

THE MESSIAH WILL SUFFER WITH YOU**ISAIAH 53:7-9**

Imagine this scene with me. Billions of people are scattered across a great plain before the throne of God. Here and there groups of people talk heatedly. “How can God judge us?” one person demands. A woman jerks back the sleeve of her robe revealing a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp and asks, “What does God know about suffering? We endured terror, beatings, torture, and death.” In another group, an African American man lowers his collar. “What about this?” he demands showing an ugly rope burn on his neck. “Lynched for no crime but being Black. We were suffocated on slave ships, wrenched away from loved one, and forced to work until death brought us release.” Far out across this plain were hundreds of these groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He had permitted in His world. How lucky God was to live in Heaven where there was no weeping, no fear, no hunger, and no hatred! What did God know about what human beings were forced to endure in this world. “God lives a pretty sheltered life,” they all said,

Each group chose and sent a leader – someone chosen because he or she had suffered the most in that group. There was a Jew, an African American, an untouchable from India, an illegitimate person, someone from Hiroshima, and another from a Siberian prisoner camp. They consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather simple. Before God would be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on Earth as a human being. But because He was God, they set certain safeguards to be sure He couldn’t use His divine powers to help Himself.

Let Him be born a Jew, they decided. Then, let the legitimacy of His birth be doubted. Let Him champion a cause so just, but also so radical, that it brings down upon Him the hatred of every major and established religious authority. Let Him see, taste, hear, and smell what no one can describe and then try to communicate who God is like to other people. Let Him be betrayed by His dearest friends. Let Him be indicted on false charges, tried before a prejudiced jury, and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let Him experience terrible aloneness and feel completely abandoned. Let Him be tortured and then die. And then let Him die the most humiliating kind of death imaginable.

As each leader announced his or her portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from this great throng of people standing before God’s throne awaiting His judgment. But when the last one had pronounced sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word. No one moved. Why this reaction? Because suddenly everyone knew. God had already served His sentence.

In these weeks leading up to Easter Sunday, we’re considering a fascinating description of Jesus found in Isaiah that was written some 700 years before Jesus was born. I’m calling this series of messages *A Portrait Of Jesus Before He Came*. God had revealed to this Jewish prophet, Isaiah, that He was going to send a special deliverer into the

world for people everywhere. Over the years, the Jewish people began to refer to this promised deliverer as the Messiah. Because Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, we know Jesus is the Messiah. Now last week we looked closely at 53:4-6 where Isaiah answered this question, "Why did the Messiah die and what did His death accomplish?" Today, let's reflect on v. 7-9 where Isaiah answered a different question, "How did the Messiah suffer and in what ways did He endure that suffering?" When you consider the suffering of Jesus, you can learn so much about your own suffering in life. These verses in Isaiah underline at least two main truths I'd like us to focus on today.

YOU CAN'T ESCAPE THE PRESENCE OF SUFFERING.

Is it only human beings who suffer? It's easy to assume God is totally immune to or insulated from suffering. God is often pictured as an angry old man with a long, white beard hurling thunderbolts of wrath from His ornate palace up in Heaven – a Being who never suffers in any way, shape, or form. But is that image of God true? I suggest to you that the infinite, awesome, majestic God is also the greatest sufferer in all the universe. Before the dawn of creation, God already knew that sin and evil would sneak into His perfect world. He already knew then the sorrow and suffering it would bring. He already knew He Himself would suffer if human beings – His greatest creation – were to experience a restored relationship with Him.

God's suffering was literal and real. It was concentrated in and experienced by Jesus. Because Jesus was and is God, it's absolutely accurate to say His suffering is one and the same as God's suffering. Jesus was the most afflicted person who has ever lived. Do you remember verse 3 of Isaiah 53? "He was despised and rejected – a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief." (Is. 53:3 NLT)

Now, in v. 7-9, Isaiah goes on to predict accurately many of Jesus' sufferings. His words remind us of the tremendous opposition and hatred Jesus faced, the cruel and painful humiliation He endured, and the terrible violence He experienced. Even before the crucifixion itself, Jesus lived for a long time under the stress of knowing people wanted to kill Him and that one day soon they would succeed. Isaiah said the Messiah would be identified with criminals in some way in His death. The NT tells us two thieves were crucified alongside Jesus. Isaiah indicated a rich man would play a role in the Messiah's death. The NT tells us a wealthy man, Joseph of Arimathea, asked for Jesus' dead body and laid it out in his own tomb.

Many of life's difficulties we experience are undeserved and unfair. They aren't the expected consequences for our poor decisions or punishment for doing something wrong. God knows all about undeserved, unfair suffering. Isaiah reminded us here that the Messiah was sinless and yet even that wasn't enough to prevent the greatest miscarriage of justice the world has ever witnessed. Unproven accusations. Hateful, lying witnesses. Biased judges. God knows all about undeserved, unfair suffering. Let's never forget He Himself has experienced it fully in His Son, Jesus.

So, if God Himself doesn't escape the presence of suffering in His own universe, then why do we think we should? It's become a lucrative profession in our culture by both secular and spiritual spokespersons to tell the rest of us that hard times are always avoidable and never necessary. I was intrigued by an observation I heard years ago by a leading psychiatrist who said some mental illnesses can be traced back to trying to avoid sufferings and setbacks in life at all costs. I grew up just an hour's drive from Disney World in Orlando. I enjoyed visiting there as much as anyone. But many people seem to believe Disney World is what real life ought to be like and look like. And isn't it ironic that some followers of Jesus – the very one Isaiah called “a man of sorrows” – have come to the mistaken conclusion that suffering is never ever God's will for them?

The Bible is ruthlessly realistic about suffering. It contains a very simple message: you can't escape the presence of suffering in this world. Jesus Himself said, “Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.” (Jo. 16:33 NLT) Of course, we don't go out and look for trouble. We don't invite suffering into our lives by being sinful or foolish. Be that as it may, not all suffering can be avoided, deflected, or averted. A lot of it just has to be faced, endured, and lived through. The Bible also teaches that the presence of suffering is not an indication God is absent. Don't ever jump to the conclusion that something is terribly wrong with a person who is facing lots of problems. Why? Lots of adversity in a person's life doesn't prove God is unhappy with him or her. By the same token, lots of prosperity isn't proof of God's favor either. Don't believe that nonsense!

Jesus said you can count on the presence of suffering in your life. Apparently, it's one of God's methods of maturing you. It's also an indication that you're actually a part of God's family. Just like you discipline, shape, or train your kids because you love them, God disciplines, shapes, and trains the people who belong to Jesus because He loves us. One of His methods of shaping us is suffering. When you endure unfair, undeserved suffering while keeping your heart open and submissive before God, it's one of the best evidences of the reality of your faith and the fact you really do trust in God come what may in this life. God doesn't always take His people out of various kinds of suffering. Instead He demonstrates how His grace can sustain us in the midst of pain, heartache, and loss. You can't escape the presence of suffering. Now, I freely admit that while that statement is absolutely true, it's not something that blesses your heart or encourages you, is it? So let me mention another truth about suffering that should surely bless and encourage us. In God's hands – and that's the key issue -

YOU CAN'T ESTIMATE THE POWER OF SUFFERING.

Isaiah pointed to the obvious power of the Messiah's suffering there in v. 8 (NLT), “But he was struck down for the rebellion of my people.” He compared Jesus to a lamb being taken to the altar as a sacrifice. Lambs were one kind of animal used in OT sacrificial worship. The priest laid his hands on the lamb's head and – spiritually speaking – the sins of the person who brought the lamb to the temple were transferred to the lamb. Then the lamb was killed in that person's place as a substitute. God was teaching His

people that sin deserves death. But He was also teaching them that He would both allow and provide a substitute. The ultimate purpose of animal sacrifice was to point people to Jesus – the real, the ultimate Lamb of God. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to be baptized, he said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jo. 1:29 NLT) Jesus’ suffering made our eternity in Heaven a reality. It’s one of the most powerful spiritual realities in the universe. You just can’t estimate it!

Now, someone will say, “But, Rick, Jesus’ suffering is very different than my suffering.” True enough. Nevertheless, there are some very real parallels between what Jesus suffered and what we suffer. For instance, Jesus provided a wonderful example of how to suffer. He suffered with courage, patience, and faith. The overwhelming witness of the Bible is that God has a purpose in allowing tough times in our lives even as He did in Jesus’ life. There is a spiritual power – a good, godly, and holy power – that operates in suffering that’s beyond our estimation. Here’s how the Bible underlines that truth. “We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.” (Rom. 5:3-4 NLT) God uses suffering in our lives to create, establish, and strengthen our inner spiritual character. The Bible even suggests that enduring suffering in a Christ-like way in this life will result in spiritual benefits to us in eternity. “For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!” (2 Cor. 4:17 NLT) I don’t pretend to understand what that means, but it’s fascinating, yes?

The Bible never explains all the whys of suffering. I agree with Vance Havner, an old and much loved country preacher, who made this insightful comment. “I get a little weary of these dear souls who have all the dealings and doings of Providence catalogued and correlated and figured out and can give you glib answers to your heartache. They haven’t been far. God just doesn’t operate on our timetable. And some of His operations don’t add up on our computers. The little boy who didn’t understand why God put so many vitamins in spinach and didn’t put more of them in ice cream had a pretty good idea that it just doesn’t work out like you’d think!” Amen!

As I consider what’s life trials have done in me and – as I’ve also observed what it does in the lives of others as a pastor for over 40 years – some observations come to mind. Any heartache you endure – deserved, undeserved, fair, unfair, unexpected or expected – is allowed by God for one ultimate reason – to drive us into His arms all the more. What drives us into God’s arms isn’t always comforting or makes us feel good. Furthermore, to be driven into God’s arms always results in personal transformation of some kind. For reasons God only knows, He uses suffering to do a work of inner transformation in us. It begins the moment you trust in Jesus and continues until the moment you pass into His presence. Much of the time, personal transformation comes as a result of the hurts and the difficult things that happen to you. In the hands of God – and that’s the all important qualifier – life’s heartbreaks and heartaches make you more submissive to God, more devoted to Jesus, more gracious in your attitudes, and more

caring towards others. None of that kind of transformation or development just happens automatically. It only happens as a result of being driven into God's arms.

"But, Rick, can't suffering also make people bitter against God, other people, and life itself?" Absolutely. You have a choice in how you will respond to suffering that comes your way and your response matters. The Bible says very little about why suffering exists. It says a great deal about your attitude in the midst of suffering. It might sound trite, but you can let life's struggles make you bitter against God and other people or you can let them make you better. That's the choice before us: bitter or better. Life's heartaches aren't what matter in the end; it's our reaction to them that matters. All heartaches – past, present, and future – will pass away. All pain is temporary. But our reaction to what God allows into our lives leaves a spiritual deposit in our soul that's eternal. It goes on forever. That's part of the power of suffering.

You remember the story of Job in the OT, don't you? He was the guy who lost everything – incredible wealth, all his kids, and then his health, too. Things got so bad that even Mrs. Job said, "Why don't you just curse God and die?" It's often been said that Job's story is about one man's great suffering. I like the suggestion instead that it's really a story about one man's great faith. Yes, Job was ticked off at God because his suffering was so undeserved and unfair. But he never gave up on God. Instead, he said, "God might kill me, but I have no other hope." (Job 13:15 NLT) Now that's about as raw and real as faith gets. "Go ahead, God, and kill me if You want. I may not understand it this side of Heaven, but my faith and hope are in You." Job's faith clung to God – held on for dear life – even though there was little outward reason to do so.

It's OK to get angry with God as long as you don't stay angry at Him forever. Job did. David did in the psalms he wrote. God is big enough to handle your anger. God's self-esteem will survive if you say, "God, I'm really disappointed in You." We sometimes get disappointed with God because His job isn't meeting our expectations. Like Job, your suffering and mine will often create a crisis of faith. But just like Job, you need to hang on and hold on to God despite the lack of answers to your questions. Everyone here will face those times in life when we're tempted to ask, "Why me, Lord? What do You have against me?" If you haven't felt that way yet, just wait!

I'm still learning some uncomfortable truths about God. He's not my celestial teddy bear. He has His own agenda. He's far more interested in the transformation of my character than giving me whatever I think will make me happy. He's far more interested I learn to trust in Him for everything in this life than increasing my earthly prosperity. God wants to shape me so I fit into His heavenly family not entertain me in some kind of spiritual Disney World of my own making. Every difficulty in life presents us with a choice. Will I trust God in this? Will I trust God for this? Will this heartache drive me to God or away from Him? Will I hang on to God despite it all or turn away from Him? When we hand over our hurts, our heartaches, and our heartbreaks to God – when we

place all of it in His all-knowing and all-loving hands – we just can't estimate the power of suffering. That's what happened to Jesus. That's what can happen to us and in us.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was one of the world's great authors. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature back in 1970. He passed away in 2008. For years he stood up against the evils of the Soviet Union and lived to witness its collapse. Ironically, one of his greatest personal discoveries occurred in a Soviet prison – part of the Gulag, the vast Soviet labor camp system – that Solzhenitsyn made the world aware of through his writings. Like the other prisoners, Solzhenitsyn worked in the fields. His days were filled with backbreaking labor combined with slow starvation. One day he hit a wall. The hopelessness of it all became too much to bear. He felt there was no purpose in fighting on. His life would make no ultimate difference. Laying his shovel down, he walked over slowly to a crude bench and sat down. He knew at any moment a guard would order him to get up and – if he failed to respond – start beating him to death, probably with his own shovel. He'd seen that happen to other prisoners many times.

As Solzhenitsyn sat there sat there, head down, he felt a presence. Slowly he lifted his eyes. Next to him sat an old man with a wrinkled, utterly expressionless face. Hunched over, the man never spoke a word. Instead, he took a stick and deliberately traced the sign of the cross in the dirt. As Solzhenitsyn stared at the cross, his entire perspective shifted. Yes, he knew he was just one man against the seemingly all powerful Soviet empire. Yet, in that moment, he also knew that the one and only hope of all humanity was represented in that simple cross. Through its power anything was possible. So Alexander Solzhenitsyn slowly got up, picked up his shovel and went back to work. He didn't know then that his books on truth and freedom would one day impact the world.

Look at the cross again this morning. Does your heart ache this morning for some reason? Does it all seem so unfair or undeserved? We worship a God who is well acquainted with suffering. In fact, Jesus is the supreme sufferer in all of the universe. And He put all of His suffering into His Father's hands. Just look at what the Father did with Jesus' suffering! We, too, can put our hurt, our pain, our suffering into our Father's loving hands. God will do something with it that will matter for all eternity. And then, once you've looked long enough at the cross, get up, pick up your shovel, and go back to work.