

THE BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO PAIN AND SUFFERING

Psalm 88

Dr. Ronald B. Rice
West Side Presbyterian Church
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We are all afraid of pain. But surprisingly pain can actually be a good thing. If you have read Dr. Paul Brand's book, *Pain, the Gift that Nobody Wants*, you'll know what I'm talking about. Old-timers around here know that we used to have a world-renowned physician and his world-renowned physician wife, Dr. Margaret Brand, as members and elders in our church. Paul Brand died in 2003 at the age of 88. He was the world's foremost expert on leprosy. Back in the 1950s as a missionary doctor in India, his research on leprosy patients challenged the whole medical establishment around the world. It had been universally accepted that leprosy attacked human tissue and that was why leprosy sufferers lost their fingers and toes and sometimes even more.

But Paul Brand proved that was absolutely wrong. He proved that leprosy attacked the nerves, so that patients lost their feeling in their hands and feet. Then when they got a cut or a blister or a burn, there was no pain, so they didn't take care of the injury. The infection spread and the flesh rotted and fingers and toes fell off. In one rather gruesome account he told how patients would have part of a finger missing in the morning that was there the night before, and he finally figured out that they had slept with their arm dangling from the cot and a rat would come by and chew on a finger, but they never felt it.

So pain can be a good thing. It's interesting that his book didn't sell very well and the publishers decided people didn't want to buy a book about pain, so they dropped the word "pain" in later editions, and the title became *The Gift that Nobody Wants*. It is also interesting that in later years he collaborated with one of the top experts on diabetes in the US, and showed him that diabetics' loss of nerve function in their feet was very similar to leprosy. Thus a lack of pain meant they were not taking care of their feet when there was a cut or a blister which festered and wouldn't heal, eventually leading to amputation of the leg. Out of this collaboration came such things as having diabetics examine the bottom of their feet every night with a mirror, and regular examinations of their feet and immediate care for even the tiniest cut reduced the number of amputations in half. If you haven't read that book, you need to. It's a real page-turner.

But this doesn't really answer the huge question of why God allows pain and suffering, especially for those who have done nothing to deserve it. We can understand why those who have abused their bodies with bad habits end up with pain and suffering, but what about Paul Smith, who ministered to us faithfully for 35 years, and who ran 5 miles many mornings every week? He certainly did nothing to deserve the intense

suffering he is going through. And Louie Platt, who served us faithfully as our Associate Pastor for 17 years and who suffered and died with lung cancer shortly after his retirement. Many of you have suffered with a physical ailment or death of a spouse or a child or a divorce or any number of physical or emotional kinds of pain.

I've tried to do some reading to prepare for this sermon. I waded through *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis. It's only 142 pages, but I found most of it heavy going, and not that helpful. I also tackled Tim Keller's book from the church library, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*. It's a very readable book, 320 pages, although I haven't finished it. The most helpful book was a brand new one that I read about in *Christianity Today's* list of the best books of 2017, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* by Kelly Kopic, a professor at Covenant College on Lookout Mountain, Georgia. Covenant College is the official college of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). After surviving surgeries and treatments for cancer, Dr. Kopic's wife Tabitha developed a connective tissue disease in 2010, characterized by debilitating pain in all four limbs and in her hands and feet. Along the way she also developed a rare disorder with a very long name but called the "man on fire" syndrome. He says, the chronic pain is always there, always nagging. Always!

Although he had been wrestling with the realities of suffering for some time, Dr. Kopic was not planning to write a book, until out of nowhere he was offered a Visiting Research Fellow position at Biola University and a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to move his family to California for 5 months and do this research.

Dr. Kopic stresses that there is a big difference between philosophical, theological and academic studies and reasoning on why evil and suffering exists in the world, and what is helpful to the person in the midst of their suffering. There are many books and studies that try to make sense of the apparent tension between human misery and the existence of an all-powerful, wholly good and wise God. How can there be so much pain in this world if such a God exists? Even if we had in hand an explanation that made sense, such dispassionate philosophical theories leave us empty when we walk in the fire and ashes of genuine suffering. These theories need careful attention in the classroom, but not in the home of the afflicted.

Alvin Plantinga, one of America's great Christian philosophers, wrote, "Faced with great personal suffering or misfortune, the believer may be tempted to rebel against God, to shake his fist in God's face, or even to give up belief in God altogether. . . Such a problem calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care."

How often have well-intentioned ministers or friends tried to explain away a particular death or disease or something worse by an uninformed appeal to God's purposes? Do any of us really know why a particular event happened? Claims to provide the reason for a specific experience of suffering abound: divine discipline, for the purpose of church renewal, to bring a watching nurse or neighbor to salvation, or to foster personal humility. Unfortunately, all these claims are made without true knowledge of

exactly why something is happening. Even if these suggestions contain an element of truth, we are not in a position to unpack the mind of God regarding such mysteries.

Such explanations assume some good outcome can nullify or justify the pain, but this is not so. A tragedy is still a tragedy; pain is still pain even if some insight is gained in the process. We may hope that God has reasons for allowing suffering in his world, but that is very different from thinking we have access to those reasons or can understand why a particular experience of suffering is taking place. While God can and does bring about good through our suffering, that is not the same as knowing why God allows it. Nor is it the same thing as saying that God thinks our suffering is good. While it is true that amid our fallen world God can and does work through our suffering, that does not mean he delights in our pain.

While conducting his mother's funeral some years ago, famous Presbyterian pastor and author Eugene Peterson was so overcome with the ugliness and pain of death that he broke down and wept uncontrollably in front of those who were gathered there. After finishing the service, he went into a side room in order to settle himself. His daughter also came in and sat with him, crying and lamenting along with him. A few moments later a man he did not know entered the room and sat down next to him. He placed his arm around Peterson, muttered some "preacherish clichés" in a "preachish tone" and then stepped out, seemingly confident that his platitudes had properly consoled this distraught man. After his unsolicited comforter had left, Peterson leaned over to his daughter and said, "I hope I've never done that to anybody."

Both the Old and New Testaments ask and address deep and difficult questions about pain, suffering and the apparent triumph of evil, and the apparent absence of God in times of stress. We see that especially in the Psalms. The Psalms are full of struggle. In fact, 40 per cent of the Psalms are laments.

Psalms of Lament are poignant cries of distress and grief. Often the psalmist is complaining about the actions of others, or is even troubled by his own thoughts and actions. But some of the Psalms are expressions of frustration with God himself. They do not point us to answers and formulas. Hope? Yes. Answers? No. The Psalms orient us to God. Our hope is in him who made and redeemed heaven and earth, not in our own intellectual ability. In Bible times, believers fully understood that evil and suffering existed. It was their place to resist the evil when they could and to mourn and lament the brokenness that they could not overcome.

Love in this life inevitably involves suffering. Some people, realizing this, harden their hearts or choose some form of self-destruction. For example, couples who go through repeated miscarriages often struggle with crushing grief and disappointment. Sometimes people suggest that they not get their hopes up lest they be devastated again. "Protect your hearts," they are told. Yet protecting their heart only means that they steel it against hope and joy and make it fit to feel only disappointment and pain. That is calling them not to life but to death—such suggestions require them to slowly kill off their heart.

So they risk, they yearn, they long, and they struggle. Why? Because they dare to love. Most who truly love others will at some point have their hearts broken and join the chorus of lament.

Laments rise to the heaven as a strange combination of complaint, grief, questions, confusion, desire for rescue, and expectation of God's faithfulness. Our great hope is that lament is not all there is to human experience. Nevertheless, any who have truly lived and loved must come to believe that lament is at least part of our existence. Only the idealistic and unloving belittle tears and sadness. Only the coolly detached never raise a complaint about the condition of things, including our broken bodies. If we never lament, then it is legitimate to wonder if we have ever truly loved. Biblically we discover that lament is a legitimate, even necessary, form of fellowship with God when we are in a place of pain. The Bible repeatedly affirms lament to be an honest and expected expression of our battle with the brokenness of ourselves and the rest of the world.

Let's look now at one of those Psalms of Lament:

Psalm 88

¹ LORD, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you.

² May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.

³ I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death.

⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength.

⁵ I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.

⁶ You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

⁷ Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.^[d]

⁸ You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief.

I call to you, LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.

¹⁰ Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you?

¹¹ Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction^[e]?

¹² Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

¹³ But I cry to you for help, LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you.

¹⁴ Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

¹⁵ From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair.

¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.

¹⁷ All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.

¹⁸ You have taken from me friend and neighbor— darkness is my closest friend.

This is one of the saddest prayers in the Bible. Most of the Psalms of Lament end on a note of praise or something positive. But this one, and Psalm 39, are famous for ending without any note of hope at all. The last word of the Psalm in Hebrew means “darkness,” saying that darkness is my closest friend—in other words, “God, you’re not my closest friend, darkness is.”

When read this in light of the whole Bible, this Psalm is a great resource and even encouragement. We learn from this Psalm that believers can stay in darkness for a long time. It is possible to pray and pray and endure and endure and things not really get any better. Darkness may symbolize either outside difficult circumstances or an inward spiritual state of pain. Things don’t quickly have to work themselves out, or does it always become clear why this or that happened. One commentator wrote: “Whoever devises from the Scriptures a philosophy in which everything turns out right has to begin by tearing this page out of their Bible.” The author of Psalm 88 is Heman the Ezrahite. He is angry. He is cross-examining God, saying, “I want to praise you. I want to declare your love and faithfulness to others, but you have never been there for me.” Heman does not keep control of his temper, nor does he speak reverently to God.

But let me say something. God is big enough to handle our anger, and even our temper. You parents, have you ever had a child get angry at you, stomp and shout, say all kinds of hurtful things to you, maybe kick you in the shins when they were small? Did you stop loving them because they got angry at you? Don’t you think God is able to handle our anger and frustration when we’re hurting or things are going badly and there’s no one else to blame?

Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner writes, “the very presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to God’s understanding. He knows how people speak when they are desperate.” In other words, God didn’t censor prayers like this to keep them out of the Bible. He didn’t say, “Real believers don’t talk like that. I don’t want anything like that in *my* Bible.” This Psalm shows that God remains Heman’s God not because he puts on a happy face and controls all his emotions, but because of God’s grace. God is gracious and patient with us and this Psalm is an encouragement to be candid about our inner turmoil, to pour it out and express it earnestly.

Even more fascinating is the heading of Psalm 88. Look closely. This is a song! This is for the Director of Music! This is for singing in worship. Look at the footnote for those two words *mahalath leannoth*: a title, Possibly a tune, “The Suffering of Affliction” and then the explanation of the word *maskil*, Title, Probably a literary or musical term. This was a song they sang in worship in the temple! Can you believe it? A worship song?

This whole idea may be a shock to many of us, especially if you have never personally experienced the depth of despair of severe suffering and unrelenting pain. I’ll admit this idea of lament and my sermon this morning makes me a little uncomfortable, because I have never personally experienced this kind of despair or severe suffering.

Christians are supposed to be victorious! How many times over the years have I preached or led Bible studies on the book of Philippians, the letter that Paul wrote from prison with the theme of the letter being joy, and rejoicing that he could suffer for Christ. How many times have I emphasized the story in Acts 16 how Paul and Silas had been stripped and severely flogged with rods and then thrown in prison and put in stocks, and were singing hymns to God at midnight. Singing hymns at midnight, immobilized by stocks and their backs probably looking like hamburger? That's the kind of victorious life and joy in the midst of suffering that Christians are supposed to have, not being angry at God or expressing your frustration or voicing your complaints—especially in church, and putting it to music!

But there it is in the Bible. I didn't make it up. Forty percent of our beloved Book of Psalms is laments. There is even a whole book of the Bible named Lamentations. Five chapters of lamenting over the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem. The book ends like this: "You, Lord, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation. Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old, unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure."

Timothy Keller notes that some Lutheran authors following the Reformation were embarrassed that the book of Job was even in the Bible, since questioning God—as Job did—was a terrible sin. In the first chapter when Job got all the bad news about the deaths of his children and the loss of his estate, he got up and tore his robe and fell to the ground, something pious Christians would consider unseemly or showing a lack of faith. But then the Bible says, "In all this, Job did not sin." Job went on in chapter 3 to curse the day he was born and much of the rest of the book is lamenting and his friends lamenting over his suffering. His grief was expressed with powerful emotion and soaring rhetoric. He was brutally honest about his feelings.

The great prophet Jeremiah was not at all hesitant to blame God for his suffering. "You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long" (20:7-8).

When we choose not to lament, we harden our hearts. To have a healthy emotional, spiritual and mental life, we must be honest with ourselves and with God. We know from psychology that when we try to repress our feelings, to deny them, to stuff them, eventually they will come out in unhealthy ways. I doubt whether any of these biblical writers had ever taken a psychology class in college, but they knew intuitively that emotions needed to be honestly expressed and God is big enough and wise enough to handle them.

The shortest verse in the Bible is also one of the most profound, John 11:35, "Jesus wept." Jesus grieved deeply over the death of his friend Lazarus, and with Lazarus' two

sisters, Mary and Martha, at the death of their dear brother. Jesus constantly dealt with human agony, sin, and misery in his dealings with people. This is why the Christian tradition so often speaks of Christ's *vicarious* life and death—he lived and died for us, in our place. Think of his name Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” God in his incarnation in Christ is with us. Christ knowingly came to earth and suffered not only physical pain but emotional pain. He felt the pain of abandonment in the garden when crying out to the Father. Even as our hearts are filled with dread and doubt, and questions of, why do I have to suffer? we can take confidence that God personally understands us, not hypothetically, but concretely in Christ. Jesus wept tears, for through his incarnate life he had fully entered into the drama of fallen human experience. His ache and struggle give new meaning to our tears and suffering.

I just learned about a book a couple of days ago titled *Psalms of Lament* by Ann Weems, an author I met years ago when I was the Presbyterian General Assembly photographer. She wrote *Psalms of Lament* after she suffered the tragic loss of her son. I didn't have time to get the book, but it has quite a few positive reviews on Amazon from readers who had also suffered the loss of a child. Ann Weems wrote, “Jesus wept, and in his weeping he joined himself forever to those who mourn. He stands now throughout all time, this Jesus weeping, with his arms around the weeping ones: ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.’ He stands with the mourners, for his name is God-with-us. Jesus wept.”

Sadly, there is seldom a place provided for lamentation in many churches, and many do not give sufferers the freedom to weep and cry out, “Where are you, Lord? Why are you not helping me?” Timothy Keller tells of one man who felt the sting of being told—directly and indirectly—that he shouldn't grieve *too* much, that he needed to quickly get on to “rejoicing in tribulations.” The man felt dead inside; he wanted to but he could not.

We are the body of Christ, continuing Jesus' ministry. So if Jesus wept with Mary and Martha, we need to weep with those who are grieving or suffering. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12 that when one part of the body suffers, every part of the body suffers with it, when one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. In 2nd Corinthians Paul writes, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we have received from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ” (1:3-5). No one should have to suffer alone.

The last paragraph of the second chapter of Job reads, “When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Namathite, heard all about the trouble that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their

robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.”

Joseph Bayly, who lost three sons at various times in his life wrote about grief in his book *The View from the Hearse*: “I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God’s dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except to wish he’d go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn’t talk. He didn’t ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour or more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.”

Dr. Kopic writes about a friend Bob, in his late 50s, who asked if he could audit a class Dr. Kopic was teaching on faith and suffering. Bob was a faithful saint, an elder and pillar in his local church. He and his wife had gone through some experiences of real pain in their lives. They had spent years and years caring for elderly parents and it had not gone smoothly. As you make your wedding vows, he once told Dr. Kopic, you don’t think about changing your mother-in-law’s diapers. About a month into the class, the assignment was to write personal laments. This was not an easy exercise and it could be deeply painful. Sitting outside under the warm sun, the class scattered and started to write. About 40 minutes later Bob handed him his notes on a scribbled paper. With his permission, his “Spontaneous Lament” is reproduced in the book:

Why did my daughter’s husband break her heart?

I know little child

Won’t you tell me Father?

I won’t, my son

Why does my wife have to live in pain?

I know little child

Won’t you tell me, Father? It would make it easier

It wouldn’t, my son

Why do parents have to bury their children? It isn’t right

It isn’t little child

Then get rid of death, Father

I am, my son

Why are your people abused, persecuted and killed? Can’t you protect them?

I can, little child

Then do something

I did, my son

Why do parents need to finish their lives in unrelenting misery? How is that merciful?

It is, little child
Then I don't understand mercy
You don't, my son

But it all hurts so much sometimes
I know it does, little child
How do you know Father?
I have felt all the pain of sin, my son

Can you make it all stop?
I can, little child
Then do it, Father
I started 2000 years ago and will finish soon, my son

I believe you, Father, help my unbelief
I love you, my son

This lament was not because Bob lacked faith, but because his faith was so real, so personal, so intimate. Where else can we turn with our questions, hurts, concerns and longings? No one but the living God can fully handle our lamentations.