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## Our Hope in Suffering

(Hebrews 2:14-18; Romans 5:3-5)

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*Second sermon in an Advent series entitled "Where Is God When It Hurts?"*

### Introduction

We all experience various kinds of pain. Someone disappoints us, and a relationship falls apart. We run out of money or think we're going to. For a man to lose his job often creates an identity crisis, and he feels less than a man. A loved one suddenly dies, perhaps a child, and we are devastated. We come down with some sickness that cannot be cured, or if it can be cured, we are incapacitated for a while. You could add other things into the mix, I'm sure.

But why do we go through these things in the first place? What is the point of these matters? The world accuses us of believing in a God who either cannot stop evil, and is therefore impotent, or if He can stop evil but doesn't, He is sadistic. One partial answer to this is that God has given us a will that can obey or disobey; otherwise, we would be robots. But that is not the only reason by far, and we cannot now go into this, only we can say that we Christians have hope in the midst of suffering for a good end.



What hope is there for the non-Christian who cannot even define evil without God? What hope is there if there is no life after death? If the atheist position is correct, we came from molecules in motion, and we will return to the same nothingness. Therefore, what difference does the in-between make? It is **complete despair** to

think that all our suffering is just by chance with no meaning and no solution. Without personal immortality, life is absolutely meaningless.

But why pain? There was a Christian doctor, Dr. Brand, who worked with people who had leprosy.



As you may know, lepers lose all feeling in their limbs, not knowing when they injure themselves or its severity. Thus, they often injure themselves severely and become infected, and sometimes this is what kills them. Limbs did not rot off, but were injured. Fingers and toes were eaten by rats. Eyes that lost sensitivity did not blink so that a man's eyes went dry, and became blind. These people can undergo surgery without anesthesia!

Dr. Brand tried to teach the people how important it was for them to take care of their injuries, but it fell on deaf ears. Then he came up with an ingenious plan: he would devise a machine like a net to put on the limbs most vulnerable to injury. When they injured themselves, there would be a loud buzz in their ears, and it would keep buzzing intermittently until something was done. But guess what? They did not feel anything and so did not react to protect themselves, such as we do when we put our hand on something hot. The people would turn the switch off or take out the batteries. Then the doctor realized that pain was God's gift to us to make us take care of ourselves. **"No pain, no gain."**

The same is true in the Christian life. We are so dull to our sins that we will not make positive change until God gets our attention by some kind of suffering, either great or small, enduring or temporary. But when we do make moral changes in our lives, it is for the better. Remember, God is concerned about our character, not our pocketbook, or other matters.

## I. Hope in Christ Who Identified with Us Completely (vv. 14, 18)

So, how can we have hope in the midst of some kind of trials?

The first thing is for us to remember that the Son of God became human in every way as we are except sin.

Was He God who could not sin? Of course, and some early heretics drew the conclusion that He could not have joined our weak humanity to Him, for that would compromise His deity. Thus, some said He only appeared to be human, and others said though the humanity was real, it was not really joined to the Son of God. If He only appeared to be human, then He would be laughing at our trials. There was cooperation between the human and divine parts of Christ, but not really a union. The fathers quickly saw that both positions really meant that we have no savior, for to deliver us, He had to be one with us. The early fathers said it this way:

What the Son of God did not assume of our humanity was not redeemed.

Thus, if He did not have a real human body, such was not redeemed. If He did not have a human will, our wills were not redeemed. If He did not have a human mind (as well as a divine mind), the mind was not redeemed. If He did not have real human suffering, our suffering would be meaningless, but now He sanctifies to us our suffering by His suffering.

Therefore, the Son of God truly became man, adding to Himself our human nature, not a human person, yet a nature without sin so that we had both God and man in one person. This way, He identified with us as our peer and with God the Father as His peer. From the virgin conception to today, every act of Christ is an act of God-man.

One early heretic in particular said that the Son of God could not suffer; therefore, His deity was not joined with His humanity, for that would say He could suffer. This heretic said that if the Son of God

really added to Himself a human nature, then He had something new and had changed, but the Son of God could not change.

St. Cyril arose to the occasion and gave a great statement, which we see here in Hebrews:

The Son of God could not suffer and was unchangeable, but through His humanity He did suffer.

This is a mystery; don't try to solve it. The point is that He completely identified with us, suffering, temptations, and death. He knows how we feel in sufferings because He has been there! Look at the last verse of our passage:

For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted (v. 18).

Did not being sinless give Him an advantage over us in not yielding to sin? You bet, and thank God; otherwise, we would perish.

*The Bible enjoins us to defend those who cannot defend themselves, to speak for those who cannot themselves speak. And so we defend and speak for the unborn, the disabled, and the dependent. What the Bible and the light of reason make clear, we must make clear. We must be willing to defend, even at risk and cost to ourselves and our institutions, the lives of our brothers and sisters at every stage of development and in every condition. – from the Manhattan*

But in another sense, the more pure one is, the more pungent would be the temptations.

However, as verse 18 states, because He was tempted in all things like us, therefore,

We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

Thus God's identification with us where we live is unique among the world's religions. Allah is so other that one cannot even converse with him, let alone

expect him to identify with our trials. Buddhism does not believe in a god but is a philosophy. Hinduism has 300 million gods.

"In Gethsemane, He did not pray, 'Thank you for this opportunity to suffer,' but rather pled . . . for an escape" (Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, p. 230). Obviously, there is nothing wrong with such pleadings, and we can complain to God.

It is difficult to describe what it's like in military combat. Many to a certain extent have sympathy with me for having been there and gone through it, but when I call my friend Salvatore Gallo, who

lives in Rochester, NY, and we talk on the phone, there is an instant bond. We were there together and covered one another's back. I bandaged a severe wound he sustained from an incoming mortar round, and had him "dusted off," as we said about having someone taken out by helicopter. We understand one another in a way that no one else can.

How can one understand the sniper bullets zinging by, the incoming 82 mm mortar rounds and 122 mm rockets coming in, how can one understand talking to two men, and then a few seconds later their heads were gone, unless he has been there?

One who has gone through a divorce can empathize with another who is going through the same, while others who have not been there just don't feel the pain, the loneliness, the guilt, the fear of the future, and the angst.

Likewise, the eternal Son of God, Creator of all that is, has been in our shoes, quite literally. Therefore, when we feel the pain, it gives us great **hope** to know that He understands, does not condemn, but lovingly takes us through trials for our own good, even as He endured the same for us, and found it joyful in the long run (Hebrews 12:2).



He lost loved ones, such as His friend Lazarus; and though He raised him from the dead, He still wept at His death. He said that He had nowhere to lay His head, so He had money problems. He was betrayed by His closest friends so He understands the loss of a relationship. Though He was not sick (and in my view, could not be sick, for that is a product of sin), yet He had friends and family who were sick. Then He experienced one thing we shall never experience, "**My God, My God, why has thou forsaken Me?**"

Thus we have hope in His sufferings with us, which gives us meaning.

## II. **Hope Because Satan Is Destroyed (v. 14)**

It was as a Man that Jesus conquered the devil. This really had to be the case, for a man, Adam, lost the world, and another Man, the Last Adam, Christ, had to regain it. He did so by taking the very thing that Satan had brought about, death to humanity. Jesus took the worst that Satan could hand out, very death itself, and went to the grave for three days, then by the power of who He was, He came out of the grave, much to Satan's horror.

Most people do not take the devil seriously, but if we look at our culture, we surely must conclude that he is alive and well in the USA. Our whole culture is given over to all kinds of sexuality, death, destruction, gangs, murder, wickedness in public schools and in high political places and so on. How can so many be involved in the same conspiracy to attack Christians and God's morality except that there is a mind, a very powerful mind, behind all these things?

As Peter said:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8).

Those who have been involved in the occult or drugs sometimes "have been taken captive by him to *do his will*" (2 Timothy 2:26).

We have hope because our age-old enemy has been defeated. He can only do us good, though at times it may seem like evil, as in the case of Job. The devil is defeated; we win.

## III. **Hope Because We Have Victory over the Fear of Death (v. 15)**

This hope over death is not just wishful thinking, but it is based on the sure, historical, bodily resurrection of Christ. We can demonstrate His bodily resurrection from history as surely as we can that Pilate and the Caesars lived.

Others are enslaved by Satan's servants to drugs, prostitution, gangs, and so forth. Satan is a real foe, and his weapon has been survival. People will do anything to avoid death, but Jesus came to deliver us from the devil and therefore from the **fear** of

death. What is more important to a Christian than anything is pleasing the Lord. Death is secondary.

We would rather die than dishonor Christ, like the three Hebrew children who chose the fiery furnace rather than worship the king's idol (Daniel 3). On TV I've watched investigations into various gangs in our large USA cities, and the one thing they have in common is an orientation to death and the terror of it. They are held captive by it. Modern Christians who are signing the Manhattan Declaration are saying they prefer death to compromising pro-life stand, the biblical definition of a family, and other matters.

We will all die, and though there is some angst about it even for us – and indeed for the Lord in the garden just before His crucifixion – yet we have definitely been delivered from it.

St. Chrysostom said in his day that he was embarrassed for Christians to engage in the custom of the culture to wail over the death of loved ones. He reminded his people that the sting of death had been removed.

<sup>55</sup> O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? <sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

We will all face the "sting" of death, sooner or later, and wouldn't it be great to know that the bee's sting, that is the devil's death sting, has been removed:

<sup>14</sup> Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup> and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Just recently my stepfather's sister fell, hit her head, and never regained consciousness. She died within five minutes of being removed from life support. Yet she was a strong Christian, so for her the sting of death was gone. Can you imagine being normal, walking around and thinking of what you were planning for the next few hours (dinner with her daughter), falling one minute, and waking up in the arms of Jesus the next!

We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

We have hope, the sure confidence, over the fear of death itself, so what can lesser trials do to us?

## Conclusion

So what trial are you having right now? What is the worst thing that could happen? You could die, and then what? We win. If we live, we win because we

*Read more about the Manhattan Declaration at <http://www.manhattandeclaration.org>*

experience God's grace now in our lives to provide all our needs. If we have something happen to us that is worse than death, such as what Joni Eareckson Tada went through being paralyzed from the neck down as a teen, God's grace is sufficient, and one day death will release us from our trials.



So what is our hope? Wrong question. **WHO** is our hope? His name is Jesus, who became truly man, though continuing to be God, (1) identified with us so He understands, (2) defeated Satan, and (3) has defeated death. Let's look at it this way:

- If we have financial problems, Jesus is the provider, and He truly understands our daily needs, for He had nowhere to lay His head. He supplies our needs, so we win.
- If a relationship goes sour, we have One who is closer than a brother, who understands because all His relationships went sour. We win.
- If someone close to us dies, He weeps with us, as He did at the grave of Lazarus, but He has overcome death. We can look at a coffin and

thank God for the resurrection of the Son of  
God. We win.

There are no odds that we will win, for that is  
gambling, but there is certainty, absolute certainty,  
infallible certainty, that we have won and will win.  
He is our anchor of the soul (Hebrews 6:19).

**THIS IS INFALLIBLE HOPE.Ω**