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Job 42:1-5

4th Message

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FORMED THROUGH SUFFERING

SERIES: FORMED INTO CHRIST

In his song American Tune, Paul Simon sings:

*I don't know a soul who's not been battered
I don't have a friend who feels at ease
I don't know a dream that's not been shattered
Or driven to its knees*

Jeremiah is more blunt:

**Why did I come out from the womb
to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame? (Jeremiah 20:18 ESV)**

Today we take up the topic of suffering and darkness in our “Formed into Christ” summer series. We wonder how sorrow and pain fit into God’s plans for our lives to form and shape us into Christ because suffering seems so incompatible with our plans and inclinations. And yet God even uses difficult times to bring us to maturity. Our Scripture reading 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 provides a centering text:

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. (2 Corinthians 4:16-17).

I want to offer some thoughts and then we will have a time of sharing and prayer.

Seasons of Suffering and Darkness

Seasons of suffering are inevitable and come upon us uninvited and unwanted. We may do everything we can to avoid these seasons but our efforts will fail. We do not have control of them and are not masters of our own destiny. Our belief in God does not yield a pain-free life. But these seasons are an essential aspect of our spiritual journey. “The journey to Christian maturity rarely navigates through smooth seas”¹ We might say that suffering is actually *necessary* for Christ to be formed in us.

When I mention suffering I am not talking about the bumps and bruises of ordinary life or even consequences of our sin, but rather serious storms and dark clouds: major illnesses; the death of a loved one; mid-life crisis or transition in life; a crisis of faith; a tragic accident; being laid off; or dealing with struggling children or aging parents.

A quick survey of Scripture reminds us that we are like many who encounter suffering in our redemptive journey: Job, Naomi, David, all the prophets — especially Jeremiah. Paul mentions his own afflictions in 2 Corinthians 11:

... imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea. (2 Corinthians 11:23-25)

He tells the Corinthians of a particularly difficult time when death seemed imminent:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8).

If the saints of the Bible suffered, then maybe we should expect to as well. But perhaps the most compelling example of suffering is God himself. We have a suffering God. The Son was willing to humble himself by taking on the form of a man, suffer an agonizing death on the cross, take the judgment for our sin on himself, and experience abandonment from the Father. And the Father too suffered, watching his Son being tortured and killed. If self-sacrifice is part of God’s nature and he is willing to suffer in his dealings with mankind, and we are becoming like him, then why would suffering evade us?

The reality is that life is hard and good people suffer. I don’t think I hit this season in life until I was 38 and Liz and I lost 3 parents in 6 years, one every other year. We got a break for six years, but then in successive years we lost our last parent and my brother died in a tragic automobile accident. Shortly after that I told Liz that I didn’t think I could handle one more thing. It was only a few days later that Liz called and told me her sister had died tragically. Life is hard.

This can be an important lesson for young people and important for parents to teach children. Our culture breeds success and happiness. Parents rush in to save their children from pain. But somewhere along the line things will get messy. As Jesus himself told his disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33).

Disorientation

The arrival of dark clouds brings on great disorientation and unsettledness. We find ourselves in a strange and uncomfortable place. Life falls apart and we are out of control. Our black and white world is shattered. The explanations don’t hold and there don’t seem to be any easy answers. Our emotions can cover a wide spectrum from grief to anger, including fear, anxiety, hurt, and depression. We feel naked and vulnerable. We can find ourselves in survival mode.

During these times God seems out to lunch—hidden, distant, absent, inaccessible, and unwilling to help. We feel abandoned and doubt God’s goodness and unfailing love. We ask God, “When will this end? Where are you?” We have to decide whether suffering and God are mutually exclusive. If our pain becomes anger directed at God it is an acknowledgment of our belief. Many people leave church at this point because they feel out of place.

Again the Scriptures show us the real world of pain and suffering, and include the honest, raw expressions of hurting people; Job curses the day of his birth:

Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said: “Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that

said, 'A man is conceived.'" (Job 3:1-3) And he laments: "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul?" (Job 3:20) Jeremiah also curses the day of his birth: "Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!" (Jeremiah 20:14) And adds a piercing lament: "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?" (Jeremiah 15:18)

When Naomi returned home with Ruth, the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara (bitter), for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?' (Ruth 1:19-21).

In Psalm 13 David asks God:

How long will this last? When will it be over?
 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
 How long must I take counsel in my soul
 and have sorrow in my heart all the day? (Psalm 13:1-2)

Have you ever thought these thoughts or expressed them to God? Most of us have. "Suddenly it seems as if the lights have been turned off. Struggles, discouragement, and suffering replace peace and joy. Worse, it seems as if God has now left you in the darkness and is nowhere to be found"²

Laments like these are not giving us the truth about God, but rather how people feel about God and their lives in the midst of suffering. During times of suffering it is important to embrace reality, be aware and honest about our confusion and disorientation, and name our raw feelings and thoughts. And God gives us permission to do that, even though we feel alone and no one may understand.

Default Reactions

During times of suffering we usually react strongly and are armed with a variety of default reactions that might be summed up as fight, flee, or freeze. We attempt to alleviate the pain or problem with quick solutions looking for quick relief. We might deny the pain, run away or bury ourselves in compulsions. We might become bitter, blame others, take out our anger on innocent people, or play the victim role. We can seek to numb the pain through drugs or alcohol or sexual addiction. We might deal with it by explanation and reason or by fitting the problems into neat theological boxes and categories for a God we can understand and control.

None of these solutions will lead us to where God wants to take us. The harder we try to control, fix, clutch and grasp, the more frustrated and restless we will become. We will actually be working against what God wants to do. The reality is that when storms and darkness come, there is no timetable. We enter an undefined season and the work that God wants to do always takes longer than we would want. To embrace and accept the uncertainty and discomfort of being in this season is difficult but it is part of the process.

The Inner Journey

So how do we respond to seasons of suffering and view them in a healthy way? As always the Bible gives us the truth we need. If we are accepting and open to the master potter and the deeper work of the Holy Spirit, seasons of suffering and darkness provide the opportunity and the potential to transform and change our hearts on at least two levels.

On one level, our character is refined and transformed into the new creation we are in Christ that we talked about last week. This is what Paul says in Romans 5:

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. (Romans 5:3-5)

James tells us the same thing:

The testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

But perhaps Paul says it best when he writes in 2 Corinthians 4:

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. (2 Corinthians 4:16-17)

The word "renewed" is the same word we saw last week in Col. 3 describing the new self we are in Christ:

Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Colossians 3:10).

In other words the inner man that is being renewed is our new self, the person we are in Christ.

The word "preparing" in 2 Corinthians 4 is the same Greek word for "produces" in Romans 5 and James 1. Suffering actually produces or literally works out this transformation into glory, the renewal of the inner man.

Paul sees the sufferings of this life as very light and slight when compared to the weight or magnitude of glory that is the result of the work of God. The body or outer self is corrupt, is wasting away, destined for death. Suffering helps us to see this. Dying to self happens much more readily during these times and changes our focus from our outer man to our inner self that is becoming whole, being prepared to share in God's glory. This is our deepest longing—our longing for God and to share in his glory, to arrive at our heavenly home and be complete. There is nothing on earth that will quench this longing. C.S. Lewis says this is the longing for which "we pine"³. In fact all of creation is longing for this glory.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:18-23)

Life is hard but suffering does something that nothing else can do. "We wish there could be some other system. We wish there could be a way of developing patience without delay, courage without danger, forgiveness without offense, generosity without need, skill without discipline, endurance without fatigue, persistence without obstacles, strength without resistance, virtue without temptation, and strong love without hard-to-love people. But it turns out there is no other way"⁴

God accomplishes his most profound work in the lives of his children not in times of tranquility but in seasons of hardships. According to spiritual writer Jean Pierre de Caussade, "God instructs the heart, not through ideas but through suffering and adversity"⁵

Suffering not only transforms our character but on another level transforms our relationship with God as the layers of our guarded heart are stripped away. We stop trying to understand all about God

and who he is. Instead we enter into the wonder and mystery. We experience a deeper sense of his love and intimacy. We encounter thin places and find deeper healing for our wounds and failures. Our attachments to the world and sinful habits loosen and we gain internal freedom. Our relationship with God changes from seeing God as someone who can benefit or bless us, like some cosmic genie, to a Presence we long for and love even though he is beyond our grasp or life is difficult.

If we let the season work, our questions change. At first our questions are, “how long?” and “why?” But these questions seek explanations and look backward. Now our questions become “where is God in this and what does this hold for future meaning?” These questions look forward to the future and to the possible good that can come out of our suffering. Instead of despair we begin to hope and trust in God directly and personally rather than in our own beliefs or theology. The horrible disorientation of suffering gives way to trusting in God’s goodness and unfailing love. We learn to see God, life, people in a completely new way.

This is the second thing that Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:

We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:18)

This is the place where Job came after debating with his friends and demanding God for answers and finally being humbled:

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you (Job 42:3, 5)

In the really difficult seasons of life we can begin to see and know God’s presence even in the darkness. “We learn to float on the dark river of God’s love. As we do so, we receive the gift of a deeper knowing than that which is ever possible by means of our senses. We receive the gift of knowing in faith and love”⁶

Waiting and Surrender

As I said before seasons of suffering last much longer than we want them to because transformation is lengthy and gradual. This is a graduate level course. We can resist God by not accepting or embracing the season. We can go from church to church, person to person, book to book looking for answers. We can continually analyze and try to understand. We can continue to rely on what has served us in the past—our own efforts and self-sufficiency.

Our choice is to resist or to wait and surrender ourselves to what God wants to do. Being formed into Christ is the work of God’s grace, but we have to be willing to participate. I keep saying this again and again because it is so vital. This is not a giving up or being passive. Rather it is an active letting go of our pride and ego, surrendering our wills, and staying in the darkness until the season has done its work in our hearts.

The process of waiting and surrender is not well defined. It is messy and full of mystery. Mostly we are unaware of the gradual, imperceptible movements of God. But when we emerge from these seasons we do not return to life as normal but as people transformed by God.

God’s Compassion

Finally, I want to remind us that God is not only a suffering God, but also a compassionate God. He knows, sees, and cares. David tells us that God hides all of our tears in a bottle:

You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? (Psalm 56:8)

As Jesus wept for Lazarus, God weeps with us as well. God is also with us in the darkness, whether we sense his presence or not, because for God the darkness is as light. This is what David says in Psalm 139:

**If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you. (Psalm 139:11-12)**

And Paul gives us an assurance of a God who comforts us in our suffering:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction...as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

God will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. His grace and mercy are sufficient. At some point he will turn our mourning into dancing because out of death comes resurrection and life. This is the assurance that the cross and resurrection of Jesus give to us. There is no resurrection without death but death does not have the last word. Even though we might lose everything of the world, joy comes in the morning and our hope and trust can be anchored in God’s suffering, compassion and love.

Jeremiah had a tough assignment from the Lord and he lamented more than any other prophet. And yet despite all his pain and suffering he could write these words:

**Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!
My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:**

**The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.” (Lamentations 3:19-24)**

Jeremiah came to know God’s unfailing love and we can know it as well.

“And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 5:10-11)

1. Bruce Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, (IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2009), 41
2. David Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011), 78.
3. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (Touchstone, NY, 1975), 35.
4. Brian McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, (HarperCollins, NY, 2011), 107-108.
5. Bruce Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 51.
6. David Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 78

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