

Suffering and Unanswered Prayer

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, July 3, 1988. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Psalm 89:20-37; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10; Mark 6:1-6.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

About six years ago, when I was in Kenmore, New York, a young man in the church, recently married and graduated from college was playing ball with his young seven year old brother in law. A thunder storm came up suddenly and he was struck by lightening and killed instantly. I remember sitting out on the front porch that night with David's father and mother as they talked. And the question that kept coming up was, "Did God do it or was it the Devil?" Their question was a painful expression of their need to find meaning in this tragedy. It sounded the very depths of the problem of human existence.

This is the question St Paul wrestles with and answers in our Epistle lesson. Paul said he was given a "thorn in the flesh." He suffered from some chronic and painful ailment which had a crippling effect on him. We don't know what it was. There've been all sorts of speculations about what it was, malaria; some kind of eye disease; or perhaps even epilepsy. Whatever it was it was persistent, recurrent, and painful. Now, was it God or the Devil that sent it to him? The interesting thing about this passage is that Paul somehow seems to say that *it was both*.

1. It was 'a messenger of Satan'. It was the Devil's work. It was brought about by the powers of the kingdom of evil. Paul Tournier, the Christian psychotherapist who recently died, wrote in his *A Doctor's Case-book in the Light of the Bible*, that many doctors in their struggle against disease have felt, like him, that they weren't up against something passive but a clever and resourceful enemy. Paul would have a lot of sympathy with that conclusion. He felt he was up against that

clever enemy, Satan. That reminds us of how Jesus talked about human suffering and disease in the Gospels. It was the work of the Kingdom of Satan, tormenting human life. And Jesus set Himself to free people from it in the name and by the power of the Kingdom of God.

Paul knew all about that so he prayed. "Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me." That doesn't mean that Paul literally prayed three times and then gave up. It means that he prayed and prayed and prayed again to be delivered from his *thorn in the flesh*. But his prayer wasn't answered. Or was it? We very understandably speak of *prayers that aren't answered the way we want* as being unanswered prayers. But Paul's prayer *was* answered even though it wasn't the answer he wanted. He tells us what the answer was, "The Lord said to me, 'My ~~grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.~~'"

Paul discovered that while suffering is an evil, something sent by Satan, yet God's grace enables us to bear it. As William Barclay writes, "God doesn't spare us things, but makes us able to conquer them."

But, secondly, *Paul came to the place of being able to say that somehow it was also God that gave him the trouble*. His *thorn in the flesh* was not only a *messenger from Satan* it was also *given to him* he says. Given by whom? "Of course by God," writes Alfred Plummer in his commentary on 2 Corinthians. Scholars who know Greek far better than I do, agree that Paul is referring to God. James Reid, in the Interpreter's Bible says, "If it did not come directly from God's hand, it came *through* his hand." This thorn in the flesh was the messenger of Satan but it was also, in some strange, mysterious way, the gift of God. When Paul said that, he was saying something profound about the tragedies of life. The suffering we experience—our pain and disappointments, the evil

that we know is evil- doesn't come to us by blind chance or fate. Somehow that suffering, those messengers from Satan, are in the hands of God and are made to serve God's purposes for good for us.

Christians have come to this conclusion because of what we see in the cross of Jesus. The death of Jesus was the worst thing that ever happened. Was it God that did it, or was it the Devil? Of course it was the Devil who was behind the jealousy of the Pharisees, the scheming of the Saducees, the treachery of Judas, the hysteria of the crowds. Behind it all were the demonic powers of darkness. The people who wrote the New Testament are quite clear about that. When Jesus died on the cross the Prince of Darkness had his hour.

But that wasn't the whole truth. All over the New Testament we find ~~the conviction that the crucifixion of Jesus was not only the worst thing~~ that had ever happen, but also the best thing. That's why we call that dark Friday, Good Friday. God was in it-- not in the sense that God had appointed this fate for an innocent man, but in the sense that God was in Christ. When Jesus suffered and died on the Cross, this was God Himself bearing the sin and suffering of the world. And this was what enabled Paul to say, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." And so in *our* suffering, when we have to put up with our painful thorns in the flesh we say, "This is *not* God's will. This is *evil* and Christ came to *destroy* evil, pain and suffering." But we also come to see that God is in that suffering. Christ is in us and with us in all that we suffer, and bears that suffering as he bore it once upon the cross.

A lot of people are experiencing trouble this morning- debilitating weakness, painful hardship, dreadful calamities. They've prayed for God to

deliver them, to heal them. You know some of them. Maybe you're one of them. Your heart is bruised and broken, your life is spoiled by pain and suffering, physical or mental. And yet God is here this morning to tell you, "My grace is sufficient for you." That may not be what we want to hear, but if we *could* hear it we'd hear it as good news. The great British preacher, G. Campbell Morgan once said, "God's fires never harm God's saints. They purify the saints."

Last night I visited Bob Pollock. As some of you know he has cancer that has been eating away in his nose and forehead. He's received radiation treatments but the doctor told him that only radical surgery would help. Thursday morning Bob went through over five hours of surgery in which the surgeon removed his nose in an attempt to destroy the cancer. It was a ~~terrible, agonizing decision. Bob prayed for healing. "Take this away from~~ me." But the only answer he got was the one Paul got, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Bob has helped me believe that. Last night as he lay there in bed, he said to me, "Ted, buddy, God never gives us more trouble than we can bear."

I'm grateful to all the people who've shown me that in some strange way God brings the very best out of his servants when they've been through the discipline of suffering. And maybe we too can learn with Paul that suffering and weakness accepted in faith can become a means of grace. "My grace," God says to us this morning, "is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

Let us pray: O merciful Father, may we all know in our experience that whatever our weakness, whatever our hardships, whatever our calamities that you are strong when we are weak and that your grace is and will be sufficient for all that comes our way; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.