

Good Friday Meditation

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[0 : 00] This being Good Friday, I've been thinking a lot today and reflecting on the state of the world, and I've been thinking about the problem of suffering. How do you explain suffering, like what we see in the world?

Especially now that we live in a world where we have instantaneous contact with tragedies all around the globe. The minute something happens, like the fire in the Notre Dame Cathedral or the fires in the various other churches that received far less press over the past couple of weeks, we know instantaneously when tragedy strikes.

And so we have to make sense of that somehow because we're human beings. And all religions have to deal with the problem of suffering. And honestly, after years and years and years, I've realized that no religion gives a fully satisfactory explanation, including Christianity.

And it's been a struggle for me. It's been one of the great sources of struggle in my own faith, is that the Christian faith does not give a fully satisfactory explanation for the problem of suffering.

But that doesn't mean I've come to realize that the Christian gospel does not offer an answer to suffering. Because while it doesn't give us an explanation, I do believe it gives us something far more valuable in that it offers us a solution to suffering.

[1 : 38] I was reading today Isaiah 53, verses 4 and 5 say, Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with His wounds, we are healed.

And that last line struck me deeply today. That God's answer to our grief and suffering was to bear our grief and suffering.

To enter into it and take it upon Himself. And so now, as we're gathered here for Good Friday, very appropriately, the cross is at the center of our focus.

[2 : 41] And in a few minutes, we'll invite you to come forward and to venerate the cross, if you so desire. To kneel before it, to touch it, even to kiss it.

To recognize and to give respect to God's answer to the problem of suffering and to reflect on what it cost Him.

Because as we do that, we realize that we are dealing with a God who loves us enough to take on pain and suffering in order to promise an end to pain and suffering.

And that verse which says, with His wounds we are healed, that's meant literally. That's not poetry. That's not a nice sentimental idea.

It literally means, with His wounds, we are healed. And so what I want to say tonight is that this healing is available here and now.

[3 : 42] Spiritual healing is available here and now. All of the ways that we've been cut off from the source of life, from our Maker, all of the ways that we've rebelled against Him, and the purposes for which He made us, all of that, all of the wrongs that we've committed against one another, all of that can be dealt with here and now in a moment.

You simply have to look to the cross and ask for forgiveness. And that spiritual healing is yours.

There's also emotional and psychological healing that is available at the cross.

If you look at the next chapter in Isaiah, Isaiah 54, it says, Sing, O barren one who did not bear.

Break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor.

You know, to be a barren woman in the ancient Near East was the epitome of shamefulness and failure and inadequacy.

It amounted almost to a death sentence because your children were everything. They were your future. They were your honor.

[5 : 01] They were your glory. They were your wealth. They were everything. So to be a barren woman was the most hopeless situation one could imagine in the ancient Near East.

And yet what this is saying is that because of the cross, because of the God who bore our suffering, we receive something that is of such infinite value that even a barren woman in the ancient Near East, when she receives this gift, will break forth into song.

Because this God has given us Himself. And in Him, our family, our descendants will be as numerous as the stars.

So I don't know if you're anything like me, but around 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, that's the hardest time of my 24-hour day.

Because that's when I, for one reason or another, I wake up and everybody else is asleep, and these voices begin to needle away at me.

[6 : 12] And I have these things in my life, these things that I've done, these things that I've left undone, that cause me tremendous shame. And the voice of shame begins to speak to me as I lay there in a half-awake state.

And some days and some nights I feel tormented by those voices. I felt so tormented sometimes that I will audibly say, shut up.

And then my wife says, what? And I say, not you. And you realize that in the cross we have an answer for our shame.

We have an answer for our guilt. We have an answer for our inadequacy. And we can come before the cross. And we can take those sources of shame and we can cast them on the cross.

And then we can walk away free from them. And we never have to listen to those voices again.

There is social healing to be found at the cross.

[7 : 16] I don't know if there is anyone in your life who has hurt you or wronged you. People you have struggled to forgive. People you have not forgiven. Come to the cross.

Reflect on the price that God paid to forgive you. Find not in yourself, but in the cross, the strength to bear the suffering required to forgive those who have hurt you.

Because forgiveness does require us to suffer. You can even find physical healing here. I was reflecting on the Good Friday service and realizing, if anything, this is a healing service.

By His wounds we are healed. And so come, if you have physical ailments, if your body is rebelling against you, if the entropy of the fallen world is pulling at your soul, come and ask God to heal you and restore you.

And the promise is this. Either God will heal you, or for a time, God will allow that thorn to remain in your flesh.

[8 : 31] But one day we will all have new bodies. And suffering and pain will be no more. And so come to the cross. Ask God to heal you.

And reflect on these words from Ed Shalito, who endured the horror and the suffering of World War I, and in the wake of all of that evil, had to make sense of the question of suffering in his own heart.

And in his wrestling, he wrote this poem called Jesus of the Scars. And I'll only read the final stanza. The other gods were strong, but thou wast weak.

They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne. But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak.

And not a god has wounds, but thou alone. Lord, we ask that as we come forward, and we touch the wood of this cross, as we focus our attention on the wood of this cross, that this would be a way that you might draw us into the reality of the true cross of Christ.

[9 : 54] And that as he stretched out his arms on the hardwood of that cross, and as he opened his arms in a posture of embrace to a suffering world, that as we come to this cross, we would come into his embrace.

And we would experience the healing and the wholeness that is only to be found there. In your Son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.