

Hebrews: the Supremacy of Christ above all Things
God, Pain and the Pantheon
Hebrews 12:3-11

Introduction:

Let's begin this morning by doing a quick survey. Turn with me first to 2 Corinthians 4.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (ESV)

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

1 Peter 1:6-9 (ESV)

⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, as was necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 4:12-19 (ESV)

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" ¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Pain, trials, testings, turmoil, affliction, suffering – these are all part of the normal lot of life for human beings.

The outer man is wasting away. There are many momentary and slight afflictions. There are grievous trials and fiery tests; aren't there?

Suffering, however, is nearly universally thought of as something negative – something bad – to be avoided at all costs. The painful side of suffering is unquestionable.

But in each of these texts, there is a strange chord that is repeated so as not to be missed. There is a kind of people who do not need to regard suffering as a bad thing.

Paul said in 2 Cor. 4:16 – "Do not lose heart." Suffering may become a drag on life but for this group of people it need not be so. Why? Because the slight momentary affliction is working by design – it is producing an eternal weight of glory by comparison." That means that though the outer man is wasting away the inner man can be renewed.

Those are strange words to our world.

Peter said in 1 Peter 1 – “In this you rejoice...though for a little while you have been grieved by trials.” Rejoice? Peter is not sane, is he? How can one rejoice in the middle of grief? Peter says you can rejoice knowing that the trial is working by design. It is but nothing more than a test – the kind of fire that produces pure gold. There is a kind of trial for one group of people that produces in them more glory than grief!

Again, Peter said in 1 Peter 4 – “Do not be surprised at fiery trials as though something strange were happening to you; but rejoice.”

Listen to me well...for people who have entrusted their life to a heavenly Father, pain is pain and pain is pleasant!

...Those are strange words!?

Is all pain bad? Is all pain to be avoided at all costs?

You and I both know that the answer to that question is a resounding No! That would be an absurd presupposition for life even if we didn't have the Bible with its God-designed purposes behind pain. We know from simple life that all pain is not bad and some pain is pleasant.

- Is the pain of an athlete in training bad? NO!
- Is the pain of a surgeon correcting something wrong and saving your life bad? Is it to be avoided at all costs? NO!
- Is the pain of child-birth bad? Oh the pain is bad alright! I have never seen so many blood vessels in one spot as I have seen in my wife's forehead. But we all know the pain is pleasant and it is not long after the pain that the pleasure of children causes women to entertain thoughts of doing it all over again!

Athletes, patients, and mothers are not masochists. And neither are Christians!

In our text this morning, the author of Hebrews is going to take exception with the false presuppositions that (1) all pain is bad and (2) all suffering is the result of an angry God.

Go with me now to Hebrews 12:3-11:

Text:

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Here is a gigantic **thesis statement**: *The way you respond to suffering in your life displays what you believe about God.*

That is precisely why all suffering is a test. That is why all suffering is a trial. Your view of God is being put to the test. Is he an angry ogre eager to thump his rebellious subjects? Is he a passive deity handcuffed as an onlooker as the evil of Satan and the world wreaks havoc on his children? Or is He a loving heavenly Father who designs and purposes and plans and brings about all things according to the counsel of his will (cf. Eph. 1:11)?

Listen to me, church! Only one of those views of God will produce hope and comfort in your soul when the pain strikes! Believing that God is a heavenly Father who disciplines his children offers an explanation when no explanation is forthcoming. It offers hope when the design is not seen for the darkness. It offers comfort when life is full of chaos.

Oh, but more and more, I am starting to see how many Christians ask the wrong question at the outset of suffering. Most Christians, as they start to suffer in life, ask the question, “What did I do wrong?” That question shouts your view of God: “All pain is the result of an angry God who punishes sin.”

Newsflash: God Almighty is not a member of the pantheon. He is not simply another pagan deity who needs to have his wrath appeased or placated. “The gods are angry” is the explanation to every cataclysmic event in the pagan mind.

Newsflash: God Almighty has already fully punished sin! – in Jesus Christ!

I want to linger here because we need our mindset changed.

Now it is obvious that the theme of this passage is discipline. The word is used in either its noun or verb form 9 times in these 9 verses. But here me oh so well – discipline is not punishment. God will never punish his children. He disciplines them; that is to say, he trains them; he corrects them; he rebukes them; he instructs them; he chastens them; but he will never give you the just penal requirement for your sin. The penal requirement for your sin is death. He will not give you the punitive damages for your sin. He will not punish you if you are his child.

Why will he not punish you as his child?

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” A little while later, after his arrest, He said to Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” (cf. Matt. 26:39; John 18:11).

The question is, then, what was in that cup?

We generally associate Jesus’ cup with his crucifixion. We assume that he was praying desirous of escaping the cross as if it was a painful circumstance to be avoided. It is not that Jesus was asking if there was some other way to die that was less cruel and inhumane as a cross. What was in the cup? It was the cup he wanted spared, not necessarily the cross.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the cup is a reference to God’s judgment. For example:

Psalm 75:8 (ESV)

⁸For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.

This is the cup of judgment. But it still does not answer the question of what is in the cup. Jeremiah gets more specific when he writes:

Jeremiah 25:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.

The cup is filled with the wrath of God. Judgment is God pouring out his wrath. Looking into the future John writes in Revelation:

Revelation 14:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

Jerry Bridges says, “So we see that the cup is a metaphorical expression referring to the judgment of God as expressed in the pouring out of His wrath on sinful nations and people.”

This brings us back to the cup Jesus drank at his crucifixion. What was in the cup? It was the wrath of God. It was the cup of wrath that we should have drunk. Jesus, as our representative, drank the cup of God’s wrath down to its very dregs. He tasted the last drop.

The Bible uses a strange and big and almost extinct word to describe what Christ did for us when he drank the cup of God’s wrath: *propitiation*. Most of the modern translations have abandoned this great word. For example, the NIV translates the word with the phrase “atoning sacrifice.” But the word propitiation is a good word and one that Jerry Bridges says all sincere believers should understand and contemplate with wonder and amazement when it is used to describe Christ’s work on our behalf. And no one has done a finer job ant making the word understandable than Jerry Bridges has in his book, *The Gospel for Real Life*.

What does propitiation mean? A modern dictionary will say that it means to appease or to placate. But these words are misleading. They seem to imply that God is simply an offended deity who needs to be appeased. Or the words imply that God can be bought off so as to make a concession. Neither of these is sufficient in explaining the principle.

The NIV usually puts in a footnote to the words, “atoning sacrifice” saying, “as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin.” But was Jesus merely deflecting God’s wrath? I think not!

The word that I have learned and adopted from Bridges, when speaking of propitiation is the word *exhausted*. Jesus exhausted the wrath of God. It was not merely deflected and prevented from reaching us; it was exhausted. Jesus bore the full, unmitigated brunt of God’s wrath. God held nothing back when he unleashed his fury over sin on his Son.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 53:4-5 (ESV)

⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

Note these words: stricken, smitten, afflicted, wounded, crushed, chastisement or punishment, stripes. They describe the full pouring out of God’s wrath on His Son. During those awful hours when Jesus

hung on the cross, the cup of God's wrath was completely turned upside down until Christ had exhausted the cup of God's wrath. The cup was emptied to the very dregs – the last drop.

That means that for all those who have entrusted their life to Christ, there is nothing more in the cup. It is empty!

When Jesus cried out from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), he was not crying out in relief but in triumph. He had accomplished what he came to do – to save his people from the wrath of God.

Listen to Paul:

- Romans 5:9 (ESV)
⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.
- Romans 8:1 (ESV)
¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:9 (ESV)
⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

So when you have pain or suffering enter your life, your faith – your view of God is being put on trial; it is being put to the test.

When pain enters your life, it might be the result of your sin; but know that God will never give you the just penalty for your sin. That he has already carried out in full against Jesus, thus purchasing your salvation.

So when pain enters your life, you can know instead of it coming from an angry God, it comes from a loving God who longs to mold, shape, correct and train you in the holiness of Jesus Christ.

Pain in the life of a believer is a mark of being loved by God!

In his book called, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis says this: "God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Do you feel loved by God when suffering comes?

I hope you will!