

Transforming Culture sermon 2 – Suffering
2nd Corinthians 1:3-11

The nearly 10 years as State Minister allowed me to be an observer of the Church. I have always been an observer – journalism.

Observing at the mall... and the man ‘observing me

People all over, believers and non-believers alike, are hurting. Within the church we are certainly the “walking wounded.”

The Bible calls us into relationship; relationship with Christ and with each other. Relationship is an interesting concept. It is unity that goes further... Jesus taught it in his parables; it is taught throughout the New Testament in terms of carrying one another’s burdens and caring for each other. It is living out the love of Christ in family, community, church, and culture.

The “culture” around us often accuses us of living in a Pollyanna state of denial. How can we say “all things work together for the good” when bad things happen?

(Side note: Don’t quote Romans 8:28 from a perch! It is only to be quoted when you are in the midst of the circumstance alongside the person)

Earthquakes, floods, famine - Divorce, abuse, cancer, heart ailments???

Most times, people go to Job... but find no answers

Job had three friends... they were nitwits... but they were there for him.

Even amid the trials and turmoil of Job, God only tells Job to trust Him.

1. How can we possibly know what to feel when bad things happen?
 - a. The gospel frees us from all pretending and trying to put an acceptable spin on the stories. **We are not supposed to like bad things.** How do we make sense of such tragic events and incalculable suffering as are present in the world?
 - b. We are not supposed to reach for a spiritual band-aid or easy answer. While God certainly works all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28), some things in and of themselves are not good. Jesus calls us to engage with, not escape from, the overwhelming tragedies and great sufferings of life.
 1. My heart episodes... “minor procedure” but people die from heart procedures!
 2. If your god is not big enough for tough questions you need a bigger god!
 - c. Paul knows firsthand about tragedy. 2nd Corinthians is filled with the sadness and passion of a believer personally familiar with great pain and loss. He is also a believer who is captured with the heart and ways of Jesus Christ. As we enter the story, we want to see how he responded to difficult questions about suffering and the crises we experience in life as followers of Jesus – just like the ones before us now.
2. Here is the first thing that calls our attention: when confronted with confusing, even biting, questions about his own suffering and great suffering in the world, Paul did not offer philosophical explanations, but **teleological** reasons.
 - a. A life shaped by teleology is a life lived along a story line – a life lived with a view to the future. The Greek word *teleos* means “end” or “goal.” When used in the context of biblical faith and our relationship with Jesus, it presupposes that history has meaning and

people have meaning, and that all things are to be understood in light of God's ultimate purposes revealed in Jesus.

1. God is the eternal NOW.
 - b. Paul was a gifted scholar and philosopher, who could give well-reasoned and impressive answers to difficult questions; he chose to respond to the Corinthians not in terms of intellectual notions, but in terms of redemptive narrative. By doing this, Paul modeled the important difference between asking the self-centered question, "Why me, Lord?" versus asking the God-centered question, "What now, Lord?"
 - c. Basically it is the difference between expecting "*because*" answers to difficult questions versus looking for "*so that*" answers to difficult events. "Because" answers focus on giving a good reason; "*so that*" answers are more concerned about giving a godly response to the situation.
 1. "*So that*" answers are equipping responses to inexplicable problems.
3. Look at Paul's answers to the issues of suffering and hardship.
- a. He writes with refreshing honesty and vulnerability about his own personal crisis in Asia. In 2nd Corinthians, Paul deals with a series of challenging questions that emerge within the storyline of the letter. There is a need to read 1st and 2nd Corinthians to get the full picture.

4. See Paul's answers to ***three*** important questions posed by the Corinthian church.

Paul, why did you suffer so greatly in Asia?

- a. Instead of a "*because*" answer to this important question such as, "This happened because we didn't have enough faith;" or "because we live in a fallen world;" or "because our obedience was incomplete," Paul have a "*so that*" response. 2nd Corinthians 1:9
- b. What an amazing response! In essence, Paul was saying... "*So that* I might more fully enter into God's Story of making all things new. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God is bringing life to dead things and dead people. Though I am tempted to live life as self-centered, self-sufficient man, God has called me – and you – to a greater story. God will always bring us to the end of ourselves *so that* we might rely upon Jesus and identify more fully with his purposes and passions."
 - i. Lean not to your own understanding. Do not trust self, but God
 - ii. God is God and I'm not. He was doing right well before I came along and He will do right well after I'm gone!

Paul, if Jesus already suffered for us, why do we continue to suffer so much in life? 2nd Corinthians 1:3-7

- c. We suffer with Christ abundantly in this broken world and are comforted by our merciful Father *so that* we might be better equipped to enter into the sufferings of others and comfort them with the very comfort God brings us through Jesus.
 - i. Jesus did not die so that we would escape suffering in this world, but to eliminate suffering in the world to come. He is preparing us to enter more fully to the sufferings of others, *so that* we might share the gospel with them and bring His restorative mercy and grace to their broken situation.
 - ii. I don't know if it is accurate, but... Steve Brown says he believes every time a non-believer gets cancer and believer gets cancer so the world can see the difference."

Paul, if we are going to suffer, why pray? What good will it do for us? 2nd Corinthians 1:11

- d. God did not give us prayer as a pragmatic tool for getting our way, but as a providential means *so that* His glory is revealed. Prayer will expand our hearts to the greater good God is up to, which always includes more people than just us.

We may never have “because” answers which are adequate for our emotional need for answers; “because” answers, are often too subjective.

It is a hard saying, but true, God is not accountable to us... God is not obligated to give us “because” answers.

If we “renew our mind” to the thinking of scripture and seek “so that” answers, we will live more peaceably in this life. “*So that*” answers help us discover God’s ultimate purpose in all of life. “So that” refreshes... “So that” heals.