

Message August 12, 2007
Crossroads Christian Fellowship
Waking Up to Heaven - Romans 5:1-5

A physician told this story about her then-four-year-old daughter. On the way to preschool, the doctor had left her stethoscope on the car seat, and her little girl picked it up and began playing with it. Be still, my heart, thought my friend, her hope surging, my daughter wants to follow in my footsteps! Then the child spoke into the instrument:

"Welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order?"

We talked about hope last week. We considered that as believers in and followers of Jesus, it is critical that we understand we were made and redeemed for heaven and not for this world.

Our great reward awaits us in heaven, in the life to come not here. The life promised to us by Jesus – He has gone before us to prepare a place, a room in his Father's mansion. Jesus promised he would come back for us.

Paul said a hope already gained is no hope at all so we wait patiently for it. Like a kid waits for Christmas, like waiting for our paycheck, like running for the finish line. We wait patiently for what we know is coming.

The point is this...in Christ we have a hope that will not and can not disappoint. It won't fail or fade. It is God's promise and God can not lie.

But why do we need such hope? That is the right question for today.

We need hope because living is not all easy, wonderful, and full of pleasure. The question and the answer take us back to the very beginning. As believers in Jesus we believe and hold the Bible as God's word and as our authority for life. In the Bible we come to understand that we were made to walk with God in paradise. We were created to be in good relationship with God with others, with the world, and...with ourselves. You can see how big this message can get!

Let's boil it down to bare bones – I believe God made man and woman with the ability to choose and a long time ago the option came along. Our ancestors, having been deceived or not, chose themselves over God and sin entered the equation breaking the balance of all that good God created and so opening the door to brokenness, struggle, hardship, and evil. A reading of Genesis 1-4 will help you understand the way God created us, how sin deceived, and the consequences. It was the beginning of suffering, struggle, brokenness, and when evil took hold in human life. We live in a world dominated by the consequences of sin. Why? Because people continue to sin...and God has not changed his mind about the consequences.

Jump forward with me. Lee Strobel in his book *A Case for Faith* writes that he commissioned Barna, the public polling organization, to ask what hinders people from believing in God. The most common answer...”how can a loving God allow suffering?”

The answer requires more time than we have but as I understand the Genesis account, the bottom line is suffering, struggle, brokenness exist because of sin and the human propensity to rebel against God. It was evil that created suffering. It is part of our lives and world because God made humans with choice. I don’t want to answer the question of why suffering exists. I don’t think I can. I do want to say that that God’s love and mercy are stronger than suffering. How should we understand suffering is our focus today.

The truth is that we experience painful events as a normal part of life. Accidents occur, there is sickness and disease, there are hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and mines cave in on miners. People are born into total poverty, live and die in unimaginable conditions, children are stolen and forced onto sexual slavery, alcohol and drugs take over peoples lives ruining marriages, families, and futures. Horrible things happen every day in our world. There are human atrocities happening today in Africa. The victims of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao Tse-tung, the killing fields in Cambodia, numbered in the millions...add to that the new evil of terrorism...all this raises questions

Where is God?

Doesn’t God care?

Why doesn’t God stop it or help?

That is why we need the hope Jesus gives...because of sin and what it has done, does, and will continue to do until we see Jesus face to face in glory. We need hope because we believe there is more than “life is hard then you die”. We must have hope because we can not make the suffering and evil in our world fit into our schemas of understanding. And it doesn’t look like it is going to go away.

So what is a Christian view of suffering? First of all suffering comes from sin.

Peter 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In God's great mercy he has caused us to be born again into **a living hope**, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. **4** Now we hope for the blessings God has for his children. These blessings, which cannot be destroyed or be spoiled or lose their beauty, are kept in heaven for you. **5** God's power protects you through your faith until salvation is shown to you at the end of time. **6** This makes you very happy, even though now for a short time different kinds of troubles may make you sad. **7** These troubles come to prove that your faith is pure. This purity of faith is worth more than gold, which can be proved to be pure by fire but will ruin. But the purity of your faith will bring you praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is shown to you. **8** You have not seen Christ, but still you love him. You cannot see him now, but

you believe in him. So you are filled with a joy that cannot be explained, a joy full of glory. 9 And you are receiving the goal of your faith -- the salvation of your souls.

Secondly, The apostle Paul taught that our faith and belief did not exempt us from hardship, struggle and suffering – but a faith where our struggles lose their hold on our lives and souls when held alongside of heaven (because sin no longer rules us). That is what is meant by being born into a living hope...a hope for the salvation and promises and good that God has kept in heaven for us and that awaits us at the end of time.

It is quite clear that Jesus suffered. He knew and told his followers – including us – that we would suffer. And here’s a disconnect for us! When we lose sight of heaven as our goal we lose understanding of suffrage. It becomes senseless punishment and something to avoid rather than thrive within. Instead of reminding us of our longing for heaven it discourages us to the point that many have fallen away from faith.

So with this living hope for heaven and what awaits us - we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus the beginner and completer of faith, who has gone ahead as a model for all believers in their faith, we look to him so we will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1ff)

Having a Living hope does not mean an escape of suffering, hardship, struggle, and pain. These are no less real and honest in this life. Having a living hope means they have lost their hold over us. It means they strangely pale when held against heaven. It means that when we suffer and the pain that accompanies life come upon us, the hope of our faith wins. **We have this hope to hold out to a hopeless and suffering world**

In Mere Christianity, CS Lewis wrote [heaven] “is the only thing we were made for. And there are strange, exciting hints in the Bible that when we are drawn in, a great many things in nature [our world] will begin to come right. The bad dream is over; it will be morning.”

“A bad dream?” Writes Dekker (The Slumber of Christianity pg. 181), “Yes. In many ways sin has turned our dreams bad, evil has spoiled so many pleasures and introduced so many sufferings”. If we live for this life and world we are left constantly disappointed. And empty. Jesus awakens us to heaven – to our father’s intended goodness of being and good relationship, and to the good, good, good as all was created. Suffering becomes part of the journey toward that not a hindrance of it!

At this point, never having seen Jesus or been in paradise with him, and sin having had its work in our lives, as humans we sort of need suffering. Strange isn’t it? That true joy, anticipation, and expectation – hope – does not come into clear focus until we see it through our suffering.

It is good at this point to clarify that by suffering we are not talking about having to miss out on frapachinos, the home we always wanted, a latest model car, or from making bad decisions.

Suffering as it is referred to by Jesus and Paul and others in the Bible is suffering for your faith (2 Timothy 1:8; 1 Peter 4:12-13). It meant going through a more difficult living sometimes paying the highest cost, because we believe in and follow Jesus. To the hearers of Jesus and Paul it most often meant persecution...being tortured, stoned to death, burned, or pulled apart by horses because of their faith in Jesus. It also meant being ostracized from your family, not getting work, and old friends walking away. It meant being laughed at and humiliated and thought a fool.

They were willing to allow that to happen because of their consuming passion for heaven.

While we do not generally experience this level of persecution –it is a part of our world and I believe the Bible tells us is coming again for believers. How is it that our lives are made more difficult because we believe in and follow Jesus?

Paul said, “I want to know Christ and the power that raised him from the dead. I want to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death. *II* Then I have hope that I myself will be raised from the dead.”

Jesus suffered to do what his Father asked him to do and not sin. That’s our goal in this life

We understand...Hebrews 12:1ff

So let us run the race that is before us and never give up. We should remove from our lives anything that would get in the way and the sin that so easily holds us back. **4** You are struggling against sin, but your struggles have not yet caused you to be killed. **5** You have forgotten the encouraging words that call you his children: "My child, don't think the Lord's discipline is worth nothing, and don't stop trying when he corrects you. **6** The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as his child." **7** So hold on through your sufferings, because they are like a father's discipline. God is treating you as children. All children are disciplined by their fathers

Sin continually disrupts our relationship with God. We have to work hard and diligently to hear and understand our Father so we are able to be obedient. We are charged to live lives worthy of Christ (Ephesians 4). To give everything toward following him as King of our hearts and lives like the pearl or treasure of greatest value (Matthew 13:44-46). It is

difficult and worth suffering for. So we must discipline ourselves to read God's direction in the Bible and then live it.

Our sins of selfishness and self-centeredness make messes out of relationships with each other. Jesus set a high standard for the love we are to have for each other. We struggle to truly love and sacrifice for our brother and sister. It is the mark of the Christian church. We are called to suffer for each other and give ourselves to those who do not know Jesus so that that would (Matthew 22:37-39)! To love, help, encourage, and hold each other accountable for living to the highest standards of Jesus - as his followers in this world.

We are continually searching for the wholeness and inner strength that it is to be created in the image of God

A good deal of the suffering we experience comes from having lost sight of the goal of running hard for heaven and being with Christ in Glory. So many things in life take hold that should not take hold, and weigh us down. I am not saying that hope is some sort of spiritual anesthetic that helps us numb out the burdens and pain of life – that we become uncaring, disconnected and compassionless.

Rather that pain and suffering are an integral part of our faith. It drives us into the arms of our loving and caring Father, it drives us to the finish line of glory with Christ. There are no words that can or should take pain away, only words of hope that can change the way we understand it and the effect it has over us. We do not suffer for ourselves but for our King.

Philippians 3: 10 I want to know Christ and the power that raised him from the dead. I want to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death. **11** Then I have hope that I myself will be raised from the dead. **12** I do not mean that I am already as God wants me to be. I have not yet reached that goal, but I continue trying to reach it and to make it mine. Christ wants me to do that, which is the reason he made me his. **13** Brothers and sisters, I know that I have not yet reached that goal, but there is one thing I always do. Forgetting the past and straining toward what is ahead, **14** I keep trying to reach the goal and get the prize for which God called me through Christ to the life above.

18 Many people live like enemies of the cross of Christ. I have often told you about them, and it makes me cry to tell you about them now. **19** In the end, they will be destroyed. They do whatever their bodies want, they are proud of their shameful acts, and they think only about earthly things. **20** But our homeland is in heaven, and we are waiting for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, to come from heaven. **21** By his power to rule all things, he will change our simple bodies and make them like his own glorious body.

The connection of faith and suffering and hope is necessary. Suffering, struggle, hardship are part of living. It gives integrity to the truth of living as a follower of Jesus.