

# Redemptive Suffering

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2 Timothy 1:8-18

Sermon Series:  
Kingdom Legacy

*Have we created an illusionary world of happiness without pain?*

Americans are spoiled. In last week's storm, most of us lost power for a day or two. Oh, the grouching and the complaining! Parents remarked that their kids didn't quite know what to do without access to internet or TV. Twenty-five percent of the world's population lives without electricity 24/7. We have come to believe life is an endless series of weekends made for Michelob.

Everywhere I turn, I see advertisements offering more happiness, as though we live in a world of perpetual good fortune. "I just want my kids to be happy," has become the universal mantra of today's parents. Really now, is our sole purpose on earth to be happy?

Don't get me wrong, happiness is awesome. But with so much attention given to happiness today, we could be setting our kids up for disappointment. By overprotecting kids from adversity, we could leave them ill prepared for a life that can't always be rosy and bright. Have we created an illusionary world of happiness without pain and joy without sorrow?

American Christians want a smiley-faced, feel-good religion. Jesus' words, "Those who want to become my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross

and follow me," are incomprehensible to most Christian Americans.

After an extensive tour of the United States, well-known pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked what he had observed as the great defect of American Christians. His answer was rather striking. Thielicke said, "American Christians have an inadequate view of suffering."

You may ask why I am talking about suffering on Father's Day, although it could well be argued that being a dad is an insufferable job these days. Suffering is a predominant theme in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy. Last Sunday, we began an eight-week series on this letter. Paul writes this letter to Timothy, his son in the faith (1:2). As Paul nears the end of his life, he is intent on leaving his young protégé a kingdom-of-God legacy.

Paul doesn't recruit Timothy to preach the kingdom of God by telling him it will make him happy or make his life easy or solve all his problems. Rather he writes in verse 8, "Join me in suffering for the gospel."

Paul writes this letter from jail. Come to think of it, Paul writes nearly all his letters from jail.

A first century Roman jail looks nothing like our Adult Detention Centers. Roman jails are dark, foreboding places. There are no

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windows, no water or food, except what is supplied by prisoner's families. The stench is, in a word, unbearable.

There are Christians in Paul's day embarrassed by Paul's incarceration. Paul writes in verse 8, "Don't be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner." How could this God-ordained missionary to the Gentiles end up in the slammer? Teresa of Avila, a 16th century saint once remarked in the face of adversity, "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them."

Paul tells us in verses 15-18, "All who are in Asia have turned away from me." I doubt seriously that absolutely everyone deserted Paul in Asia. I suspect Paul feels in his suffering as though everyone has deserted him. Paul singles out two friends in verse 15, Phygelus and Hermogenes, whose defection he finds particularly distressing.

The greatest Christian missionary the world has ever known is not exempt from suffering. God never promises His people that tornados will skip their houses on the way to our pagan neighbors. Christians get cancer too!

Verses 8-11 likely contain fragments of an early Christian hymn or creed. These verses also constitute a single sentence in the original Greek. This is another reason why I am convinced Paul wrote 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, given Paul's penchant for long, run-on sentences.

Paul's suffering in verse 8 is specifically "for the gospel." Since Paul mentions this word

gospel three times in quick succession, we would do well to consider its meaning. Gospel is an English word meaning "good story." Paul summarizes in verses 8-11 God's good story. God's power saves us and calls us "...with a holy calling" (verse 9). God saves us in this verse from something as well as saves us for something. God saves us from sin, but God also saves us for a holy life. This gospel is not the result of anything we have done; salvation is solely God's idea. This gospel has been operative from the beginning of time, but in these last days, it has been revealed through our Savior Jesus Christ, who has broken the hold death has over our lives (verse 10).

I don't suffer much for the gospel. I occasionally experience ridicule or disapproval for being a Christian, but that's pretty much the extent of it. There are places in the world today where Christians suffer for the gospel. North Korea, Iraq, India, Cambodia, Laos and China come immediately to mind. You can ask our Coptic Christian brothers and sisters about the persecution against Christians in Egypt. Christians have been known in these lands to suffer loss of employment or property, physical abuse, imprisonment, torture and even death.

I do not fear that the Christian faith will cost me everything but that it will cost me nothing at all!

Every religion, sooner or later, must confront the problem of suffering. Have you ever noticed that we often talk about the problem of suffering, but we almost never talk in terms of the problem of

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pleasure? Nobody bothers to ask why all these good things happen to us!

Christianity's unique contribution to the problem of pain is that God enters our world of pain and suffering. God through Jesus Christ has hurt and bled and suffered and died. God has dignified all those who suffer by sharing our pain.

John Stott writes, "I could never believe in God if it were not for the cross. In a real world of pain, how could I worship a God who was immune from it?"

Tim Keller is a Presbyterian pastor from New York City who spoke at a Service of Peace and Remembrance after 9/11. He said, "We don't know the reasons why God allows suffering and evil to continue, but we know what the reason can't be. It can't be that He doesn't love us. It can't be that He doesn't care. God so loved us and hates suffering that He was willing to come down and get involved in it."

In answer to the people who flocked to his Manhattan church after 9/11 asking "What does your God have to offer me at a time like this?" Keller responded, "Christianity is the only faith that tells you that God lost a son in an act of violent injustice. Christianity is the only religion that tells you that God suffered as you have suffered. Christianity does not so much offer solutions to the problem of suffering, but rather provides the promise of a God who is completely present with us in suffering."

God enters our world of pain to redeem our suffering. We tend to ask a backward-looking question about suffering: Why has this happened to me?

As a minister, I spend countless hours with people struggling with the "why" question. I confess to you that I often feel inadequate to answer such a question.

Scripture remains vague on the cause of suffering. God never answers Job's inquiry directly as to the cause of suffering. Rather, the Bible asks a forward-looking question: To what end? Scripture is much more focused on the results of suffering than its cause.

Scripture declares that God can redeem and transform suffering. Exhibit A is the cross. God takes the worst thing that possibly could happen and turns it into the best thing that possibly could happen. God allows unimaginable things to happen, such as the death of His Son, and turns them into something altogether redemptive.

God is not immune to our suffering. Indeed, God enters our world of suffering to redeem it. Therefore we are able to trust God in the midst of pain.

You see, suffering has the capacity to produce something in us. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "...suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope" (5:3-4).

As Alexander Solzhenitsyn eloquently expressed it in his classic novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, "Faith in God may not get you out of the camp, but it is

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enough to see you through the day.”

John Olerud played major league baseball for 17 seasons for four teams. He was known for having one of the smoothest swings in baseball as well as for wearing a batting helmet, even when in the field, as a result of suffering a brain aneurysm in college.

John Olerud's daughter was afflicted with a rare genetic disease as a young child. During one of her medical treatments, he held his young daughter in his arms while doctors attempted to insert an IV. Olerud described the look in her eyes: What's going on? I thought you were my dad, protecting me, and you're holding me down and allowing them to stick a needle in me? How can you say you love me and let somebody do this? Knowing that even if he could tell her why all this was happening, Olerud could only say, "You've got to trust me."

Olerud learned an important faith lesson in that experience. "Sometimes with our suffering, you look to God and say, 'God, this doesn't make any sense. I'm getting hammered here, and You could change it.' I'm sure He's looking at us saying, 'I can't tell you why I'm doing this. It's in your best interest. You just have to trust Me.'"

I trust you, God. I believe You know what You're doing. I will trust You, even when life doesn't make sense.

