

### “Giving Life”

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I've used this passage probably as much or more than any other passage in the Bible. If you ever need a passage when you are going to the hospital or when you are with someone who is about to pass away, this is a wonderful passage. Anytime there is suffering, pain or impending death, this passage is beneficial. Remember it. I usually read from verses 28-31, but it is a marvelous passage.

I used it one time that I remember, in particular. Jill and I were in our first call and we had dear friends. He was off doing a tiling job, and they had one of these, you know in the north country, you have the gas station with the moccasins, t-shirts, and gas, and everything else, all in one place in a little town.

She stayed at the place where they worked, and helped with the gas and all of that, while he was off doing other jobs. One day, in particular, he was off [working] and she was working, and this young guy came in. She had her little daughter who was 2 years old [with her] playing and he did something horrible.

After that she and her husband struggled mightily and, as their pastor, all I could think of - because I was as angry as anyone else - all I could think of was this passage helping to remind them that they wouldn't be stuck in this place forever. That if they worked hard in their faith, they would, in time, receive the feeling that the Holy Spirit could lift them beyond this tragic moment and allow them to *mount up with wings like eagles, to walk and not be weary, and not faint*, and that they could survive this tragic moment. It took time, but over a period of months they were able to get beyond it by the faith and the strength of loving, supporting people and by the very hand of God.

I would like to explain how that healing occurred, because we can learn from the tragedies and the difficulties of other people. And so, to help me explain what is so hard, sometimes you can lift something, you can watch it grow, but to put it into words in a 15-minute sermon may be very difficult.

So, I thought, “OK, let me go back to a book that I found that can help.” I went to a book by a guy I don't usually quote very often because he is from one of those conservative Presbyterian denominations that doesn't like women very much and other things, and doesn't let them speak in the pulpit. But this particular gentleman really knocked the ball out of the park today in the book he wrote. It's been around awhile actually. His name is Timothy Keller and he has this large denomination in New York City of 5000 members. He also has any number of other churches that he has started. But what he wrote in this particular book, “Walking with God through Suffering and Pain,” is one that I would *always* recommend.

He talked about, and I think very rightly, that there are ways and reasons why the Church must teach its people to handle, and to learn how to work through suffering and pain. Because, unlike these prosperity ministers who talk about how God will bless you, and you will be a blessing, and you will receive all of this money and all of this good fortune, if you

just follow Christ - which is a bunch of poppy cock - the reality is that the one thing every Christian will experience in their life is suffering and pain. If we don't figure out how to work through it; it will make us bitter, cynical and keep us from having a fulfilled life in faith. It's probably the number one reason why most people give up their faith, or refuse to have any kind of faith, and live agnostic the rest of their lives, because they can't come to terms with why a loving God would allow such horrible things to happen.

And, I like the way he responds, this Rev. Timothy Keller. Rev. Keller said - and I agree with him, "At the very beginning of the Bible, the first thing the Bible does is try to explain suffering and pain." You open up that Bible to the book of Genesis, you turn to the first three chapters and it tells you [of] the Creation. Then, in the midst of Creation, you hear about the Garden of Eden, in chapter three. Then, all of a sudden, you have Adam and Eve, and everything is perfect. They didn't experience suffering and pain. They had the *perfect* life, and who messed it up? It wasn't God. Adam and Eve messed it up, and God has been trying *all* this time afterward to recreate the Garden of Eden in this world again. *Over and over and over*, we keep messing up God's work in trying to restore the Garden of Eden.

That is why, in Revelation chapter 21, it talks about the new Heaven and the new earth. The new Heaven and the new earth is like the Garden of Eden, and God is trying to restore it. In our sin, individually and as a humanity, we keep messing it up. And yet, we have the gall to look up at God and say, "Why, God, do you do this to me? How can there be a God? How can you be a God, if there continues to be suffering and injustice in this world?"

We messed it up, and yet, we blame the one who is trying to fix what God created perfectly in the first place. It's our fault. So, quit blaming God, and start working *with* God in that re-creation process.

Now, the person who wrote Isaiah understands that. This was written right around 486 BCE. It was written after the exile. The people had been torn out of their place of residence in Israel and marched across the deserts, all the way to Babylon and what is now Iraq. They were stuck, being treated as second-class citizens. They had to wonder whether their God was weaker than the Babylonians' god, and if they had any right to exist at all. They knew suffering and pain, and yet the story about *mounting up with wings like eagles; we will run and not be weary; we will walk and not be faint*; was the hope that they could one day be restored, and be full and healed again - and that's what gave them hope.

Now, I'm not going to preach today on how you speak to people who are agnostic and atheists and bring them around. I don't have time and I'm probably not even that good at it, or I would have a whole lot more people sitting here in the pews today. But I can talk to fellow believers - you and me - about how we sustain our faith in the midst of the suffering and pain we will all experience. And, if it hasn't happened to you yet, boy, are you lucky. But hang on, because it will. No one misses out on suffering and pain.

Here is how we try to walk with God through that suffering and pain: I love what C. S. Lewis stated. He made this beautiful comment: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, God speaks in our conscience, but God shouts in our suffering."

When everything is going well, you have to listen to the still, small voice. When you are struggling, and things aren't going well, and you don't hear God, God is speaking to you -

we often are not listening - but God is still speaking. But, when we have nowhere else to go and we can't fix it - it is devastatingly painful - we fall on our knees and in that moment, God shouts to us. In that one way, suffering and pain can actually be a gift, because in that moment we can hear God more loudly, more strongly, more hopefully than any other place. So, the first part of finding out how we live through suffering and pain is the reality that the Holy Spirit fills us, guides us and speaks to us *louder* than at any other point in life.

So, I would like to talk about how God does shout to us and how we can learn and overcome suffering and pain.

There are 10 of these:

The first one is: We must recognize the varieties of suffering and we must admit that some of those suffering things that we have to do is our own fault. We have made mistakes which have hurt other people, which have hurt ourselves, and we have to own that. The sooner we own it, the easier it is to heal it. But not all things that suffering does is because of what we have done. There are moments when people have betrayed us, or we have been attacked by others - bullying is an example - but there are also universal forms of suffering that we have to understand.

Death of a love one. I have told you the story [that] one time I had a 93-year-old man give up his faith. I had just performed his wife's funeral. He was so mad that he was never going to love God again, because God took his wife from him. It was everything I could do not to laugh. [I wanted to say,] "You are 93 years old. Did you expect her to live forever?" Fortunately, I was a 27-year-old minister and I didn't have the guts then. He would probably be 135 now and I would like to grab him by the lapels now and shake him. I wish I had been a good enough minister then to shake him, and say, "It's not like that. You are not going to live forever, and she wasn't going to live forever, but if you fall on your knees, rather than crab all of the time you might just see her again." But, at [age] 27 I wasn't obnoxious enough to be a good minister, yet. [Laughter.]

Financial reversals can be our fault, but they can be a universal problem; I had a woman in her 90s in my last church, who was incredibly wealthy. She had gold under her bed in a Louis Vuitton purse. (That's another story to ask me about sometime.) And, after 2008, after her financial person recommended that all of her money go into Bank of America, that was all she had. Millions of dollars gone and the gold under the bed was the only thing left. It wasn't her fault. She just did what her people told her to do. Sometimes pain and suffering isn't our fault. And our own imminent death - something that is going to happen to every one of us - isn't our fault either, but we have to come to terms with it.

The second one is: You must recognize distinctions in temperament. God is not fair. Now, I can't speak to this, because I only had one child. I have told this one before. If you have two children, you're allowed to comment after the sermon is over. [Laughter.] I have been told that no parenting is ever fair, because children are different, and you have to respond to them differently. While we are all God's children, and God responds to each one of us differently - not fairly, but differently - for what is needed for us to get through this world and its pain.

We have to understand that there are distinctions, and we must be careful not to assume that God is going to help somebody else the same way God helped me. “I got through my cancer surgery, so why in the world is my loved one not getting through it?” God isn’t fair. God treats everyone differently, and we don’t know why or how. We just have to accept it. Just because God brought healing to a friend one way doesn’t mean that God would treat you and me the same way.

Number three: Learn to weep. It is alright to cry. In fact, crying is important. Our culture needs to be more brutally honest. We try to avoid pain and conflict, avoid it like the plague, pretend it isn’t happening. Jesus didn’t act that way. In the Garden of Gethsemane, right before he knew he was going to hang on that cross, he fell on his knees and he wept: “*Dear God, take this cross from me.*” Even Jesus said that. It’s alright, God wants your truest emotion, and then God can speak to you in that moment. You are supposed to pour out your soul.

Number four: There is trusting. Summoning up trust in God’s wisdom. Despite your grief, you are called to use the same words that Jesus did: “*Thy will be done.*” You know you are going to die anyway. You know you are going to suffer. Is it going to be totally useless, or are you going to make it meaningful?

Richard Dawkins is one of the most famous atheist evangelists out there today. He has written any number of books, and he says, “Ultimate reality is cold and indifferent, and extinction is inevitable.” That is how an atheist looks at life. Let me repeat what he said, in one of his books, “Ultimate reality is cold and indifferent, and extinction is inevitable.” That is what life is without faith. Evangelism isn’t about saving some one’s soul from death; it is about saving them from having to live with that fatalistic understanding.

Number five: We must be praying even when we don’t even feel like it. There is that old expression, “Fake it till you make it.” Job did a lot of complaining. He even cursed the day he was born, and God didn’t complain when Job was screaming and hollering because he [Job] was still speaking to God - he did it all in prayer. Simone Weil said, “If you can’t love God, you must *want* to love God, or at least ask him to help you love him.” You pray. It’s who you are. It’s what you do. And, you trust that God will be greater than the fatalism of nothing and make a difference.

Number six: We must be disciplined in our thinking. It is easy to over react, to get so anxious (and I’m good at being anxious), and to the point that you lose control and you can’t even grasp or remember God. How many days, when you are wrapped up in something really frustrating, do you go days without even remembering to pray? When you finally stop and think, “Oh, my gosh. What have I done?” The minute you pray you calm down and life finds hope again.

Number seven: We should be willing to do some self-examination. Job suffered mightily, but he also grew in grace. He found life worth living even in the midst of all of that suffering, because he was willing to self-examine, to find out what truth really meant, and to find out where his weakness was, where the other persons’ weaknesses were, and how he could respond more faithfully.

Number eight: We must be about reordering our love. A lot of the suffering and pain that we have is because we think we have been treated unfairly; because we don't have the right kind of stuff that other people have. We don't make as much money as we think we should. We don't have the right kind of family situation we expected or thought we should have. And our suffering becomes aggravated in double because we turn good things into ultimate things. The only ultimate thing is God's love for us and the promise of life eternal.

Number nine: We should not shirk community. That is the great gift that the Church gives. Most people who are suffering and in pain do so in isolation. What I'm so proud of [about] our Church is we have a strong Deacons group. We do pastoral care reasonably well because we don't let people - very often - live in isolation. We go and we find them. We pester them. Sometimes we even get hollered at: "Why don't you just leave us alone?"

I was talking to Ken one day. Ken has a lot of very good stories, but he is also very good at a quick little line. We were talking one day and he said, "I would much rather get in trouble for having done too much than not enough." If we are going to get into trouble, let's get in trouble for pestering people too much, rather than forgetting about them too often.

Number ten: Some forms of suffering require skill at receiving grace and forgiveness from God, and giving grace and forgiveness to others. When adversity reveals mortal failures or sinful character flaws, it means that we have to learn to repent and seek reconciliation from God and others. Until we do that our pain will continue to gnaw at us. But, once we have been freed from that guilt, then that pain and that suffering doesn't have a hold. [You could say,] "Ok, I'm going to die, but I have eternal life. But the freeing of guilt is the greatest gift of all, knowing that if I have to die, that my loved ones are cared for by the same God who took care of me. It is freeing. Only then can I *mount up with wings like eagles and I can walk and not be faint.*" We know that God will protect us and heal [us]; once we have learned that we can let go and fall into the loving arms of God.

George McDonald, that old Scottish Presbyterian from the late 1900's, said, "The son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their suffering might be like his." We are going to suffer. Suck it up. But the question is, how are we going to do it? Whiney, cowardly, or with courage, conviction and strength. And that only comes through the Spirit of the living God, because God has already lived it in Jesus Christ on that cross.

May we take our cross and bare it with the same courage, the same guilt-free trust. That is how we live with suffering and pain. Amen.