, and naked, and under daily pressure because of his anxiety for all the churches (see 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 and 11:23-30)." Having lived through many more trials, troubles, and tests than most of us will ever experience, Paul is able to write with conviction about suffering. He says in Romans 5:1-5:

"Therefore, since we are **justified by faith**, we have **peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to **this grace** in which we stand; and we **boast in our hope** of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our **sufferings**, knowing that **suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us**, because **God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit** that has been given to us."

Suffering is a broad topic, it is mentioned in over 200 verses in the Bible, so it would take many weeks to cover in depth, so today I'm just going to share a few thoughts but by no means will we be able to cover all that might be said.

What is suffering? **Suffering is experiencing, feeling or enduring pain, distress, loss, injury, harm, or punishment.** The experience of suffering can cause us to doubt God in at least three ways.

**First, Suffering causes us to doubt God's existence.** When we hear the horrific stories in the news each week about the latest violent atrocity

somewhere in our country or elsewhere in the world, for some people it raises the question, "If there really was a God, why does God allow such terrible things to happen?" On the one hand there are natural disasters like the Tsunami in December and hurricanes that are part of the physical world that God created. Certain conditions are going to create storms, gravity works, if you fall to great a distance, you will not survive. These sorts of things are a little easier to understand because we know they are created by certain physical events. Then there are acts of suffering that are caused by human failures, sin, evil, selfishness, and wickedness. Wars, genocide, acts of violence, and abuse, are the result of human sinfulness, God's response to the human question, "Why does God allow such terrible things to happen?" Might be, "Why do you allow such terrible things to happen?" One could argue that God has given us the ability, intelligence, and resources to eliminate a great deal of the suffering that exists on the planet if we only used them wisely.

Perhaps suffering causes us to doubt God's existence because we don't think suffering should be a part of life. However, suffering need not cause us to doubt God's existence if we understand that suffering is a part of life. Jesus, God's own son, had to endure suffering. We read in the New Testament that Jesus, "*himself was tested by what he suffered,*" and "*he learned obedience through what he suffered*" (Hebrews 2:18, 5:8). We too will be tested by what we suffer and we can learn from to obey God even if difficult times. Paul encourages his younger companion Timothy to "*join with me in suffering for the gospel. Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:8, 2:3).*" Rather than being surprised by suffering that leads us to doubt God's existence, we can be prepared for suffering, knowing it is a part of life and part of living out our faith.

**Secondly, Suffering causes us to doubt God's power.** When something awful happens, we wonder, "If God is really so powerful, why doesn't God do something to help?" Why didn't God prevent the accident, cure the disease, save my family member, or intervene in a dramatic way?" If God didn't, then we question if it was because God couldn't or God wouldn't. If God couldn't

then we doubt God's power, if God wouldn't, then we doubt God's love. We read the gospels and we see Jesus healing people in incredibly dramatic ways, even restoring to life people who have died. We look around today and wonder why God doesn't seem to do that and yet God still does. There are many people in this sanctuary today who wouldn't be here were it not for the skills and abilities that God has given to people. There are people who would not be here were it not for the power of prayer. But even Jesus didn't heal every single person, he raised Lazarus from the dead but Lazarus would have the unique experience of dying twice. Prayer is mysterious, we don't know why one person goes into remission and is blessed with more years of life and another person does not. It is a mystery that we will never completely solve. Annie Dillard writes in her book, *Pilgrims at Tinkers Creek*, "*Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery.*" Suffering rather than causing us to doubt God's existence or power, pulls us into relationship with life's larger meaning and life's larger Mystery.

**Third, Suffering causes us to doubt God's love.** Sometimes people think that those who are powerful and prosperous, must be the people who are most loved by God. So folks who are poor and powerless may question whether God loves them, if God did, they think, wouldn't my circumstances be better? The scriptures tell us God especially loves the weak, the poor, the humble, aged, the children, the sick, the suffering. Some times people forget that in the midst of suffering, especially suffering that is caused by the violent acts of people, **God's heart is always the first heart to break.** On Memorial Day we came as we always do to watch the parade on 6A, Greg walked this year with the Cub Scouts, and I couldn't help thinking as the wreaths were laid at the monuments, "*In how many towns in America is this Memorial Day sharply more painful?*" As 27 service people a day are buried in Arlington National Cemetery alone, as people die violently and young all over the world, God's heart is the first heart to break. Julian of Norwich wrote, "*God is the author of all good, and suffers all evil.*" Whatever your image of God is, wonder how frequently we think about or perceive, that God is probably in agony 24 hours a day looking at people on the planet earth. Think about the pain

you feel when someone you love is an accident, is diagnosed with a disease, is a victim of violence, is hungry, homeless, fearful, or dies. God deals with that on a scale of billions – the pain God feels every day is utterly beyond human comprehension.

**So where is God in the midst of suffering?** When I was in seminary at Boston University School of Theology, I had the opportunity to take a class with Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel who survived Nazi death camps during World War II. The class was called *“Parables and Paradoxes”* and we looked at some of the stories that are at the heart of some of the world’s religious traditions. Jesus of course taught with stories, which was the common practice of both his culture and his religious tradition as a Jew. Elie Wiesel wrote about his experience in a book called *Night*, that includes this experience from his time in a Nazi concentration camp.

“The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him.... The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. *“Long live liberty!”* cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

***“Where is God? Where is He?”*** someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp.

On the horizon the sun was setting. *“Bare your heads!”* yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping. *“Cover your heads.”*

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive....

For more than an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He

was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed. Behind me I heard the same man asking: ***“Where is God now?”*** And I heard a voice within me answer him: ***“Where is He? Here he is – He is hanging here on this gallows...”***<sup>1</sup>

I think Elie Wiesel is right. Where is God in the midst of suffering? Where is God in the midst of suffering as large as genocide whether in Europe during World War II or in the Sudan today? Where is God in the midst of the devastation wrought by a hurricane or tsunami? Where is God when a loved one is struggling with a disease or dying? I think the answer to those questions is - **God is here in the midst of our suffering.**

Throughout the Bible we see that God is with people in the midst of their suffering, pain, and grief. God was with Joseph when his brothers beat him and sold him into slavery. God was with his descendants, the Israelites, while they were in slavery in Egypt and God heard their cries. God was with Israel during their exile into Babylon. God was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they were thrown into the fiery furnace. God was in the lion’s den with Daniel. God was in prison with Paul and Silas.

**Suffering causes us to doubt God’s existence, God’s power, and God’s love, yet we believe God is with us in the midst of our suffering.** That is Paul’s great affirmation of faith in Romans 8, *“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, no powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

BBC member Arlene Faber wrote me this note during the 40 Days of Purpose, “When I lost Al, my dad, and Craig, I kind of felt I lost my reason for living. The Purpose Driven Life showed me I do have a reason and more important a new purpose. I can show others that when bad things happen, you can survive and go on – with God at your side.

I pray God will use these experiences to me a better witness of his love.”

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<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960), 75-76.

In the passage from Romans 5 that I read earlier Paul describes a progression that can happen when we respond in faith to suffering. Suffering can lead to endurance that produces character which leads to hope because God's love and the Holy Spirit have been poured into our hearts. **The example of Christ, the love of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit are our great aids in suffering.**

1 Peter 2:20,21, and 23 says, *"But if you endure when you do right and **suffer** for it, you have God's approval. For to this end you have been called, **because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.***

***When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten;***

*but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly."*

As followers of Jesus we don't return abuse for abuse, whether in school, on the road, or in the family. When we suffer, we do not threaten, we entrust our selves to God and we endure.

**We are to help alleviate suffering and as we do, we share God's presence, power, and love.** In 1 Corinthians 12:26 Paul says of the members of the church,

*"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."*

And in Galatians 6:2 Paul urges us *"Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."* That is why we receive the OGHS offering, it is one way we can help to alleviate suffering and share God's presence, power, and love with people in circumstances that might lead them to doubt the love and presence of God.

God's heart is always the first heart to break.

God is with us in the midst of our suffering.

Suffering shouldn't surprise us, it is part of life in this world and part of living a life of faith. **The example of Christ, the love of God, and the power of the Holy**

**Spirit are our great aids in suffering.** Jesus worked to alleviate suffering and endured the suffering that came to him. Like Jesus,

**We are to help alleviate suffering and as we do, we share God's presence, power, and love.** I believe this is the great challenge and opportunity for us as individual Christians and for the church around the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps the greatest witness we can have as followers of Jesus is being instruments of the Holy Spirit in alleviating suffering and sharing the mercy and love of God.

“The crucified Jesus is a sign that love may suffer but it overcomes. The man of faith has found in Jesus a hope stronger than history and a love mightier than death.” (Anthony Padovano)

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Where is God in the Midst of Suffering?  
Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you found yourself asking some of the questions at the beginning of the sermon? What was going on in your life that caused you to doubt or question God's existence, power, or love?
2. What forms of suffering do you struggle with the most – those caused by nature (tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes) or those caused by people? Why is that kind of suffering worse in your eyes?
3. What kind of difference does it make if suffering surprises us or if we are expecting it?
4. Jesus, Paul, and many of the great figures in the Bible and in Christian history endured suffering. What do we learn from their lives that can help us?
5. What are our greatest resources in the face of suffering?
6. How can you be an instrument of God's love by alleviating suffering?
7. In addition to all BBC is already doing, what else might we do to alleviate suffering in Jesus' name?

In addition to all the verses referenced in the sermon see 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.