

THE MESSIAH WILL SUFFER WITH YOU

ISAIAH 53:7-9

Imagine this scene with me. Billions of people are scattered across a great plain before the throne of God. Here and there groups of people talk heatedly. “How can God judge us?” one person demands. A woman jerks back the sleeve of her robe revealing a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp and asks, “What does He know about suffering? We endured terror, beatings, torture and death.” In another group, an African American man lowers his collar. “What about this?” he demands, showing an ugly rope burn. “Lynched for no crime but being black! We have suffocated on slave ships, been wrenched away from loved ones, and toiled until death gave release.” Far out across this plain were hundreds of these groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He permitted in His world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where there was no weeping, no fear, no hunger and no hatred! What did God know about what human beings were forced to endure in this world. “God lives a pretty sheltered life,” they all said.

So each group chose and sent forth a leader – someone chosen because he or she had suffered the most in that group. There was a Jew, an African, an untouchable from India, an illegitimate person, someone from Hiroshima and another from a Siberian slave camp. They consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather simple. Before God would be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a human being. But because He was God, they set certain safeguards to be sure He couldn't use His divine powers to help Himself.

Let Him be born a Jew, they decided. Then, let the legitimacy of His birth be doubted. Let Him champion a cause so just but so radical that it brings down upon Him the hate and murderous efforts of every major and established religious authority. Let Him see, taste, hear and smell what no one can describe and then try to communicate God to people. Let Him be betrayed by His dearest friends. Let Him be indicted on false charges, tried before a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let Him experience terrible aloneness and feel completely abandoned. Let Him be tortured and then die. And then let Him die the most humiliating kind of death imaginable.

As each leader announced his or her portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from this great throng of people standing before God's throne. But when the last one had pronounced sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word. No one moved. Because suddenly all knew. God had already served His sentence.

In these weeks leading up to Easter Sunday, we're considering a fascinating description of Jesus found in Isaiah, a book in the Old Testament portion of the Bible, that was written some 700 years before Jesus was born. I'm calling this series of messages, *A Portrait of Jesus Before He Came*. God had revealed to this Jewish prophet, Isaiah, that He was going to send a special deliverer into the world for people everywhere. Over the years, the Jewish people began to refer to this promised deliverer as the Messiah. Because Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy, we know that Jesus is the Messiah.

Now, last week we looked closely at 53:4-6 where Isaiah answered this question, “Why did the Messiah die and what did it accomplish?” I want to consider the next three verses with you today – v. 7-9 - where Isaiah answers a different question: “How did the Messiah suffer and die and in what way did He endure that suffering?” **READ, p. 731.** When you consider the suffering of Jesus, you can learn so much about your own suffering in life. These verses in Isaiah teach many things, but there are two main truths that I’d like you to focus on today with me.

YOU CAN’T ESCAPE THE PRESENCE OF SUFFERING.

Is it only human beings who suffer? Many people conclude that God is totally immune to or insulated from suffering. God is often pictured as an angry old man with a long, white beard hurling thunderbolts of wrath from His ornate palace in heaven – a Being who never suffers in any way, shape or form. I suggest to you that the infinite, awesome, majestic God is also the greatest sufferer in all of the universe. Before the dawn of creation, God already knew that sin and evil would sneak into His perfect world. He already knew well the sorrow and suffering it would bring. He also already knew that He Himself would suffer if human beings – His greatest creation – were to experience a restored relationship with Him.

God’s suffering was literal and real. It was concentrated in and experienced by Jesus of Nazareth. Because Jesus was and is God, it is absolutely accurate to say that His suffering is God’s suffering. I suggest that Jesus was the most afflicted person who has ever lived. Back up in v. 3 of Isaiah 53, we read these words, “He was despised and rejected - a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief....” (Isaiah 53:3 NLT)

In v. 7-9, Isaiah goes on to predict accurately many of Jesus’ sufferings. His words remind us of the tremendous opposition and hatred he faced, the cruel and painful humiliation he endured, and the terrible violence he encountered. Jesus lived for a long time with the stress of knowing that people wanted to kill Him and that one day soon they would succeed. He says that the Messiah would be identified with criminals in some way in His death. The New Testament tells us that two thieves were crucified alongside Jesus. Isaiah tells us that a rich man would play a role in the Messiah’s death. The New Testament tells us that Joseph of Arimathea asked for Jesus’ body and laid Him in his own tomb.

Many of life’s difficulties are what you might call undeserved or unfair. You didn’t earn them through poor decisions or as punishment for doing something wrong. God knows all about undeserved, unfair suffering. Isaiah reminds us that the Messiah was sinless and yet that wasn’t enough to prevent the greatest miscarriage of justice the world’s ever witnessed. Unproven accusations. Hateful, lying witnesses. Biased judges. God knows all about underserved, unfair suffering. He experienced it fully in His Son, Jesus.

If God Himself doesn’t escape the presence of suffering in His own universe, then why do you think you ought to? It’s become a lucrative profession in our culture by both secular and spiritual proponents to suggest to the rest of us that hard times are always

avoidable and never necessary. Some years ago I was intrigued by the observation of a leading psychiatrist who said that some mental illnesses can be traced back to an unwillingness to endure sufferings and set backs in life. I grew up just an hour's drive from Disney World in Orlando. I enjoy visiting there as much as anyone. But lots of folks seem to believe that Disney World is what real life ought to look like. And isn't it ironic that some followers of Jesus – the one Isaiah called “a man of sorrows” – have come to the mistaken conclusion that suffering is never God's will for them?

The Bible is ruthlessly realistic about suffering. It contains a very simple message: you can't escape the presence of suffering in this world. Jesus Himself said, “...Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows...” (John 16:33 NLT) Not all suffering can be avoided, deflected or averted. A lot of it just has to be faced, endured and lived through. The Bible also teaches that the presence of suffering is not an indication that God is absent. Don't ever jump to the conclusion that something is terribly wrong with every person who has lots of problems. Why? Lots of adversity in a person's life is not proof of God's displeasure. Lots of prosperity in a person's life is not proof of God's favor. The Bible never teaches such nonsense so why believe it?

Jesus says you can count on the presence of suffering in your life. Apparently, it's one of God's methods of maturing you. It's also an indication that you're actually a part of God's family. Just like you discipline your kids because you love them, God disciplines and trains the folk who belong to Him because He loves us. One of His methods of discipline is suffering. When you endure unfair, undeserved suffering while keeping an open heart to God, it's one of the best evidences of the reality of your faith and the fact that you really do trust in God come what may. God doesn't always take His people out of various kinds of suffering. Instead He demonstrates His grace through them in the midst of pain. You can't escape the presence of suffering. Now, I freely admit that while that statement is absolute truth it isn't something encouraging that blesses your heart! So let me mention another truth about suffering that can and should bless and encourage your heart tremendously. In God's hand – and that is the key issue:

YOU CAN'T ESTIMATE THE POWER OF SUFFERING.

Isaiah points to the obvious power of Jesus' suffering there in v. 8: “...But he was struck down for the rebellion of my people.” He compares Jesus to a lamb being taken to the altar of sacrifice. Lambs were one kind of animal that were used in Old Testament sacrificial worship. The priest laid his hands on the lamb's head and – spiritually speaking – the sins of the person who brought the lamb to the Temple were transferred to the lamb. Then the lamb was killed in the person's place as a substitute. God was teaching the Jewish people that sin deserves death. But He was also teaching them that He would provide and allow a substitute. The ultimate purpose of animal sacrifice was to point people to Jesus – the real Lamb of God. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to be baptized, he said, “ ‘Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29 NLT) Jesus' suffering makes your eternity in heaven a reality. The suffering of Jesus is one of the most powerful spiritual realities in the universe. You just can't estimate it!

Someone will say, "But, Rick, Jesus' suffering is different than my suffering." And, of course, that's true. Nevertheless, there are some very real parallels between what Jesus suffered and what you suffer. For instance, Jesus provides a wonderful example of how to suffer: with courage, patience and faith. The overwhelming witness of the Bible is that God has a purpose in allowing tough times in your life even as He did in Jesus' life. There is a spiritual power – a good, godly, holy power – that can operate in suffering that is beyond your estimation. The Bible underlines it in a verse like the following: "We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation." (Romans 5:3-4 NLT) God uses suffering in your life to create, establish and strengthen your inner spiritual character. The Bible even suggests that enduring suffering in a Christ-like way in this life will result in spiritual benefit to you in eternity. "For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!" (2 Corinthians 4:17 NLT) I don't pretend to understand what that means, but I like the sound of it!

The Bible never tries to explain all the whys of suffering. Why should you or I? I agree with Vance Havner, an old and much loved country preacher, who made this insightful comment: "I get a little weary of these dear souls who have all the dealings and doings of Providence catalogued and correlated and figured out and can give you glib answers to your heartache. They haven't been far. God just doesn't operate on our timetable. And some of His operations don't add up on our computers. The little boy who didn't understand why God put so many vitamins in spinach and didn't put more of them in ice cream had a pretty good idea that it just doesn't work out like you'd think!"

As I consider what's life trials have done in me and - as I've observed as a pastor for over 30 years - what they do in God's people, a couple of observations come to mind. First, any heartache you endure – deserved, undeserved, fair, unfair, unexpected or expected – is allowed by God for one ultimate reason – to drive you into His arms. Now just remember that being driven into God's arms isn't always comforting or intended to make you feel better. Second, to be driven into God's arms always results in personal transformation of some kind. For reasons that God only knows, He uses suffering to do a work of inner transformation. It begins the moment you trust in Jesus and continues until the moment you pass into His presence. Much of the time, personal transformation comes as the result of hurt, of suffering, of hard, difficult things happening to you. In the hand of God – and that is the all important qualifier – life's heartbreaks and heartaches make you more submissive to God, more devoted to Jesus, more beautiful and gracious in spirit and more caring towards others. None of that just happens to you automatically. It only happens when you're driven into God's arms.

"But, Rick, can't suffering make people bitter against God and other people?" Yes, you're right, it can happen. Here's a third observation: you have a choice in how you will respond to suffering and your response matters. The Bible says very little about why suffering exists; it says a lot about your attitude in the midst of suffering. It might

sound trite, but you can let life's struggles make you bitter against God and other people or you can let them make you better. You have a choice: bitter or better. Life's heartaches aren't what matter in the end; it's our reactions to those heartaches. All heartache – past, present and future – will pass away. All hurt is temporary. But your reaction to what God allows leaves a spiritual deposit in your soul that's eternal. That goes on forever. That's powerful.

You remember the story of Job in the Old Testament, don't you? He was the guy who lost everything – incredible wealth, all his kids, and then his health, too. Things got so bad that even Mrs. Job said, "Why don't you just curse God and die?" It's often been said that Job's story is about one man's great suffering. I like the suggestion that it's really a story about one man's great faith. Job was ticked off at God because his suffering was so undeserved and unfair. But he never gave up on God. Instead, he said, " 'God might kill me, but I have no other hope.'" (Job 13:15 NLT) Now that's faith, isn't it? "Go ahead, God, and kill me if You want. I may not understand it this side of heaven, but my faith and hope are in You." Job's faith clung to God – held on for dear life – even though there was little evidence to support that faith at that time in his life.

It's OK to get angry with God as long as you don't stay angry at Him forever. Job did. David did. God is big enough to handle your anger. God's self-esteem will survive if you say, "God, I'm really disappointed in You." You will get disappointed with God sooner or later because His job isn't meeting your expectations. Like Job, your suffering and mine will often create a crisis of faith. But like Job, you need to hang on and hold on to God despite the lack of answers. Everyone here will face those times in life when you say, "Why me, Lord? What do You have against me?" If you haven't said that yet, just wait! I'm still in the process of learning some interesting truths about God. God is not my celestial teddy bear. He has His own agenda. He's far more interested in the transformation of my character than giving me my definition of happiness. He's far more interested that I learn to trust in Him than increasing my earthly prosperity. God wants to shape me so I fit into His heavenly family not entertain me in some kind of spiritual Disney World of my own making. Every difficulty in life presents you with a choice. Will I trust God in this? Will I trust God for this? Will this heartache drive me to God or away from Him? Will I hang on to God despite it all or turn away from Him? When you hand over any hurt, any heartache, any heartbreak to God – in other words, you place it in His all-knowing and all-loving hand – you just can't estimate its power. That's what happened to Jesus. That's what can happen to you.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn is one of the world's great authors. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature back in 1970. For years he stood up against the evils of the Soviet Union and lived to witness its collapse. Ironically, one of his greatest personal discoveries occurred in a Soviet prison – part of the Gulag, the vast Soviet labor camp system, that Solzhenitsyn made the world aware of. Like other prisoners, Solzhenitsyn worked in the fields. His days were a combination of backbreaking labor and slow starvation. One day the hopelessness of it all became too much to bear. He felt there was no purpose in fighting on. His life would make no ultimate difference. Laying his shovel down, he walked slowly over to a crude bench. He knew at any moment a guard would order him

to get up and, when he failed to respond, start beating him to death probably with his own shovel. He'd actually seen that happen many times.

As Solzhenitsyn sat there, head down, he felt a presence. Slowly he lifted his eyes. Next to him sat an old man with a wrinkled, utterly expressionless face. Hunched over, the man never spoke a word. Instead, he simply drew a stick through the sand at Solzhenitsyn's feet, deliberately tracing out the sign of the cross. As Solzhenitsyn stared at that cross, his entire perspective shifted. Yes, he knew he was just one man against the seemingly all powerful Soviet empire. Yet, in that moment, he also knew that the hope of all humanity was represented in that simple cross. Through its power anything was possible. So Alexander Solzhenitsyn slowly got up, picked up his shovel and went back to work – not knowing that his writings on truth and freedom would one day impact the whole world.

Lift your eyes and look at the cross again this morning. Does your heart ache this morning for some reason? Does it all seem so unfair and undeserved? We worship a God who is well acquainted with suffering. Jesus is the supreme sufferer in all of the universe. And He put all of His suffering into His Father's hands. Just look at what the Father did with Jesus' suffering! So that's what I'm going to ask you to today – give your pain, your hurt, your suffering into the Father's hands. God will do something with it that will matter for all eternity. And, then, once you've looked long enough at the cross, get up, pick up your shovel and go back to work.