

Pilgrim Valley: Walking with God in Suffering

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 August 2015

Preacher: Rev. Jeremy Graham

[0 : 00] This is the fourth Sunday in a sermon series on the biblical theme of walking with God. And this theme confronts us with the need to be honest about what it looks like to walk with God in every single season of life, including the difficult ones.

And that's because the Bible is very clear that suffering is to be expected in this world. But the Bible also, I believe, offers an utterly unique perspective on suffering, unlike anything else you'll find in the world.

It's unique because it's hopeful and it's redemptive. It puts all our human suffering in perspective, the perspective of the cross of Jesus Christ.

And this is good news for all of us here this morning and for the world. And so whether you're walking with God today, or whether you've come because you're curious, or whether someone's just dragged you along to church this morning, I want to invite you to have your Bibles open to Psalm 23 with me.

And I'd like to see what this psalm particularly says about suffering. And it's really verse 4 that I want to focus on this morning. So let me read it again for us. The first thing we see here in verse 4 is that Christians should expect suffering in life.

[1 : 36] And we need to hear this, don't we? As 21st century folks? Because suffering is getting pushed more and more towards the margins in our culture.

I mean, I know that many of you have experienced tangible and real suffering. Physical, emotional, spiritual suffering. But the reality is that in our world today, suffering is not nearly as visible as it was only a few generations ago.

I'm talking about frequent funerals of loved ones. Regular pain from a toothache. Something we would never think about today.

We just go to the dentist. No anesthetic for operations. Just whiskey and a piece of wood to bite down on. That's suffering. So I think that we are particularly vulnerable to be tempted today to expect a life that's free from this kind of suffering.

But when we live this way, what we're really doing is mistaking the destination for the journey. We're looking at this life as if it is the destination. And so we expect that this is where we're going to find the best life.

[2 : 53] This is where we're going to find the perfect life. This is where we're going to find fulfillment. We put our hope in the now. And if you were with us last week, we looked at how when we fix our eyes on the goal, the telos, the end of the Christian life, which is the celestial city, the hope of heaven.

Our citizenship is in heaven. When we fix our eyes on that, it gives us the perspective we need to walk, even in times of suffering. Especially in times of suffering. And you know, King David, he assumes this kind of suffering is going to happen in his life.

You notice how he says, even though I walk, which basically means I know I'm going to walk through the valley. I know it's inevitable. It's a matter of when and not if. And you know, John Bunyan, who wrote Pilgrim's Progress, which is one of the inspirations for this sermon series, he assumed suffering was part of the Christian life.

He was a 16th century Puritan. And he was persecuted as a Christian, believe it or not, it was illegal not to be Anglican. And because he refused to go against his conscience, he spent more than a decade behind bars, away from his family.

He suffered physically. But John Bunyan also suffered severely from depression. Particularly around the issue of the assurance of his salvation. And so he knew acutely mental and spiritual anguish as well.

[4 : 21] And so when we open Pilgrim's Progress, if you've had a chance to read it this summer, it has a lot to teach us as 21st century folks about suffering. And I'd like to just read a short quote, particularly from the passage that's inspired by the 23rd Psalm, when the protagonist, the main character, Christian, walks through the valley of the shadow of death.

This is Bunyan speaking. Now at the end of this valley was another, called the valley of the shadow of death. And Christian must needs go through it, because the way to the celestial city lay through the midst of it.

You can see how Bunyan affirms here that there's no way around this valley. You can't just avoid it to get to the celestial city. He continues, I saw then in my dream that when Christian was got to the border of the shadow of death, there met him two men making haste to go back, to whom Christian spake as follows.

Whither are you going? They said, back, back. We would have you do the same too if either life or peace is prized by you. Why? What's the matter? Said Christian. We were almost in the valley of the shadow of death, but that by good half we looked before us and saw the danger before we came to it.

We saw the valley itself, which is as dark as pitch. We also saw their hobble goblins, satyrs, dragons of the pit. And over that valley hangs the discouraging clouds of confusion.

[5 : 44] Death also doth always spread its wings over it. In a word, it's every wit dreadful, being utterly without order. Then, said Christian, I perceive not yet by what you have said, but that this is my way to the desired haven.

Just to translate that last line, Christian is saying, you've said nothing to change my mind from knowing that this road is the road that leads to the celestial city, and it lies through this valley. So Bunyan reminds us that if we begin the journey of faith, but we're not prepared for suffering, we'll never be able to face it when it comes. We'll turn our backs and run from it, just like these two young men that Christian meets.

So first, we can expect suffering, even when we're walking with God. But verse 4 doesn't end there, does it? David continues by saying, even in our suffering, no, even better maybe, especially in our suffering, God is with us.

Let me read verse 4 again. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

[6 : 59] Two weeks ago, David Short said something that I haven't been able to get out of my head. He said, it's in suffering that we learn God is with us more than anywhere else. I wonder if this has been your experience.

Do you think what he said is true? I think I've experienced this to be true. And I think it's because it's precisely in our weakness, the weakness of suffering, that we most fully learn to rest entirely in God to be our strength.

Let me say that again. In our weakness is where we've most fully learned to rest entirely on God as our strength. And you know, the truth is that Psalm 23 is not actually a psalm about suffering.

It's a prayer of trust. And the phrase that captures this best is right in verse 1. I know most of you have memorized it. You don't even need to look at your Bibles. The Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not want. In other words, if everything that Psalm 23 says is true, I have absolutely no reason to doubt that God will ever fail to provide everything I need forever.

[8 : 16] But when we suffer, we begin to doubt the truth of Psalm 23. We do this because we think that God cannot possibly allow me to experience suffering if He really is my good shepherd.

And He can't possibly understand the hardship and the horror of the suffering that I'm experiencing. Suffering must be the one thing that God can't possibly understand. Or in other words, we say to ourselves, I am in want.

But the unspeakable good news of the Gospel, friends, is that even in the midst of our suffering, especially in the midst of our suffering, God never wavers from being with us and being for us because He is intimately acquainted with the full depth of suffering.

God never wavers from being with us and providing for us because He is intimately acquainted with the full depth of suffering. This is how the Apostle Peter describes it.

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in His steps. He Himself bore our sufferings on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

[9 : 36] By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, Psalm 23. You see, Jesus takes suffering and on the cross He redeems it.

He takes even our suffering and He says, I know your pain and I'm with you in the midst of it. I have suffered as you have suffered. But even better, I have conquered the suffering so that you can rest completely in my strength.

I am your shepherd and you don't need to want. And brothers and sisters, this transforms our suffering from something we want to run away from or resist or avoid to something that we, like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, can walk into and through with confidence that if God is for us, who can be against us?

With God as my shepherd, I shall not want. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Let me close with this prayer that Christian prays when he safely arrives on the other side of the valley of the shadow of death.

Let's pray together. O world of wonders, I can say no less that I should be preserved in that distress that I have met with here.

[11 : 10] O blessed be that hand that from it hath delivered me. Dangers in darkness, devils, hell, and sin did compass me while I this veil was in. Yea, snares and pits and traps and nets did lie my path about that worthless, silly eye might have been caught, entangled, and cast down.

But since I live, let Jesus wear the crown. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.