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(Following is my message shared at the Dec. 26th services in Canyon View Vineyard Church)

(Film clip from the movie, "The Perfect Storm.")

Is that the way your life feels? A few days ago I talked with a man who is getting increasingly desperate about his financial situation. He said that some days he feels OK and is sure that everything is going to work out. Other days, he thinks, "Can I really trust God?" and he feels very afraid.

Many Christians are having the same problem. They are wondering what they are going to do. These are some other types of problems that folks are having: Some are suffering with sickness and debilitating pain; some are living with physical or mental disability, or their spouse or child has that problem; some have children who are in prison; some have children who are lost to the drug culture, and they may not know whether their son or daughter is alive or dead; some have painful alienation in their family, and the Christmas season exacerbated their loneliness; some have a son or daughter who is serving in Iraq or Afghanistan; some have a parent or spouse with Alzheimer's and the burden is getting overwhelming.

Christians in these types of situations may be hanging on by their fingernails. They may be having thoughts like: "What is going on? I'm a Christian! Where is God? Why doesn't he answer my prayers?"

Let me take a little detour by asking the question, What is the purpose of life? That is an ambitious subject. A related question is, Where did mankind come from?

The world has an answer to that question: We came from the primordial soup. **(Photo of a diorama: Amoeba - frog - lizard - monkey - ape - cave man - modern man)**

This is a display that we have seen in textbooks and in classes scores of times. "From goo to you by way of the zoo." In this view, which is pervasive in our society, man is a cosmic accident, and there is no meaning, no purpose to life.

What does the Bible say about the beginning of everything?
In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1)

(Photo of a galaxy in space.)

Where did man come from?

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to our likeness"...So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

According to the Bible, this is what our bodies are made of - (I had on the platform a red plastic bucket of dirt). Do you really think that if we gave this dirt enough time it would

organize itself into a butterfly, or an elephant, or a man? Of course, I did not go to Harvard, but to me that seems totally irrational, ridiculous, stupid.

It was **GOD** who formed us out of dirt. **God! The Creator!**

Think about His wisdom, power, imagination. God. It is reported that there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the beaches and deserts of earth. The Bible says that God created all those stars, and He knows them all by name! He knows you and me that intimately, even knowing the number of hairs on our heads.

And, wonder of wonders, He is a God of love! He loves us, even though He knows all about us.

There is a big revelation hidden in all of this: **GOD IS NOT HERE FOR US! WE ARE HERE FOR HIM!** Remember, you and I are made out of this (holding up a handful of dirt). This is what we are, what are bodies are composed of. God is not here for this (handful of dirt) - - He created us for Himself. As Rick Warren said in the first sentence of his book, The Purpose Driven Life, "It's not about you."

The third chapter of Genesis tells about "the fall," the time when the first man and woman fell into rebellion, sin, and death. Why did God create man with that possibility? Because He did not want an earth full of robots, mechanical toys. He gave us free will. Remember that God created us "in His image," *Let us make man in Our image*. So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him. The image of God was not totally destroyed by man's fall into sin, but it was marred, scarred, defaced. By that fall we were separated from God, and our condition became desperate.

The rest of the Bible describes God's rescue mission to restore us to the image of God. And what does the image of God look like? It looks like Jesus: *(Christ), who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person* (Hebrews 1:3) ...*Christ, who is the image of God* (2 Cor. 4:4). That is what the image of God is like, like Jesus Christ. That is what we are supposed to look like, to be like. By the way, Christ is called the Word of God, the living Word of God. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.* (John 1:1) The Bible is called the written Word of God.

So how do we get there (to the realization of the image of God)? *Faith comes by hearing (the Word of God)*. God created by His word. God saves us by His word, which is the first step in a lifetime process of becoming Christlike.

Again, our purpose as humans is not the fulfillment of the American dream - stuff, comfort, endless entertainment, security, retirement, no cares. Our purpose is to become Christlike. Remember, we are made out of dirt, and we are here to accomplish God's purposes. He is God, not us! We have a part in this process. It is accomplished through His

Word and by our obedience. *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.* (2 Cor. 3:18) *Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* (Romans 12:2) We can't transform ourselves into the image of God anymore than dirt can transform itself into the body of a man. As we behold Christ in the Word, the Bible, we are being transformed by God the Creator. Our part is to meditate on the Word, and our part is to **hear the Word of God**, the teachings of Christ, **and do them**, as Jesus emphasized at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 7:21-27)

So my question to you today is: Are you spending time regularly, diligently, in the Word of God and in prayer? And are you being obedient to what God speaks to you?

All of this is the introduction to my message about suffering.

A SEASON OF SUFFERING

What has suffering to do with our creation and our purpose on earth? It is so much a part of our lives that it must have an important part to play. Did Jesus say anything about suffering to His followers? Did He say, "If you believe in Me and follow Me, everything will be lovely, there will be a bubble around your life protecting you from all pain and problems?" He never said anything like that, but we act as if that is what He said. Following are a few of the things Jesus said (paraphrased):

John 16:33 - In the world you will have tribulation, trials, problems, trouble, pain, and suffering.

John 15:15 - If the people in the world have hated me they will certainly hate you, for I am the master and you are the servants. But don't fear, for I will be with you.

John 16:2 - There will be people who will kill you (my followers) and think they are serving God.

Two weeks ago the news reported that in Iraq Muslims machine-gunned and bombed a church as the people gathered to worship on a Sunday morning. Fifty eight people died and over a hundred were wounded. The men who did this thought they were serving God.

Jesus said, and Peter reiterated His words: If you suffer for God, rejoice and be thankful for the privilege, for your reward will be great.

Why? Why on earth does God allow suffering in His people?

(Let me share various thoughts about this question, and I will identify different subjects with the letter A, B, etc)

A. The apostle James has part of the answer. He tells us to "Count it all joy when you fall into trials and problems (James 1:2-4) for that **suffering will make you complete, mature, perfect, on your journey toward Christlikeness.**"

Last week I attended the funeral of Mike Bamford, the grandson of Dick and Belva Bamford, who were dear friends of Doris and mine for over 40 years. Mike was born with cystic fibrosis and year before last he contracted leukemia and spent the last fifteen months of his life in hospital undergoing countless painful procedures. He was a wonderful, brave young man. He died at age twenty.

In view of this, how can Mike's family and you and I

believe that God is a God of love?

B. There are many things I might say in an attempt to answer that question, but the main thing is **the cross**. Do you recall that scene in the movie, The Passion of the Christ, when Jesus was scourged by the Roman soldiers? Some people say that Jesus was whipped with 39 strokes, but that is not scriptural. The Jewish law prescribed that those subject to the punishment of scourging were to be beaten with rods exactly 40 strokes. In order not to make a mistake and go beyond the prescribed punishment, it was their custom to beat prisoners with 39 strokes of the rod. But it was not Jews who were beating Jesus, it was Romans. They did not use a rod to inflict the beating, they used a leather cat-o-nine tails, with bits of bone and glass sewed into the ends of the lash, so that great pieces of skin were torn from the bodies of their victims. And many times they beat the person until unconsciousness or death occurred. This was the punishment that Jesus endured. I believe the movie got that scene right. Jesus was beaten almost to the point of death.

Was that a misguided man who endured that torture, or was it God, the third person of the Trinity? If we believe that it was the Son of God who died on that cross for our sins, then why are we questioning whether God is a God of love? That is a moot point. Christ suffered and died for you and me, so let's stop listening to the devil and agreeing with the devil. *Surely He has borne our sicknesses and carried our pains.....but He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.* (Isa. 53:4-5)

Mike Bamford's funeral was not a dismal affair, it was a celebration. Mike's parents, Rick and Kelli, and grandparents, Dick and Belva, and all of the family, projected an air of peace and well-being that cannot be faked at such a time. It is incongruous to the world, but they trust God and know with certainty that they will see Mike again, and he will have a brand new body.

C. But Glenn, you might say, I still don't understand the terrible suffering of children, the suffering of the innocent. I don't either, but we must remember that we live in a broken, fallen world, and **everything that happens in this world is NOT God's will!** About three years ago, a young man named Darent Williams, a defensive back with the Broncos, was killed over the Christmas holidays. You may remember seeing on the news the white stretch limousine with bullet holes in the side. Mike Shanahan was coach at that time, and his words spoken at the young man's funeral were quoted on the news. He said, "I don't understand why God wanted to call Darent home at this time, but I guess God needed him more than we do." When I read those words in the paper, I hollered out, "No! God did not call Darent home." It wasn't God's idea. God has a commandment that says, "Thou shalt not kill. God had nothing to do with his murder. It was an evil man doing an evil deed. What an awful thing it is to accuse God of such terrible actions.

D. It is the observation of many that **Protestantism does not have a satisfactory doctrine of suffering**. In my view as a Protestant Christian, Catholicism has a lot of doctrine that is clearly unscriptural ("the Pope is the vicar of Christ on earth,

prayers to Mary and the saints, seven sacraments, the Eucharist, etc"), but I believe they may have an insight about suffering that we need. They use Colossians 1:24 as the foundation for their understanding: *I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the church.* Paul was not claiming that Christ's sacrifice was insufficient or that our human suffering is in anyway redemptive; nevertheless, it is true that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." (That is an aphorism, not a quote from scripture.) Father John Corapi is a regular preacher on EWTN, the Catholic channel. He is a powerful speaker and is said to have inherited the mantle of Bishop Sheen. I once heard Father Corapi tell about his father. His father was an exceptionally strong man who did not become a Christian until late in life. His father used to say, "I waited so late to become a Christian that it is too late for me to do anything for God." Then his father started coming down with many afflictions. He endured countless painful operations on his eyes, on many organs of his body, and weighed only about 90 lbs. when he died. Father Corapi asks, "Do you think all that suffering was meaningless? No, God uses all things for His purposes." I don't pretend to understand how it works, but I absolutely agree with him. *All things work for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose.* (Ro. 8:28)

E. Another very important point is **THE CONNECTION OF LOVE AND SUFFERING.** Love and suffering are inextricably bound together. Suffering is the very expression of love. Consider a mother giving birth. Consider a mother and father nurturing their baby through infancy and childhood, and suffering with that child through the pains and bad choices of the teen years and beyond. God is love. That is the affirmation of scripture. His essence is love. God loves more than it is possible for anyone else to love, and therefore God suffers more. Christ's suffering-love on the cross is the very expression of the love and suffering of God Himself. Remember: God does not send suffering to us as some sort of sadistic dictator, He suffers with us when we suffer.

Several years ago I held a weekend seminar in a prison in Canyon City. A young man named Jimmy talked with me. He had a club-foot and walked with a limp. He was deeply depressed and told me his life had been terrible and he felt that God was against him. As I prayed for him, I asked him to relax, close his eyes, and tell me his earliest memory. He kind of stiffened up and said he could see himself at about five years old hiding under his bed in terror as his drunken father was cursing and beating his mother. I prayed, "Lord Jesus, I know that you were there with Jimmy on that terrible night. Will you please let him see you in that memory." In a few moments Jimmy said, "Oh, I can see Jesus. He's sitting on the floor, looking under the bed at me, and He's crying! Now He is reaching under the bed and taking me out and holding me. He's telling me that it's OK, He is with me." Something forever changed in Jimmy's heart in that moment. He walked back toward his seat, but then he turned and came back and said, "Pastor Glenn, did you see? I walked without a limp! That is the first time in my life I walked without a limp!"

Friends, what happened to Jimmy when he was a little boy was not God's will. Of course not. Although God was unseen, He was truly with Jimmy in that terrible experience, and God was suffering with him. And God healed his limp. God

wants to heal our limp, our confusion about who God is and any resentment we may have toward God.

F. Just a word about **healing.** I believe in healing, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Over the past fifty years I have seen hundreds healed. But I have also seen hundreds of others not healed. Did God love them any less? Absolutely not. Did they have hidden sin? Well, sometimes people are not healed until they forgive someone, but other times that is not the case. Did they need more faith? Possibly so, but many times I don't think that was the issue. It is a mystery. And let me remind you that all healing is temporary. Even for the ones that are healed it is temporary, because we are all going to die, and usually sickness and suffering are a part of that process.

Joni Earickson Tada, who is a paraplegic, tells in her book that over the years many Christians have put guilt on her, telling her that she was not healed because she had hidden sin or because she did not have enough faith. (An awful thing to say!) Joni believes she is right where God wants her. She knows she is going to be healed and get a new body in heaven, and in the meantime she has a tremendous testimony that she shares in a worldwide ministry.

G. This is a point that we quickly forget but that the Bible emphasizes: **We want all the promises of God right now, in this life, this very minute, but the Bible says that our reward will be hereafter, in Heaven, in eternity.** *We have a building from God, eternal in the heavens.* (2 Cor. 5:1) *You have an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.* (1 Peter 1:4) (And there are probably at least a hundred more scriptures I could quote.)

The name of this message is, "Trusting God in a season of suffering." Friends, it's just a season. It will soon be past. There is much that we don't understand, but let us decide to trust God who is suffering with us.

H. Finally, does it appear from anything I have said that Christ is a cosmic joy-killer? The very opposite is true.

- The angels said to the shepherds, *Don't be afraid, for we bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.* (Luke 2:10)
- Jesus, our Lord, said to His disciples and says to us: *These things I have spoken to you that My joy may remain in you and that your joy may be full.* (John 15:11)
- *For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* (Ro. 14:17)
- *These things we write to you that your joy may be full.* (1 John 1:4)

And we have the promise of our Lord that our faithfulness will lead Him to say to us on that day, *Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master.*

Christ is not the joy-killer, He is the joy-giver. So if we are clinging to something in these stressful times, thinking that it will bring us joy, peace and security, Jesus asks us to surrender it to Him that He might give us His true peace, security and joy.

God Bless,
Glenn

