

The Uniqueness of Jesus (Part 5/7)

Jesus Alone gives meaning to suffering

This week we are going to consider how the Christian understanding of God allows for a coherent theology in relation to pain and suffering. The title of the sermon for today is therefore "Jesus uniquely gives meaning to suffering."

For many people the reality of pain, suffering and evil cause them great difficulty in believing that God loves us and that he is sovereign over this world and the universe he has created. The argument goes something like this. If God was sovereign and loving he would not let us human beings and his whole creation suffer in the way that it does. For some people the reality of suffering leads them to conclude the life is ultimately meaningless and godless. Listen to one of atheism's champions, Richard Dawkins interpretation:

"In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people or going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference." (Richard Dawkins: *Out of Eden* page 133)

Such is the view of someone whose understanding of the universe is built without a foundation on God. How different is the Christian's response to suffering. Rather than seeing life in the face of suffering as being without design or purpose, the Christian responds that the Bible gives an explanation that is coherent and unique.

First of all, the God of the Bible reveals himself as the Author of life and as the being in whom all goodness dwells. But God is more than just good. He is holy. In Hebrew, to be holy primarily means to be separate from the ordinary or profane. God is holy, and people, things, and actions may be holy by association with God. *Psalms and Isaiah frequently refer to God as the Holy One (Ps. 78:41; 89:18; Is. 1:4; 5:19; 30:15).*

The argument of the atheist so often is " Because evil exists; therefore, God does not." However this does nothing to disprove the existence of God. If evil

exists, then one must assume that good exists in order to know the difference. If good exists one must assume there is a moral law by which to measure good and evil. If there is a moral law, must there not be a being who has given the law? The Bible answers this question with a resounding "yes". Because God is holy he has given us a moral law. This is what the passage Margaret read from Leviticus is teaching. The Law God gives to Israel is a reflection of his character. As they obey this law they will reflect in their own lives God's holiness.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

² Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy

¹¹ You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹² And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: **I am the LORD.**

¹³ You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴ You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: **I am the LORD.**

Yet, when we ignore the holy one and despise his law, life comes unraveled. Listen to what Isaiah writes in the opening chapter of his prophecy:

² Heaven and earth, listen,
because the LORD is speaking:
"I raised my children and helped them grow up,
but they have turned against me.

³ An ox knows its master,
and a donkey knows where its owner feeds it,
but the people of Israel do not know me;
my people do not understand."

⁴ How terrible! Israel is a nation of sin,
a people loaded down with guilt,
a group of children doing evil,
children who are full of evil.
They have left the LORD;

they hate God, the Holy One of Israel,
and have turned away from him as if he were a stranger. (Isaiah 1.2-4)

The first part of the answer to the why of suffering is that it is so often the result of forsaking the Holy One and living our lives without regard for him.

2. The second element in our answer is that if God is the Holy Author of life, there must be a script. Sometimes in the face of suffering it is so easy to lose sight of the script. I read the heart wrenching story the other day of David and Svea Flood. They were a young Swedish missionary couple who went to Africa in 1921. They had a deep sense of God's call to do pioneer work among the unreached people of Africa but the people were unreceptive to the Gospel and the climate was deadly. Soon after the birth of their second child Svea died. The pain was too much for David. For all their work only one person had become a Christian, and he was a child.

David was in the mindset of thinking God had forsaken him and life was without a script when he left Africa with his young son, leaving behind a baby girl who was too weak to travel. A missionary couple took her in and when they died she was passed on to another couple. This couple subsequently moved back to the United States with the girl. Meanwhile David was living in Sweden where he turned his back on the church and his thoughts were far from the spiritual realm. After his second marriage dissolved he started living with a mistress. He thought little of his daughter whom he had not seen since her infancy.

His daughter Aggie, however, thought about him often. She learned about the work he and her mother had begun in Africa and she wanted to talk about it with him. After many years she was able to make a trip to Stockholm, where she found her seventy three year-old bedridden father in a run down apartment with liquor bottles lining the window sills. She took him in her arms and told him she loved him and that God had taken care of her through the years.

Indeed, God had done more than just that. There for the first time her father heard that the little boy who had been converted through his and Svea's ministry had been used by God to see that village of 600 converted to Christ and had gone on to become a great leader in the church. It was an emotional time for David, who through his daughter's urging, recommitted his life to

Christ. There was joy in that apartment, and neither of them could know that David had only six months left to live.

Because of his suffering and the apparent meaninglessness of his work David concluded that there was no overarching purpose to life until his daughter's visit. Can you think of time in your life when you have experienced the sense that there is no script? Perhaps it was at a time when a loved one died, when you received news of a terminal illness, or a marriage ended, you suffered from depression, were misunderstood, abused, wracked with physical pain or any number of other scenarios.

Life can at times appear so meaningless because of the intensity of the suffering. And yet the New Testament understands our suffering in light of the story of Jesus Christ who entered this world of suffering so that we could know there is a script. It was because Paul believed this that he could write in Romans 8 "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us." This is an interesting choice of words. When Paul says "For I have considered" he is considering suffering in terms of the Gospel story. He is stating that suffering is a given in this present life. Then when he thinks about our suffering in light of the future glory there is no comparison." Paul here has a context in which to understand suffering.

Third, if there is a script, a story, what is at the heart of the story? Not only is God holy but he also reveals to us the sacred nature of love, to which he beckons us. And this is very important indeed when we try to understand suffering.

J. Robertson McQuilkin was at one time the president of Columbia Bible College. In a book called *A Promise Kept* he chronicles the story of his heart gripping love for his ailing wife, Murial. She walked down the grim and lonely world of Alzheimer's disease for twenty years. At one point he tells this story:

Once our flight was delayed in Atlanta and we had to wait a couple of hours. Now's that's a challenge. Every few minutes, the same questions, the same answers about what we're doing here, when are we going home? And every few minutes we'd take a fast paced walk down the terminal in earnest search of --- what? Muriel had always been a speed walker. I had to jog to keep up with her!

An attractive woman sat across from us, working diligently on her computer. Once when we returned from an excursion, she said something without looking up from her papers. Since no one spoke to me or at least mumbled in protest of our constant activity, I asked, "pardon"?

"Oh," she said, "I was just asking myself, "Will I ever find a man to love me like that?"

This is sacred love. So is the love that Eric McFall showed to his ailing wife Dorothy. Having met 70 years ago on the 24th of May he was constantly by her side as emphysema took its toll on her body. Here was a couple who showed me what it means to understand the sacredness of life in the midst of suffering. When we choose to love another person when they are suffering and see the sacredness of that person because we know the author of life then these words with which Dr. McQuilkin ends his book "A Promise Kept" have deep meaning:

"Yet in her silent world Muriel is so content, so lovable. I sometimes pray, "Please Lord, could you let me keep her a little longer?" If Jesus took her home how I would miss her gentle sweet presence. Oh yes, there are times when I get irritated, but not often. And besides I love to care for her. She's my precious."

You see there is a script and only when that script is etched upon the heart is life truly livable.

The fourth element in the Christian understanding of suffering that is at the centrepiece of this theology is the suffering of Jesus. Listen to what John Stott has written about the meaning we gain from the Cross of Jesus Christ:

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune from it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the Cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and

intolerably thirty, plunged in God-forsaken-darkness. That is the God for me. He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering. "The Cross of Christ... is God's only self justification in such a world as ours."

And when the Cross is understood in light of a holy God who has authored life and given us a script that gives it a sacred meaning than with Paul we can also say "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us."