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GOD LOVES YOU AND HAS A DIFFICULT PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE

The way it is usually worded is, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” That is certainly true, but it suggests to some that if you become a Christian, then God will make your life a bowl of cherries: no more temptation, failure, sickness, family problems, or other forms of suffering that are common to mankind.

The reality is that God tells us again and again that following Christ will in many ways make life harder, not easier: Paul and Barnabus visited the cities where they had previously planted new churches, and: *They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many tribulations to enter the Kingdom of God.* (Acts 14:22) Someone once summarized Christ’s invitation as follows: “Come to me, and die.”

Over the years, there has been a recurring question that Christians have asked those in ministry: “Why is God allowing me to go through this terrible suffering? The Bible says that God won’t give you more than you can bear, but this (physical sickness or injury, unexpected rejection or abandonment, loss of a loved one, mental or emotional breakdown, loss of a ministry or career) is more than I can bear. If God loves me, why did He allow this to happen, and why doesn’t He answer my prayers?”

I don’t have an answer when someone asks me such a question, but I remind them that God’s people asked that question many times in the Bible. In the book of Job, Job experienced pain, loss, and suffering to an unimaginable degree. Job was a good man according to God’s own declaration. Job cried out in anguish, and 73 times he questioned God’s love, compassion and fairness. Isn’t it significant that God recorded all of this in the book of Job, the earliest book in the Bible? The same question is scattered all through the Psalms and the prophets. And on the cross, Jesus, Jesus, cried out, *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?* (Mt. 27:46) Thank God, those weren’t Jesus’ final words from the cross. His final words were words of trust and love, “*Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands.*” *And with those words he breathed his last.* (Luke 23:46) And we dare not forget that the cross was followed by the resurrection!

So what does God tell us in His Word about this universal human question, “Why does God allow so much suffering?”

First, it is important to recognize that the evil one, not God, is the author of much of the suffering in our world. *Satan comes to kill, steal, and destroy*, while Christ comes to save, heal, and deliver. When Jesus first publicly announced His very purpose for coming among us, He quoted the prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free...* (Luke 18) And the bad choices that men make are the source of much destruction and suffering. Sin is not the will of God, and when people sin they bring terrible consequences to themselves and others.

Second, the sin and rebellion of our first parents, Adam and Eve, brought a curse to our world. (Gen. 3) The world as it exists now was not how God intended it. Our world, mankind, the animal world, and all of nature, is broken, it is “groaning.” *For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.* (Ro. 8:22) I don’t know about you, but I can’t stand to watch those National Geographic videos of crocodiles snatching wildebeests, or of lions taking down zebras and baby buffalos and eating them alive. It makes me sick inside. I think that’s the way it makes God feel, too. God tells us, *The creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay.* (Ro. 8:20) And, *The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat hay like a cow.* (Is. 65:25) The God who imagined them and created them out of nothing can surely reprogram them to be vegetarians.

Third, the Image of Christ. God originally created man and woman in the image of God. That image was marred by Adam’s sin in the garden. God’s purpose in his dealing is to fulfill His original plan by changing us into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. This process is described in 2 Cor. 3:18, *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even by the Spirit.* Note the passive tense in this verse. We cannot change ourselves, God’s Holy Spirit changes us as we behold the Lord Jesus Christ. Note also that it is a process. The word “changed” in Greek is “metamorpho,” English word metamorphosis, which describes the caterpillar’s

process of changing into a butterfly, and it takes much time and energy. The caterpillar is not changing itself. It attaches itself to a leaf, rests and meditates about God (trust me), and God changes it into something beautiful and unimaginable. Wow!

Fourth, how about the pain and suffering? God's purpose is to purge away all dross from our lives. The word "purge" means to refine, to make pure, to change by heat. Have you noticed how much pressure and heat there is on God's people today? Several years ago my "team" (Fred, Lynne and I) worked for over ten years on our mission trips with Jose' and

his family in Guadalajara. Jose' had been a Christian for only a few years, but he was a wonderful man, a servant of the Lord, and we loved him so much. The problem was that before his conversion he had two other families, "wives" and children, in addition to the one we came to know. Jose' owned a jewelry business in Guadalajara where he made his own gold and silver rings, bracelets, and necklaces. We visited his business and saw him working at the furnace where he melted the precious metals. He told us he had to melt silver bars and scrape off the dross, or scum, time and again until he could see his reflection in the silver. He said that after his conversion he would work at the furnace and tears would run down his face because he understood the analogy to his own life, and the suffering had already started. It would take a very long paragraph for me to tell about the suffering Jose' has gone through since we have known him. Because his life had been such a disaster, he has had to go into the fiery furnace time and again, year after year. God will not stop until He can see His reflection, His image, in Jose's life. *Our God is a consuming fire.* (Heb. 12:29) You will either voluntarily submit to His burning the dross off in this life or you will involuntarily submit to the fire hereafter. That is Scripture. The same process is described in the analogy of the potter and the clay. (Is. 64, Jer. 18, Ro. 9)

Fifth, to bring forth fruit. In John 14, Jesus uses the allegory of the vine and the branches and describes the necessity of pruning. Dead, fruitless branches are cut away, while fruitful branches are pruned to bear more fruit. God's purpose is always positive and loving. Those servants and leaders through whom God desires to produce the most fruit will have to be pruned the most. That is absolutely Scriptural, and it may answer many questions about our lives.

Sixth, to provoke us to seek Him. *In their affliction they will seek me early.* (Hosea 5:15) Israel illustrated this many times. When Assyria or Babylon put pressure on Israel, they turned to the Lord. In affliction, pressure, or heat, we must learn where to turn.

Seventh, to produce spiritual wine. Frank Damazio has a beautiful teaching on this subject. Harvest was a joyful time in Israel, when the whole family would reap the harvest. Women and children would bear the clusters upon their heads in baskets. They would dump the grapes into a large stone vat, and the treadingers would walk upon the ripe grapes, squashing the juice out of them. As the treader worked, he held onto a beam of wood that was attached to the center pole of the vat. This rested most of his weight on the beam, because if he treaded too heavily on the grapes, he could crush the seed along with the grape, making the wine bitter and fit only for the animals.

God is the treader, and we are the grapes. Since He wants the new wine of His Spirit to flow from our lives and our ministries, He crushes us. This is a hard, painful process, but God will never crush our spirits and make us bitter. A bitter life, as with bitter wine, is worthless. If we could only perceive the end that God is after, we would welcome the crushing process and kiss the feet of the treader. (Oh, my! I have a long way to go. Fortunately, I am still young.)

Eighth, to produce endurance. Three Greek words are translated as endurance, and they mean (1) the act of holding up or sustaining - 1 Thes. 1:1 (2) to stay under, remain, continue to dwell in a location - Heb. 12:5 (3) to bear from underneath, bear with the shoulders - 1 Cor. 10:13.

Throughout Scripture, God identified Himself with three particular men: *I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.* As the God of Abraham, He is the keeper of His covenants. As the God of Isaac, He is the God of miracles. But as the God of Jacob, the meaning is less clear. He may be claiming to be the God of changed character (Jacob's name became Israel, reflecting the way God changed him). The change in Jacob is seen in Isaiah 41:14 where God says, *You worm Jacob.* Why call him a worm? This might describe Jacob's response to the crushing hand of God upon him at Peniel (Gen. 32). The Psalmist also calls the coming Messiah a worm in Psalm 22:6. Contrast the "worm attitude" with the "serpent attitude," - A Worm (1) is crushed underfoot (2) has no defense - like a lamb (3) squirms, but gives up its life. A Serpent (1) strikes when tread upon (2) defends with venom (3) fights to the death.

Read chapter 1 of James for a great teaching about endurance: *Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy, for.....your endurance has a chance to grow.....and when it is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete..... God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

Notice the words God uses in His book: "fire, burning, pruning, cutting, purging, washing, crushing." Good night! What is God up to? He says to us: *Since Christ suffered physical pain, you must arm yourselves with the same attitude he*

had, and be ready to suffer, too. For if you have suffered physically for Christ you have finished with sin. (1 Peter 4:1-2, NLT) And God tell us: Remember that God is treating you as his own children. If God doesn't discipline you...it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all.....shouldn't we submit to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever? No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening – it is painful!

But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. (Hebrews 12:7-13)

As Jesus prepared himself for the cross, He led his disciples to the Mount of Olives, to an ancient garden named Gethsemane, which means “oil press.” There Jesus was crushed. He cast himself down and prayed that if possible his Father would remove the cup of suffering he was facing. *He prayed more fervently, and he was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. (Luke 22:39-46)* And Isaiah prophesied about him 700 years before: *But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. (Isa. 53)* What a Savior! What an amazing God!

Dear ones, as suffering comes into our lives, let us resist the temptation, the lie of the enemy, to believe that God does not love us and want the very best for us. Let us meditate on the precious words of Scripture, let us reflect on the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, and be strengthened.

87 BIG ONES

Much to my amazement, I will arrive at the milestone of 87 years on the 20th of this month. Time goes fast when you're having fun. I don't feel any different inside, but the warranty on my carton has definitely expired. Especially on my hair (Ha!), skin, teeth, and joints. I told my dentist last week, and my doctor and dermatologist awhile back, that I had hoped that I would not outlast my teeth, skin, and joints. My memory has also mostly expired, but I seem to remember that this is a prophetic year. I vaguely recall a book with the title, 87 Reasons Why Christ Will Return When Glenn Turns 87. Or something like that. I've about decided to take my entries out of Christian Singles and eHarmony. That photo I submitted might cause suspicion. As I said before, I used to look like Brad Pitt, now I look like a gravel pit.

PARABLE OF THE RICH BUSINESS MAN

A certain man started out in the mail room of a large corporation. His diligence, integrity and good attitude caught the attention of his boss, and he went up the ladder very rapidly. He became the youngest regional manager in the history of the company. He regularly worked 70 or more hours per week. He had two sons and a daughter, and his wife, who was his 3rd wife, pleaded with him to spend more time with the family and to go with them to church. He kept promising to do that, but he had a burning ambition to succeed, and, after all, he was working for their benefit.

When his children entered their teen years their lives went in a bad direction, and he and his wife became very concerned about them. He decided that he should retire. After all, he had more than enough money for the rest of his life. But just then he was offered the top job, the dream job to which he had always aspired. Along with the job, he would be given stock options that would add millions of dollars to his portfolio. It was too good an offer to turn down.

Just before taking over his new job, while playing golf, suddenly his left arm started aching, then his jaw, and he fell over dead. He had a huge funeral. He was eulogized by the high and mighty. His was an American success story.

That night, at midnight, an angel appeared at the cemetery, moved to the man's huge granite tombstone and wrote with his finger on the slab: “FOOL!” That was God's verdict on this man's life.

Then Jesus told them a story: A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, 'What should I do? I don't have room for all my crops. I know, I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And I'll sit back and say to myself, My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry.'

But God said to him, 'YOU FOOL! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?'

Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not -have a rich relationship with God. (Luke 12:16-21)

WORDS ARE IMPORTANT

Last Sunday afternoon I watched a few minutes of the golf tournament at the beautiful Pebble Tree golf course. On a par three, one of the professional golfers pushed his tee shot far to the right. He slammed his iron to the ground and screamed out an oath using God's name. In doing that, he revealed a lot about himself, his lack of respect for his fellow players and the public, and his relationship with God. Our mouths and our hearts are closely connected.

Words matter. According to the Bible, they are tremendously important. Jesus even said in Matthew 12 that our words will determine our final destiny!

Blasphemously using God's name, and Jesus' name, and using the "F" word in conversation, have become so common on the media, and on the street, and in school, and at work, that we tend to become oblivious to it. We can start using those words or allowing our children to use them. Don't allow it to happen! That kind of language deadens the conscience, lowers the level of respect for people, and most important of all, it offends God.

Violence by words is just a short step away from physical and sexual violence.

Perhaps you need to think about this and repent to God and someone you have wounded?

ATTENDING SERVICES?

At a regional conference, a pastor shared a little story about an old man in his church. He said this gentleman was in his 90's, and that although he had gone totally deaf some years before, he came to church every Sunday and sat on the front row.

The pastor went to visit the old man. He wrote on the note pad the man carried with him, "Mister Thomas, I really appreciate your faithfulness in coming to church every week. But I know that you are deaf and can't hear the preaching or the music. I just want to ask, why do you continue to come?"

The old gentleman immediately spoke out his response: "I just want'em to know which side I'm on."

Do they know which side you are on?

NOTE TO EVERYONE WHO PRAYS:

Will you please add the seminar , "Pathway to Freedom," that I'm teaching at my home church on Wednesday nights for the next 8 weeks to your prayer list? Pray that God's blessing and presence be with us. Would also appreciate your praying about a little cancer situation in my left ear that I don't want to grow into a bigger problem. Am seeing a dermatologist.

God Bless

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I would like to thank each of you for your support of this ministry.

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