

Hope in our suffering

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[0 : 00] Lillias Trotter is or was a woman who hails from Victorian London.! And as she grew up, it became evident that she was a phenomenally talented artist.

! And she started to be noticed by the who's who of London society, including the great John Ruskin, who was a great lover of art, a very well-known intellectual leader. And Ruskin took her under his wing and he at some point realized that she had the kind of talent that meant she could go places.

And so he sat her down and said, Lillias, you have the potential to become one of England's greatest living painters, one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest painter of your generation. But that's going to require you to commit yourself fully to your art and do it. Get rid of everything else you're doing. At the same time, Lillias' talent and notoriety were growing, something else was growing.

It was a sense inside her that the Lord was calling her down a different path. A path that led to North Africa, to Algeria, to serve as a missionary.

[1 : 17] She would go alone, married, and she would spend her life there. So Lillias was presented with these two paths and ultimately she chose the latter path. She chose to leave London, to leave proper society.

And she chose, instead of fame and wealth and notoriety, she chose a life lived in heat and disease and, at times, isolation and total obscurity.

And yet, she flourished. She created some of her greatest works of art, not to be seen in the great galleries of the London Who's Who, but in the margins of her journals, where she also wrote beautiful reflections about the heart of God.

You know, I've been thinking about Lillias this week as I've reflected on this passage in 2 Corinthians 5 and 6. In Corinth, if you know what had been going on there, there was a lot of confusion.

False teachers had come in and they were claiming and teaching and spreading this idea that spiritual blessing equated with material blessing.

[2 : 33] That if you were blessed by God, it would be evident, it would be visible because your life would be impressive. You would be famous, you would be wealthy, you would be healthy, you would be powerful and influential, right?

And so, you know that people are blessed because, according to these teachers, it's just evident in the way their life looks. Health, wealth and power. The assumption is that if God is really with you, your life will be impressive.

However, they said, if you're the kind of person who suffers, if you're the kind of person who struggles, if you're unhealthy or unwell, if you're not successful, if you live in obscurity, then clearly God hasn't blessed you.

Maybe God is even punishing you. Maybe God doesn't really care about someone like you. So these ideas spread like wildfire because there's something in us as human beings that tends to think that way.

These ideas, I would argue, are alive and well today. Most of us, and I would include myself in this, tend to drift, if we're not careful, into this way of thinking.

[3 : 43] You know, if my prayers aren't seeming to be answered, even though I continue to pray them, or if worship feels dry, if life is hard, when suffering is lingering, maybe that means I've done something to make God angry.

Maybe that means that I've let God down. Maybe that means God has abandoned me or finally gotten sick of me and given up on me entirely. On the other hand, if my prayers are being

answered, if worship feels rich and I'm connecting with God, if things are going well, then what do we say?

God is blessing me. I'm so blessed. I'm so encouraged by all the blessings in my life. So naturally, these false teachers, when they looked at somebody like Paul, they see a man who's poor and unimpressive in appearance and apparently not a very effective public speaker in a frequently faced suffering.

And so they easily dismissed Paul. They said, well, you know, clearly the Lord is not with this man. I think it's safe to assume they probably would have said the same thing about Lilius. You know, they would have said, oh, what a shame.

What a waste. What a waste of talent. What a foolish decision she made. But Lilius knew something. She knew something about the heart of God that these false teachers could never understand.

[5 : 11] And this is something that she actually wrote in her journal years later after living a life in Algeria and reflecting back on that life. She wrote these words.

Holiness, not safety, is the end of our calling. Holiness, not safety, is the end of our calling.

And that truth sits at the very heart of Paul's words in this letter to the Corinthian church and in this particular passage. First Paul reminds them and us of the nature of his ministry.

He says, we are therefore Christ's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

The most important decision you will make in your life is that decision. Will you be reconciled to God or not? It's the only decision we make in this life that has any bearing on the next life.

[6 : 12] Will we be reconciled to God while there is time? And then comes one of the most breathtaking summaries, I would say in my humble opinion.

One of the most breathtaking summaries of the Gospel in all of Scripture. Listen to what Paul says here. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us. So that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

If you listen to what he's saying, why did Jesus come? Why did Jesus take on our sin? Why did Jesus go to the cross and give his life in our place?

So that we might become righteous. And I want to be clear here. This doesn't just mean that we would be declared righteous, although that is true and it is marvelous and it is beautiful.

But he actually means that we would not only be declared righteous, but that we would be transformed. That we would be remade, that we would be refashioned into people whose lives actually reformed.

[7 : 15] That we would be able to make the heart and the character of Christ. So God's great project that unfolds throughout Scripture, Old Testament to New Testament, Genesis to Revelation, this great unfolding plan is not merely to make forgiven people, let off the hook people.

It's to make holy people. It's to make people who radiate with the glory of Christ. This is God's singular aim.

So I want to lay this out as clearly as we can and then contemplate the implications of this. God's singular purpose in your life, and in my life, is to make us whole.

God's singular purpose in your life is to make you whole. And God's going to use all means at his disposal to forge us into righteous women and men who radiate the likeness of Jesus Christ.

And I would say this, I would say if we don't understand this, or if we don't accept it, if we don't believe it, I would say that our lives are never really going to make sense. Because all the things that we think should happen, many of those are not going to happen the way we think they should.

[8 : 40] We're going to wonder why people who seem good experience bad things, and why some of the worst people we know experience good things. And none of that seems fair. If the false teachers are correct, that's true.

Unless we understand God's purpose in our life, our lives are never going to make sense. On the other hand, once we begin to see this, once we begin to realize that God's aim is to make me holy, that begins to transform how we measure good things and bad things.

We begin to realize that we need an entirely different scale to measure and make meaning of our lives. So for instance, there are many things that the world, and most likely these false teachers in Corinth, many things that everybody would assume are no-brainer things to seek after.

Right? Everybody should want things like comfort. Everybody should want things like success. Everybody should want things like affirmation and influence and notoriety.

Of course these are good things. We should all want them. But if God's whole aim is to make us holy, the good things in our lives may actually present the greatest spiritual obstacle to that aim.

[10:05] I would argue, at least in my experience, the enemy rarely tempts mature believers with obvious evil. God's good things that slowly begin to displace God.

That's a much more effective strategy because comfort can anesthetize our dependence on God's provision.

We just feel it less and less. We go numb slowly over time through comforts and conveniences.

Success can dull our desire for the deeper joy of God's presence.

Affirmation can become a kind of shadow substitute for our reliance on God's love.

So the tragedy is not that we choose evil, it's that we choose lesser glories. We choose lesser things. We live lives where we trade the living God for manageable substitutes.

[11:14] We trade eternal joy for temporary relief. So on the one hand, if we understand that God's aim is to make us holy, it begins to change how we think about the good things that we seek after.

Maybe they are good. Maybe we should seek after them. But let's never assume that these are always good things. For some of us, they may be very, very, very harmful for us.

On the other hand, we might face hardship as believers that the world would look out with pity and say, what a shame, what a pity.

How is that person still functioning? How is that person still going? They've had it so rough. But what we come to learn if we understand Lilius' words, Paul's words, is that those might actually be the places in our lives where God brings out the greatest good.

Paradoxically. So look at Paul's example in verse 4. He says, as servants of God, we commend ourselves in every way. Ha! What's the resume? We're commending ourselves to you as legitimate servants of God, okay?

[12:28] What do you got? How do you prove it? Well, in great endurance, in troubles, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, riots, in hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger.

What kind of CV is that? He's a man who faces all kinds of challenges and hardships almost every day of his life. Many people would have given up a long time ago, and yet, look how he describes himself.

He describes himself and his fellow apostles this way. Dying, and yet we live on. Beaten, and yet not killed. Sorrowful, and yet always rejoicing.

Poor, and yet making many rich. Listen to this. Having nothing, and yet possessing everything. This is a man who's not on the brink of quitting.

He's not a man on the brink of giving up. This is a man who seems to be, by everything he says, flourishing. And it raises this question, what makes it possible for a man who has faced all of this suffering to be able to say this?

[13:40] Even though I'm sorrowful, I'm always rejoicing at the same time. Even though I have nothing, I feel like I possess everything. How could you say such a thing?

And the answer is because unlike the false teachers who believe that suffering means God has abandoned you, or that he's punishing you, Paul knew from his own experience that times of suffering, hardship, waiting, longing, silence, those are the times when Christ is most likely to draw near.

Those are the times we discover when Jesus is closer than we maybe ever have experienced him being before. The times when we can most powerfully experience his presence.

And these are often the times when God is most powerfully at work. And I think Paul realized through his own experience that there's no such thing as meaningless suffering.

That nothing is wasted. That God can and does use all of it. He uses everything. He uses the good.

[14:56] He uses the bad. He uses the ugly. He uses the stuff that we would just as soon forget ever happened. Paul sees this as all being a part of God's unfolding purpose in his life.

To make him holy. To make him like Christ. To join him and bond him so that he shares in the life of Christ.

By sharing in the sufferings of Christ. And I would say, I believe that there are degrees of emotional maturity and degrees of spiritual maturity which you find go together.

There are degrees of emotional and spiritual maturity that can only be found on the far side of intense suffering. Until that happens, we will plateau.

There are qualities in you. There are characteristics in you. There are aspects of who God has created you to be.

[16:07] Maybe some of the greatest treasures you have to offer. That can only be called out of you through suffering. Now that is a great mystery.

And most of the time, I wish it wasn't that way. If I had a magic wand, I may make a world where that wasn't necessary. But somehow in the mystery of God, in the mystery of the brokenness and sinfulness of our world, in the mystery of the way that redemption works, somehow that is true. And I know that there are some of you maybe, particularly if you are younger and you are hearing this and you think this sounds absurd or ridiculous, and that is completely fine. That is completely fine.

I also know there are some people in this room who know exactly what I am talking about. You know exactly what I am talking about. So as we enter the season of Lent, all of this begins to become deeply practical.

Because Lent, uniquely, is a time in the church calendar where we ask, where is God at work in my life? Where is God seeking to make me holy?

[17:20] And it may very well be in that place of greatest struggle right now. Whatever that is in your life, and maybe you can call it to mind right now.

Maybe you are in it. But it may very well be that that is the place where God is most powerfully at work in your life right now. That doesn't mean that I am not praying that it goes away for you. It doesn't mean that anybody wants you to suffer. But it also doesn't mean that it is meaningless or that God has abandoned you. That somehow in the mystery of a sovereign God who loves you and is for you, the worst things that are happening to you may very well be the places of the greatest life and the greatest beauty and the greatest growth.

And I hope and pray that one day when we look back on those times, it will make sense and we will see how it all played out. I think that we will. I talk a lot about my Jesus list.

List of questions that I am going to ask Jesus when I see him. It gets longer and longer. The older you get, the list gets really long. This is one of those questions.

[18:28] But it may very well be that this Lent is a time when you begin to see how God is at work in those places. Where is God sanding down your pride?

Where is God exposing idols, those poor substitutes, those lesser glories? Where is God inviting you into deeper surrender?

The practices that we take on during Lent give us ways to cooperate with God's work in us as he seeks to make us holy. Not as Jesus says in the Gospel reading to be done for outward praise or admiration or recognition.

Oh, what a spiritual person. Look at how amazing you are. Absolutely not about that. Right? This is a time for the hidden work, the secret work to happen.

It's between you and the Lord and you and the Lord alone. So when we pray, which during this Lent I would encourage you to commit to regular daily prayer.

[19:32] When we pray, what are we doing? We are aligning our will with God's holiness project in us. We are aligning ourselves. God, I am aligning my will with you and whatever you want to do with me.

Right? Thy will be done in my life and on this earth as it is in heaven. So during Lent I encourage you to commit to daily prayer. Ask God to help you see his work in your life.

Not only in the good things, but pray specifically about the hard things. Ask God to help you see his hand there as well. When we fast.

When we fast. When we take something and we give it up for the season of Lent. We are loosening our grip on things that compete with God's holiness project.

Things that distract from God's holiness project. So whatever that is, let it go. And when we give. When we practice generosity.

[20:33] When we give to the poor and the needy. Which is another Lenten discipline. We are resisting that lie that security comes from anything other than God. And we are reminded when we give.

The glory of our own spiritual poverty. And the lavish generosity that God has shown us through the grace of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus who by his death and resurrection.

Has opened the way into God's very presence. To share in his life. To become more fully human. To become more fully human. But only if we remember.

That holiness. Not safety. Is the end of our calling. Let's pray. Our Father may it be so.

May those of us in the heights of joy. Those of us in the throes of despair. And everyone in between.

[21 : 34] you. May we meet you and encounter you this night and in this season. May we see your hand at work in our lives, in the good and the bad. May we learn to measure our lives by your standard rather than the standard of the false teachers in the world. And Lord, may we hunger and thirst for righteousness. May we long for holiness. May we participate joyfully in your work to make us in the image of your son. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen.