

“The Questions of God:
2) Why Is There So Much Suffering in the
World?”

a sermon by

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Text: And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:4-5).

A year ago I came across a remarkable little book by Reynolds Price, entitled *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?* In the preface to that book, Price recounts an April afternoon in April 1997 when he received two letters in the mail that, though unrelated, had enormous influence on him. One letter was from Auburn Theological Seminary in New York inviting Price to do a series of lectures at the Seminary. The second letter was from a young medical student named Jim Fox, who had been forced to withdraw from medical school because of a recurring and severe form of cancer. Jim Fox had read a book that Reynolds Price had written several years before entitled *A Whole New Life* that recounts Price's struggle with spinal cancer in the 1980s. This young man raised two very critical questions for Price: does God exist and does God care? The letter began a series of correspondence between Reynolds Price and Jim Fox and was the catalyst for the lectures that Price did at Auburn Seminary that resulted in the book *Letter To a Man in the Fire*.

This week's sermon continues a series of sermons on "The Question of God." This past week we raised the question: Does life make sense? This morning I wish to deal with the question: Why is there so much suffering in the world?"

I.

The scripture that I have read this morning is one of the most amazing in all of the New Testament. In this passage the Apostle Paul takes one of the most dreaded subjects imaginable and turns it in a way that seems almost unbelievable. Concerning the subject of suffering, Paul builds a remarkable syllogism. "Suffering," he says, "produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

If anyone had a right to say a thing like this, the Apostle Paul was that person. This verse is autobiographical. In his second letter to the Corinthians he writes concerning himself, "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day adrift at sea" (II Corinthians 11:24 ff.). Paul started with trouble and ended with hope. That is an essential element in the Christian gospel and the person who does not understand it is farther from being a Christian than one who doubts a formal creed.

II.

In the first place, suffering, rightly used, can call out powers in a person that he or she never realized were there. In his recent biography of George Washington, historian James Burns points out that in 1754 the man who was to become the first president of this nation was in a difficult spot. He had been defeated at Fort Necessity. He was accused of taking hasty action before reinforcements came so as to get all the glory for himself. His officers were called "drunken debauchees." His report on the French plans was denounced as a crooked scheme to advance the interests of private land company. It looked like the end of George Washington. But as his biographer points out, "Just as one is about to exclaim about 'What an outrage,' one reflects and

says, ‘What a preparation!’ You see, trouble asks for something in a person that an untroubled life can never bring.

If our vocabulary did not have in it words like “trouble,” “adversity,” “calamity,” and “grief,” it could not have in it words like “bravery,” “fortitude,” “patience,” and “self-sacrifice.”

Now, please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that trouble alone brings out our best. I am saying that if we have anything approaching the spirit of Christ, we can make trouble bring out the best that is in us. Trouble by itself is neutral. It can do almost anything to a person. It can make that person bitter and resentful. It can make that person hard and cruel. But it can also bring the very best in a person. “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” Who of us does not need to hear that word this morning?

III.

Then, too, suffering can often be used to deepen our sensitivity to the plight of other people and thereby intensify our usefulness. Sometimes it takes adversity to understand adversity and history is filled with magnificent examples of hardship so wonderfully used.

One of the most important people involved in the humanitarian movement of the nineteenth century, which abolished debtors’ prisons, improved labor conditions, and cleansed the English schools of some of their worst barbarian practices was the English author Charles Dickens. Dickens was not just a marvelous storyteller; he was an effective social reformer. He understood some of the great social problems of the day because he had experienced them. Micawber was his father. His father had been in a debtors’ prison. As a young boy, crushed with shame and crippled with poverty, Dickens had visited his father in prison and saw the terrible abuses there. When he was ten years old, Dickens was forced to work long hours in a factory pasting labels on bottles in a blacking factory. He experienced firsthand the terrible cruelties of the English school system. Then he rose above his adversity, transmuted its lead into gold, made of it deep insight, profound understanding, keen sympathy, widespread public service. That is trouble finely used.

This morning our congregation has a unique opportunity to be engaged in a “volunteer fair.” There are over a hundred different ways that a person can serve in this church. One of the most important things we can do is to be involved on a personal level with people who live in homelessness or some other form of poverty. I remember several years ago talking with one of the men at the Urban Ministry Center. He had worked hard to get a job working in a restaurant in the South Park area. One day he told me he had lost his job. When I asked him why, he replied that he wasn’t able to get to and from work. Ordinarily, he was able to use the bus to get from his home downtown to work, but late at night, when he got off work, the buses weren’t running. That meant he had to walk from work to home through the neighborhoods of Eastover and Myers Park. Then, he said, he was so frightened to walk through those neighborhoods at night because he was afraid that people would see him as a criminal and call the police. So he quit his job.

The only way we can change our society is by making a renewed effort to understand other people and the great difficulty that they endure.

IV.

Then, too, consider that trouble finely used can serve our intellects as well as our characters and can rescue us from some very powerful delusions. Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, begins with a statement that for a person to reach maturity, that person must give up the notion that life is always fair. So often we encounter people who cannot believe that life is not a quid pro quo in which goodness is always rewarded and evil always punished.

Where did we get that notion? Certainly, not from the Bible. Was life fair to Jesus? Was the cross just? When Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, did he really think that the religious and political powers in that city were going to receive him with open arms?

Today is Reformation Sunday. It is a time in which we acknowledge our great indebtedness to the great reformers of the Sixteenth Century: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Knox, to name a few. It was on this day, October 31, 1517 (All Hallows Eve) that an obscure Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the Castle Church door at Wittenberg, thus beginning a series of events that would change the course of Western civilization. Martin Marty, in his book *Martin Luther*, points out that Luther was a man who lived in constant struggle about his faith, his future, his life. In April of 1521 Martin Luther was summoned to the town of Worms by the German Emperor, Charles V. Luther had been excommunicated from the Catholic Church and he was called upon to recant his writings. On April 18 of that year, Luther announced to all those present that unless it could be proved that his writings were contrary to Scripture he would not recant them. Then he concluded, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

This morning we can be assured of only one thing. One day we will each face trouble. Never ask of life that you be spared it, only ask that when it comes you will handle it well.

V.

Then, finally, trouble nobly used can strengthen us in the life of faith. Suffering, says Paul, brings endurance, and endurance brings character, and character brings hope. That is not what many of us get from suffering. We get resentment from it. We fall into self-pity because of it. We feel sorry for ourselves because of it, but character and hope--how many of us get that?

In November of 1873 H. G. Spafford, a Christian lawyer from Chicago, placed his wife and four children on the ocean line *Ville du Havre*, which sailed from New York to France. The trip started beautifully, but on the evening of November 21, as the ship sailed through the waters of the Atlantic, the ship was struck by another vessel, the *Lochearn*. Thirty minutes later the *Ville du Havre* sank, with the loss of nearly all passengers who were on board. Mrs. Spafford was rescued by the sailors of the *Lochearn*, but her four children died. Several weeks later Spafford

sailed from New York to join his grieving wife on the other side of the Atlantic. As his ship crossed the spot where the Ville du Havre had gone down, Spafford sat down and wrote a hymn.

“ When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrow like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot,
Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.”

The key of all of this, says the Apostle Paul, is the love of God that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. It is that love that produces hope and that hope does not disappoint us.
Amen!