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The Possibilities of Pain and Suffering

April 30, 2023

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TEXT: Luke 5:1-11 (NIV)

While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.

Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Immediately he stood up in

front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, “We have seen remarkable things today.”

In our Scripture text today, we encounter two individuals who are experiencing an enormous amount of pain and suffering in their lives. And it's not just physical pain and suffering. When we encounter disease and sickness in this world, it affects every part of who we are. And I've entitled this message based on the text here, *The Possibilities of Pain and Suffering*. Now the Scripture talks about you and I in a broken world, experiencing trouble and hardship, or another word that's used is the word “distress.” And we can experience distress in in all aspects of our humanity, obviously in our bodies, which we see in the text here. But then we can experience pain and suffering as well in our relational life with other people through grief and loss or someone mistreating someone and hurting them. And there can be great pain and suffering in our relational lives. And we see that all through the Scripture. We see that in our world today. We also can experience pain and suffering in our souls, in our hearts and our minds, our wills, our emotions. We can have emotional pain. The prophet Jeremiah spoke of being in anguish of soul. And of course, that can tie in with the deepest part of who we are: our spirits. And our spirits and souls can together experience pain, internal pain in our lives. The psalmist speaks of being broken hearted or being crushed in spirit.

And it's not always fun to talk about these things. But I am so thankful that the Bible deals with these kind of realities because our world is filled with pain and suffering. We meet these two individuals and they're enduring pain in their lives. While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came to him who was covered with leprosy. Leprosy is, of course, this disease where boils form on the skin, and those boils can turn into open wounds. And eventually those wounds can kill nerves around the area. And leprosy is an ugly disease. Back then, people with leprosy had to cry out in social distancing form. (What we know of in the modern day as social distancing.) And they had to say “unclean” everywhere they went and they were socially isolated from others. There was relational pain involved with it. There was physical pain to the point where after you would lose the ability to feel pain, many lepers would lose different parts of their body. Because when you can't feel pain, you can't protect your appendage as well. And just a deeply suffering and painful disease to have.

And then also we meet an individual who is paralyzed. This was just when some men showed up when Jesus was in a in a home, speaking, showed up carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher. And this, of course, idea of paralysis is when a person can't use their limbs. We

know of paraplegics or quadriplegics, and some parts of our body can become paralyzed when nervous cord is severed in some way. I have a friend who fell off of a house when I was in college and he severed his spinal cord down just above his waist in the back and was paralyzed from the waist down. I can only imagine the pain and suffering he went through. I went to visit him in the hospital and he was on a stretcher being flipped face down and then back up. And as I walked in and saw him, I was just overwhelmed by the trauma he'd experienced. And I myself turned around, walked out of the hospital room and just passed out in the hospital hallway because I just couldn't comprehend what had happened to him. Another young individual in our community here, a young high schooler just a couple of years back, was diving into a pond and kinked his neck at the bottom of a pond and now has struggled with paralysis in all of his limbs since then. And his entire family relationally, emotionally deep in their souls, and of course, physically, all the all the challenges that have come into their life from one of their young children being paralyzed in this way. And we pray for them and support them.

But what are the possible benefits that can come out of any kind of pain and suffering that God allows in our world? We see right here in the text, I think, a number of benefits. First of all, this pain and suffering has moved some individuals in humility to begin to do some things they wouldn't have done if they hadn't suffered. It's moving them. It's motivating them, first to seek and to search for help outside of themselves. While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came to him searching. This man was searching. This man was covered with leprosy. With these boils. He had to yell out "unclean" as he went through the community. But he was looking outside of himself for help. He'd heard about this one named Jesus, and Jesus was going and speaking in authority and people were being healed of their illnesses, their diseases. And he wondered, he wondered to himself, "Could this man help me?" And so he went seeking for Jesus. Verse 18 here says, "Some men showed up when Jesus was teaching in a home. They were carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher." I don't know if they got together and decided, hey, this Jesus is traveling. We've heard about him as well. We want to take you, our friend to him. You've been paralyzed. We want to take you. Or if the paralyzed man was with his friend said, Hey, I've heard about this. Jesus, I want to. I want to go see him. Could you take me to him? But they're searching for help outside of themselves.

You know, it's been said that in life we are generally moved or motivated by either inspiration or desperation. And it's been said that we even need inspiration or desperation to get us moving. We need it. And if we don't move through inspiration, eventually desperation will make us act. And this is one of the benefits that can come out of pain and suffering. It can

humble us to the point where we do things and be motivated to do things we wouldn't normally do if we hadn't experienced the suffering. C.S. Lewis, the great Christian author, says, "You know, there's many things we can ignore in life. We can just tune out a lot of things, realities in life." And he says, "God whispers to us; we don't always hear him in our pleasure and our joy, and he speaks to us, but we can ignore him. He speaks to us in our conscience, sort of quietly, internally, and his spirit can speak to us there." But he says God shouts to us or even screams to us in our pains. He describes suffering as God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. Our pain, he says, insists upon being attended to.

I don't know if you're experiencing a lot of pain in your life today, but under God's sovereignty, he allows an enormous amount of pain into our broken and fallen world. And he doesn't do this because he's unloving. God allows this in love and C.S. Lewis would say, to get our attention, to wake and to rouse a deaf world. Pain and suffering aren't always bad for us. This distress that our world experiences is one of God's best tools for getting our attention to help move us to seek outside of ourselves. See, this is actually loving of God to try to wake us from our slumber, our spiritual slumber. See, because really, under the power of sin, we don't normally reach out to God. And that's why we're here. The Book of Acts tells us he has determined the exact time and place where people would live. Every individual would live. And he did this so that they might reach out to him and find him. Though he is not far from each of us. But see, we don't naturally reach out to him for the help we need. The Bible clearly tells us under the power of sin, there's no one righteous, not even one. There's no one who understands. There is no one who, in their natural bent, seeks God. All have gone astray. The Prophet Isaiah said. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each one turns to our own way. But pain and suffering can move us to seek and search for help outside of ourselves, to humble ourselves, to do this.

And this is this is such a gift. If this happens to us and we allow the hurts and the challenges of our lives to humble us and to seek God. Because though God opposes the proud, he gives grace to the humble. So, these individuals are humbled in their pain and suffering. They're searching and seeking for help outside of themselves, and they begin to ask questions they wouldn't normally ask. While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came to him who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed down with his face to the ground and he begged him. He wasn't just asking Jesus. He was begging Jesus, "Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean." Pain and suffering can motivate us to not only search outside of ourselves, but even ask questions and ideally ask questions of God.

I was sitting with a group of individuals just this past week, and we were talking about what things God has done in our lives through our own challenges and pains and hurts. And one individual went right to James 1 and said, God has used my pain and suffering to draw me so much closer to him that I've started to welcome, even receive into my life the challenges that he brings. And then he quoted James 1: "Consider it all joy. My friends, when you encounter various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces perseverance and let perseverance have its work in you, that you may be mature and complete."

God uses suffering to grow us and mature us. Let this perseverance have its work in you that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything, but if any of you lacks wisdom in your pain and suffering, let him ask of God who gives to everyone generously, without reproach, without withholding. And He will give wisdom to those who ask in humility. This is why the Psalmist would look back on his life and say it was good for me that I had been afflicted so that I might actually seek the Lord and reach out to him and learn from him.

When I was in college, I started to experience a challenge that I had no idea I would ever face. I fell into a deep, dark depression and became very anxious about my life, and I started seeking for answers to what was happening to me. And what was happening is many generations of sin were catching up to me and my own history in life and things were needing processed and I didn't know how to handle it. And I started asking the Lord for wisdom and guidance, and my folks ended up going to a mental health workshop put on by some Christian counselors back then, Frank Minnerath and Paul Meyer. And they brought home a workbook handout describing what depression was and anxiety was. And I knew instantly that's what I was struggling with. And so, I started to talk to the Lord about it. And eventually my challenge, I couldn't overcome it. So, I made a phone call to the Frank Minnerath and Paul Meyer Ministries, and they had a place in Chicago, Illinois, Chicago Lakeshore Hospital, where a person could go and visit and get some therapy and help. And I drove to that place and asked questions of them that needed asked. They invited me to be there and I went into their training and their workshops. And it was one of the best things I could have ever done early on in my life because the pain and the hurt and the heartache of that time got me to seek and search outside of myself and begin to ask questions. And then even to drive to Chicago to the second floor of a hospital and knock on a door I thought I would never knock on. And God used that to shape my life in so many ways. And I am so thankful for that early pain and suffering that got me to open a door I wouldn't have opened.

That's what happened with some of these individuals here. Jesus was teaching in a home and some men showed up carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher and they were trying to bring him in, knocking on the front door of a house, and they couldn't get in because there were so many people there. And so they went up on the roof. And then they let him down on the stretcher through a door in a roof, tiles in a roof. They were knocking on a door they thought they would never knock on. Desperation is a great motivator. It can get us to reach outside of ourselves, ask questions we might not ask and knock on doors we might not knock on.

Let me ask you a question today, friend. Do you have any pain and suffering and hurt and heartache? What are you doing with it? Are you pursuing and seeking and knocking and crying out to God for help? Are you taking action? Are you being motivated to seek outside of yourself to ask questions, to knock on doors you might not knock on ever if you weren't hurting as much as you're hurting now? These are some of the potential benefits of pain and suffering. God uses this to draw us to himself. If we'll move in the right direction, if we'll move towards him, God is inviting us to come to him. This is the whole purpose of life: for you and I to come to know him, reach out to him, and get to know him. Though he is not far from us, this is why we were created by him and for him. And he wants to come to us and minister to us.

He may not heal everyone, but he can do a lot of things if we'll reach out and pray and find wisdom and seek for wisdom outside of ourselves. The benefits of suffering can be doing just what Jesus invited us to do in Matthew 7, when he said "Ask, ask questions, grow in wisdom, seek God ask, and it will be given to you. Seek and search outside of yourself and you will find, knock and the door will be open for everyone who asks, receives and to the one who seeks finds and the one who knocks, the door will be opened." Pain and suffering. Some of the possible benefits can be to wake and to rouse us from a spiritual slumber to get us to pursue God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and go after him with everything we have to, to open our hearts to him and plead with him for insight and wisdom. And he may lead us. He may touch us spiritually or he may lead us to people who can help us in our current situation. But God is there and he is waiting for a dead world, a spiritually dead world, to come to him.

One of the questions I've been asking is how much suffering does it take for people to turn back to God, to cry out to God, to plead with Him? Have you had enough yet, where you're desperately seeking the Lord? He sure wants us to draw near to him so he can draw near to us.

I hope you're encouraged by this text and the possible benefits that we see here from these individuals' lives about their pain and suffering that came from that and drew them closer to the great I am, the Messiah, the king of kings, the great physician, the great healer, the gentle healer who can give us grace sufficient for any challenge or heal us.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have spoken to us through your Word and we can see how you work in the world through so much of what you've revealed there to us. Please help us use our hurts and our pains and our challenges this side of life to draw us closer to you. We know that's what you're intending, that through suffering, many will be brought into glory before you. And that's even how Jesus, through suffering, has brought many to glory. Help us not resent the pains and the challenges you brought into our lives, but help us use them to reach closer and strive more fully, to connect with you. Our hope, our salvation, our life. Thank you for sending Jesus among us to open the doorway to you for this life and for all eternity. It is in the matchless name of Jesus we pray. Amen.