

Since the beginning of the year we've been focused on suffering in this series called "**Nobody Gets To Heaven Without A Fight.**" While "health and wealth" preachers want you to think it's not so, suffering - an invasive species that arrived with Death & Discord at Humanity's Fall - is **an inevitable part of living in this fallen Kosmos.** We know, innately, it doesn't belong in our lives and we resent and resist it. But short of your death or Jesus' return nothing can stop it from playing a recurring role in the drama that is your life.

BUT, though God could not shut it out [as it was the result of human choice] **God amended suffering.** God seeded suffering with redemption. **Hidden away in its hurt are the seeds of restoration and renewal.** Such that after enduring every category of human suffering Joseph can look back and say: Gen 50:20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. And both Paul and James see suffering as redemptive, providing us the benefits of endurance, character and hope [Rom 5:3-4/Jam 1:2-4].

We've been trying to spot the redemption hidden in the suffering. But it's not so easy. I was in a canoe with a couple kids taking them through Bellevue's Mercer Slough. We were stopped alongside a big bank of cattails and one of the kids made a sudden silly movement and a loud noise. An **American Bittern** [SLIDE] - an extremely secretive half-sized heron- erupted from the cattails-startling us all. This beautiful bird was right next to us but we'd never have known cause it was so perfectly hidden. It's the same as we try to see the good secreted away in our suffering. It's hard to see so I've been trying to flush it out.

[SLIDE]

***From Joseph** we saw God use every category of suffering to accomplish the salvation of many.

***From Daniel and friends** we saw Suffering **breaks the illusion of our control preparing us to accept help** [Humility] and *setting the stage for God's surprising intervention.*

***In Heb 12:1-11** we saw that God- like a Father- makes use of the suffering in our lives to teach us **discipline** in our Faith. Suffering, the catalyst, triggers a response from us and God guides that response for growth.

***In Heb 4: 13-16** We saw the "All-knowing" empathy of God linked to the Experiential empathy of the God-Man, Jesus. We saw that God has built and empowered and called us to imitate His empathy and that **our natural empathy is supercharged through suffering** similar to another's.

In short, suffering, rightly processed, releases humility, discipline, and empathy. And for this week: **GRATITUDE.** But to talk about Suffering and Gratitude we need to begin with a simple but important point.

[SLIDE] **ALL SUFFERING IS TEMPORARY. All suffering has an expiration date.** It will not; it cannot go on forever.

In the worst-case scenario that expiration date is **the day you die** [or Jesus Returns]. In Jesus' story of Lazarus and the Rich man –Lk 16- the poor, sick beggar Lazarus dies and his suffering ends immediately and he is carried to a place of rest and comfort. God promises on the other side of this life to “wipe away our tears” [Is 25:8 & Rev 21:4] And, of course we remember Jesus promising the thief dying beside him that “...today you shall be with me in paradise” [Lk 23:43]. **At the moment of your death the suffering of this world cannot touch you.**

In the best case scenario Suffering comes into our lives, resides with us for a while and then moves on- typically at it's leisure- but it does move on. Paul talks about his trials a lot in 2nd Cor. In ch4 he talks about how he and his team are “afflicted” and “perplexed” and “persecuted,” constantly “...delivered over to death for Jesus' sake...” And then he labels all the troubles he's faced [from slander to beatings to shipwrecks] “**light and momentary**” [2Cor 4:17 esp. in comparison to an “eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”] The point:

All suffering- short term or long- has an expiration date and so is temporary.

Suffering, because it has an expiration date can be a source of Gratitude in either the short or long term.

[SLIDE] 1. Suffering in the short term as a source of gratitude

Psa. 54:6 Willingly I will sacrifice to You; **I will give thanks to Your name, O LORD,** for it is good.

7 For He has delivered me from all trouble, And my eye has looked *with satisfaction* upon my enemies.

Psa. 30:11 You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness, **12 That my soul may sing praise to You and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to You forever.**

Suffering faced and finished should leave us grateful for God's care and the goodness of life.

During the week I drop in to the Winter Shelter for an hour or so to help out. In I usually leave @5:30pm. That means that in Nov & Dec. I was walking home during the deep, cold, dark of those shortest days. I suffer through them, and their depressing nature, unhappily. And then we turn the corner on the Winter Solstice until nowadays **I'm walking home in the light.** Without suffering the darkness I wouldn't have the gratitude I feel for the light. *The oppression of the dark, depressing days disappears in the light and gratitude arises.*

Last year at this time **I hurt my back.** In that week I experienced vomit-inducing, pass-out level pain like I have never felt before.

It curtailed most movement for a week and then, though the pain was gone, sensitive to every twinge and fearful I'd hurt myself I dialed back my exercise, and gave up running for bike-riding. **But this year that suffering is over and I am grateful to be in reasonably decent health to**

the point of adding a 5-mile run to my week. Suffering last year's temporary pain is the seed of this year's gratitude.

Job loses everything. His suffering is huge. But when Job's ordeal is over we get a clear picture of contentment after adversity. **Job 42:10** The LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he prayed for his friends, and the LORD increased all that Job had twofold. **11** Then all his brothers and all his sisters and all who had known him before came to him, and they ate bread with him in his house; and they consoled him and comforted him for all the adversities that the LORD had brought on him. **16** After this, Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons and his grandsons, four generations. **17** And Job died, an old man and full of days. Suffering disappears and gratitude moves in.

Remember Joseph, weeping uncontrollably as he reveals himself to his brothers and saying to them: **45:7** “ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. In this moment he is reunited with his family- with his beloved brother Benjamin and soon his Father will arrive safe and sound!! Again we have pictures of provision and celebration at the end of “short-term” suffering.

13 “Now you must tell my father of all my splendor in Egypt, and all that you have seen; and you must hurry and bring my father down here.” **14** Then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. **15** He kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward his brothers talked with him. As Joseph's suffering comes to an end all that's left is gratitude.

See the hard things we pass through in the short term leave us grateful for the ordinary goodness in life we might have taken for granted. The short-term sufferings we face help remind us what's important in life. They point us to better times and a new world where all is put to rights. When health comes after illness or provision after poverty or peace in the household after discord and disruption; that is: **when suffering ends the ordinary goodness of life stands out in stark relief and we are grateful.**

Short term suffering is temporary- it comes and goes throughout our lives- and when we're released from it, the goodness of ordinary life should be doubly obvious eliciting gratitude and contentment.

[SLIDE] 2. Suffering in the Long View as a source of gratitude.

Typically **suffering shortens our view.** It makes us focus on the immediate for the sake of survival. But sometimes God opens up our eyes to see the long view of the thing he's been doing in us or in the world. Near the end of his story, **Joseph** had one

of those moments **20** You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.

You see, this means of prompting gratitude from suffering requires the ability to step outside our short-term, tunnel-vision and take in the long-view.

For instance: The girl who maintains a picture of herself as an adult dancing with a professional ballet company- the long view- can be grateful for the hard work and suffering of the present because it is all part of the process to achieve the long view.

Stepping back from our current suffering and focusing on the distant goal is not easy. But this is what Paul is doing when he says in Rom 5: 3 ...we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; As I said earlier Paul knows what it is to be afflicted, perplexed and persecuted. But his ability to step back from immediate circumstances and take in the long view keeps him going. **2Cor. 4:16** Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. **17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,** **18** while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

When James writes to his people **[SLIDE]**: **James 1:2** Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, **3** knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. **4** And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing- he is encouraging them to step back and take the long view of their suffering, seeing down to the end when, ultimately, they are perfected- identical to Jesus.

I've had moments like that, when God has given me a glimpse of the long view, and they typically leave me weeping- cause why would God use me to accomplish that? **Brennan Manning** steps back from his own suffering to offers an insight similar to James and Paul's **[SLIDE]**: The dominant characteristic of an authentic spiritual life is the gratitude that flows from trust — not only for all the gifts that I receive from God, but gratitude for all the suffering. Because in that purifying experience, suffering has often been the shortest path to intimacy with God

Talk show host Stephen Colbert [the Late Show] **[SLIDE]**: was interviewed by GQ magazine. And he talked about how he found gratitude in long-term suffering.

When he was 10 years old, his father and two of his brothers, were killed in a plane crash.

In the years following it was just Stephen and his mother on their own.

The interviewer asked how he could lose so much and not become angry or bitter.

[Colbert said], "I was raised in a Catholic tradition ... That's my context for my existence, is that I am here to know God, love God, serve God, that we might be happy with each other in this world and with him in the next—the catechism. That makes a lot of sense to me.

I got that from my mom. And my dad. And my siblings."

"I was left alone a lot after Dad and the boys died. ... And it was just me and Mom for a long time," he

said. "And by her example I am not bitter ... She was ... broken, yes. Bitter, no."

Colbert said that even in his mother's days of unremitting grief, she drew on her faith that the only way to not be swallowed by sorrow, to in fact recognize that our sorrow is inseparable from our joy, is to always understand our suffering, ourselves, in the light of eternity. [The long view!!]

Colbert described a letter from J.R.R. Tolkien who wrote, "What punishments of God are not gifts?"

Colbert's eyes filled with tears as he said, "So it would be ungrateful not to take everything with gratitude. It doesn't mean you want it. I can hold both of those ideas in my head." He was 35, he said, before he could really feel the truth of that. He was walking down the street, and it "stopped me dead. I went, 'Oh, I'm grateful. Oh, I feel terrible.' I felt so guilty to be grateful. But I knew it was true." Their long view of suffering- in light of eternity- led to Gratitude to God for them both.

Listen to what the Teacher writes: Eccl. 7:14 When things are going well, enjoy yourself, and when they are going badly, consider this: God has designed the one no less than the other so that we should take nothing for granted. NJB

And when we hear Rom. 8:28 And we know that God causes **all things** to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose...it does not mean "All things that happen are good" But that out of all things, even out of suffering, ruin, loss and death God can bring good out of them for which we can be grateful –if not in the short term- **then in the long view.**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor and Anti-Nazi dissident who spoke out against Hitler's genocidal persecution of the Jews was tossed in a Nazi prison to spend the last year and a half of his life awaiting execution. He had every reason to be angry and frightened, both for himself and the well-being of his family and fiancée. **But his writings reveal that gratitude and Joy were part of his death-sentenced life.**

"One English officer, imprisoned with Bonhoeffer, ...commented: "Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to spread an atmosphere of happiness and joy over the least incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive."

From the prison camp Bonhoeffer wrote his brother-in-law saying **[SLIDE]**:

"...we have been able to enjoy so many good things together that it would be almost presumptuous were we not also ready to accept hardship quietly, bravely – and also really gratefully."

One author says: Bonhoeffer never ceased to **overflow with gratitude** towards the Lord. Facing the daily possibility of death, he regarded each day as a precious gift from the Lord, to be received with thankfulness and joy.

It seems evident that one of Bonhoeffer's gifts was a powerful ability to step back from his current suffering and -like Paul and James and even Colbert- take the long view of God's work in us and be grateful.

My point for these weeks is that hidden away in our suffering there are seeds of redemption, of restoration and renewal. **[SLIDE]** Suffering, rightly processed by us – that is suffering that is accepted and allowed to do it's work- releases **humility** [we're not in control and we need God's help], **discipline** [training that strengthens our faith] , **empathy** [Your pain in

my heart empowered by God and supercharged by our own suffering] and **gratitude** [from finished suffering in the short term or stepping back to see the long view of God's work in us].

God has seeded Suffering with redemption. And this is true in the worst places and the most hopeless circumstances. I'll close with this poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer while in a Nazi concentration camp shortly before his death. It is called:

"Thankfully and without trembling"^L_{SEP}

By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,
And confidently waiting come what may,
we know that God is with us night and morning,
and never fails to greet us each new day.
Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,
Still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;
Oh, give our frightened souls the sure salvation
for which, O Lord, You taught us to prepare.
And when this cup You give is filled to brimming
With bitter suffering, hard to understand,
we take it thankfully and without trembling,
out of so good and so beloved a hand.
Yet when again in this same world You give us
The joy we had, the brightness of Your Sun,
we shall remember all the days we lived through,
and our whole life shall then be Yours alone.