

9TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – YEAR B
“WHAT THEN SHALL WE SAY?”
AUGUST 2, 2009

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PSALM 22:1-5

PSALM 22 IS A PSALM OF LAMENT. A LAMENT IS A PASSIONATE EXPRESSION OF GRIEF. LAMENT IS A VITAL PART OF OUR FAITH. PSALM 22 IS AN IMPORTANT PSALM BECAUSE IT HELPS US IDENTIFY WITH THE ABSOLUTE WORST OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE. THE OPENING WORDS OF THIS PSALM IS THE PRAYER ON JESUS' LIPS AS HE HANGS DYING ON THE CROSS.

PSALMS OF LAMENT WITNESS TO GOD'S DESIRE FOR HONESTY IN WORSHIP. THEY TEACH US THAT NO EXPERIENCE IN LIFE IS TOO DIFFICULT TO BE BROUGHT BEFORE GOD. THAT'S WHAT PSALM 22 TEACHES US AND WHAT JESUS TEACHES US WITH HIS CRY ON THE CROSS.

PSALM 22 EXPRESSES WITH GREAT PASSION THE GRIEF OF FEELING ABANDONED BY GOD. NO ONE KNOWS THE EXACT CIRCUMSTANCE THAT BROUGHT ABOUT THE WRITING OF THIS PSALM, BUT WHATEVER IT IS, IT HAS CONSUMED THE PERSON WHO WRITES THIS PRAYER.

IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER THAT WE DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT EXPERIENCE THE AUTHOR WRITES ABOUT BECAUSE WE ALL CAN THINK OF A PARTICULAR SITUATION IN OUR OWN LIVES OR THE LIVES OF OTHERS THAT WE CAN IDENTIFY WITH THIS PSALM.

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ROMANS 8:18-39

ROMANS IS WIDELY REGARDED AS PAUL’S MOST CAREFULLY CONSIDERED RHETORICALLY SOPHISTICATED AND THEOLOGICALLY IMPORTANT WRITING. HE COMPOSED IT NEAR THE END OF HIS MINISTRY AND CONTAINS HIS MATURE REFLECTIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN FAITH. THE IMPACT OF THIS LETTER UPON ALL OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY HAS BEEN ENORMOUS – ESPECIALLY FOR THE REFORMATION DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH.

FOR 10 YEARS BEFORE WRITING THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS, PAUL HAD TRAVELED AROUND THE TERRITORIES BORDERING THE AEGEAN SEA EVANGELIZING. CHURCHES HAD BEEN PLANTED IN THE ROMAN PROVINCES OF GALATIA, MACEDONIA, ACHAIA & ASIA. PAUL NOW WANTED TO PREACH THE GOSPEL IN SPAIN. HE WOULD VISIT ROME ON THE WAY, AN AMBITION OF HIS FOR A LONG TIME. THE CHURCH AT ROME WOULD BE IN PART HIS BASE OF OPERATIONS AS HE PREACHED IN SPAIN – A BASE OF SPIRITUAL, PRAYER AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR HIS PLANNED MISSIONARY TRIP TO SPAIN. THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS, IN PART, PREPARES THEM & GIVES REASONS FOR HIS VISIT AND GIVES THEM A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF HIS THEOLOGY.

SOME HAVE SAID THAT ROMANS 8 IS THE HIGH WATER MARK OF THIS LETTER.

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HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY THE WORLD HAS TO BE LIKE THIS?

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY THE WORLD HAS TO BE SO HARSH?

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY?

I’VE WONDERED A LOT OF WHY’S LATELY. THIS PAST WEEK HAS BEEN A DIFFICULT WEEK FOR THE PEOPLE OF FAITH HERE IN CHRIST CHURCH.

OUR HEARTS ACHE FOR OUR FRIENDS IN CHRIST – JONATHAN & MELISSA MILLER, WHO DESPITE THE BEST EFFORTS OF MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS AND DESPITE THE FAITHFUL PRAYERS OF HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE FROM AROUND THE WORLD FOR THEIR INFANT DAUGHTER MAEVE’S HEALING – MAEVE DIED.

WHY? WHY WOULD GOD ALLOW THIS TO HAPPEN? WHY MAKE THIS FAMILY SUFFER SO? WHY BREAK OUR HEARTS AND DASH OUR HOPES? WHY DID GOD NOT ANSWER OUR PRAYERS FOR MAEVE’S HEALING? OUR HEARTS HAVE BEEN FULL OF QUESTIONS. WHY?

A LOT OF CHRISTIANS DON’T THINK WE CAN ASK WHY. WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN OR TRAGEDY STRIKES, AND SOMEONE SAYS I CAN’T UNDERSTAND WHY THIS HAPPENED, INEVITABLY SOMEONE RESPONDS – “WE’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO ASK WHY.” OR SOMEONE WILL COME TO ME, WHEN THEY’RE TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF SOME SENSELESS TRAGEDY & SAY TO ME, “I KNOW WE CAN’T ASK WHY.”

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SOME BELIEVE THAT IF WE HAVE DEEP FAITH IN GOD, WE'RE NOT ALLOWED TO ASK WHY. WELL IF YOU THINK WE CAN'T ASK GOD WHY, THEN YOU HAD BETTER HAVE A LONG TALK WITH JESUS WHO DOES EXACTLY THAT.

AS JESUS HANGS ON THE CROSS DYING, ONE OF THE LAST THINGS HE SAYS BEFORE HE BREATHES HIS LAST IS “MY GOD, MY GOD, *WHY* HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?” JESUS ASKS GOD WHY. IF OUR LORD & SAVIOR CAN ASK GOD WHY THEN GOD CERTAINLY UNDERSTANDS WHEN WE ASK WHY.

THE BIBLE ALLOWS THE QUESTION TO BE ASKED, BUT IT DOES NOT READILY SUPPLY PAT ANSWERS TO EACH & EVERY SITUATION. WE'RE SOMETIMES QUICK TO GIVE ANSWERS THOUGH WHEN OTHERS SUFFER. WE TRY TO ANSWER OUR QUESTIONS OF “WHY” WITH SLICK ANSWERS.

THINK OF JOB...JOB SUFFERED – THROUGH NO FAULT OF HIS OWN – JOB SUFFERED – HE LOST HIS MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD, ALL HIS POSSESSIONS & ALL OF HIS CHILDREN ARE KILLED. HE STRUGGLES TO UNDERSTAND WHY. HIS FRIENDS OFFER PIOUS PLATITUDES OF EXPLANATION. BUT THOSE WON'T DO FOR JOB. HIS FRIENDS INSIST JOB MUST HAVE SINNED – BUT EVEN GOD TELLS THEM THAT THEY ARE WRONG – THAT'S NOW WHY JOB SUFFERS.

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WHEN SOMEONE WE CARE ABOUT IS SUFFERING, WE WANT TO TAKE AWAY THEIR PAIN AND SO WE OFFER QUICK ANSWERS TO EXPLAIN AWAY THEIR PAIN. WHEN SOMEONE DIES AFTER A LONG ILLNESS OR AFTER A TRAGIC ACCIDENT, WE SAY THINGS LIKE, “AT LEAST HE’S BETTER OFF” OR “AT LEAST SHE’S NO LONGER SUFFERING.” THAT MAY BE TRUE, BUT THOSE ANSWERS IN EFFECT ATTEMPT TO TAKE AWAY THE MYSTERY – THE MYSTERY OF LIFE & OF DEATH. THOSE ANSWERS ATTEMPT TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM – BUT WE CAN’T SOLVE THE PROBLEM – WE CAN ONLY LIVE THE MYSTERY.

WHEN SENSELESS TRAGEDIES HAPPEN, WHEN SOMEONE IS SUFFERING, WHAT THEN CAN WE SAY? WE CAN SAY THIS – IF GOD IS FOR US, WHO IS AGAINST US? IF GOD DIDN’T HESITATE TO PUT EVERYTHING ON THE LINE FOR US, EMBRACING OUR CONDITION AND EXPOSING HIMSELF TO THE WORST BY SENDING HIS OWN SON, IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE GOD WOULDN’T GLADLY & FREELY DO FOR US?

WE CAN SAY THIS: THE ONE WHO DIED FOR US – WHO WAS RAISED TO LIFE FOR US – IS IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD AT THIS VERY MOMENT STICKING UP FOR US. THERE IS NO WAY ANYTHING OR ANYONE IS ABLE TO DRIVE A WEDGE BETWEEN US & CHRIST’S LOVE FOR US. NOT TROUBLE – NOT HARD TIMES – NOT HATRED – NOT HUNGER – NOT HOMELESSNESS – NOT BULLYING THREATS - NOT BACKSTABBING – NOT

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EVEN THE WORST SINS LISTED IN SCRIPTURE – NOTHING WILL SEPARATE OF FROM THE LOVE OF GOD IN CHRIST.

WE CAN SAY THIS: I AM CONVINCED THAT ABSOLUTELY NOTHING – LIVING OR DEAD – ANGELIC OR DEMONIC – TODAY OR TOMORROW - HIGH OR LOW – THINKABLE OR UNTHINKABLE – ABSOLUTELY NOTHING CAN GET BETWEEN US & GOD’S LOVE BECAUSE OF THE WAY THAT JESUS OUR MASTER HAS EMBRACED US.

WE CAN ASK GOD WHY. THE BIBLE IS FULL OF SUFFERERS WHO CRY OUT TO GOD, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS OUR LORD & SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. NO MATTER WHAT WE SUFFER, JESUS HAS BEEN THERE TOO. JESUS CRIES OUT TO GOD – MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME? ON THE CROSS, JESUS IDENTIFIES COMPLETELY WITH OUR SUFFERING.

AS WE EXPERIENCE SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES, AND AS WE GIVE EXPRESSION TO THAT PAIN, WE CAN TAKE COMFORT THAT GOD, IN THE VERY LIFE AND ESPECIALLY IN THE DEATH OF JESUS, IS THERE WITH US.

JOHN STACKHOUSE, IN HIS BOOK, “CAN GOD BE TRUSTED,” WRITES: OUR GOD SUFFERS ALONG WITH US, YES, AND ALL SUFFERING GRIEVES GOD’S HEART. BUT GOD ALSO SUFFERED DIRECTLY IN THE LIFE AND DEATH OF JESUS. GOD EXPERIENCED WHAT WE EXPERIENCE FIRST-HAND IN THE

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FLESH. WE MUST NEVER FORGET THAT WHEN WE ARGUE WITH GOD ABOUT OUR OWN SUFFERING OR THAT OF OTHERS, GOD HAS BEEN THERE.

GOD CREATED THIS WORLD, KNOWING IT WOULD GET SO MESSED UP. KNOWING EVIL WOULD HAPPEN. KNOWING SUFFERING WOULD HAPPEN. KNOWING REBELLION AND SIN WOULD HAPPEN. GOD EVEN KNEW DEATH WOULD TAKE PLACE. AND YET GOD STILL CREATED.

THIS WORLD IS THE WAY IT IS. THE FACT IS THAT THERE IS MORE TO THE STORY THAN PAIN AND SUFFERING. THE FACT IS, THIS WORLD IS NOT AS GOD INTENDED IT TO BE. JUST BECAUSE GOD CREATED HUMANITY WHO WOULD TURN TO SIN AND SUFFERING INSTEAD OF LIFE AND RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD DOES NOT MEAN GOD INTENDED THIS WORLD TO BE SUCH A HARSH PLACE.

WE READ IN GENESIS & IN REVELATION THE WAY GOD INTENDS THIS WORLD TO BE – GOD’S PEOPLE DWELL IN PERFECT HARMONY WITH EACH OTHER & WITH GOD – A WORLD WITH NO SUFFERING – NO PAIN – NO TEARS – NO DEATH – A PLACE WHERE NO LONGER WILL THERE BE AN INFANT BUT LIVES A FEW DAYS OR SOMEONE WHO DOES NOT LIVE OUT THE FULLNESS OF THEIR YEARS. CHRIST’S MISSION WAS TO RESTORE ALL OF CREATION BACK TO ITS PROPER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD – TO RELEASE THE CAPTIVES, TO GIVE SIGHT TO THE BLIND – TO MAKE THE

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LAME TO WALK – TO FORGIVE SINS – EVEN SACRIFICING HIS LIFE AS PART OF THE HEALING WORK OF GOD IN ORDER TO RESTORE CREATION TO ITS RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

AND ALL OF CREATION IS GROANING FOR REBIRTH. THIS WORLD IS STILL IMPERFECT AND IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD SOMETIMES IMPERFECT THINGS HAPPEN. AND WE ASK WHY. GOD DOES NOT ANSWER EVERY “WHY?” BUT GOD WALKS WITH US. GOD WALKS US THROUGH EVERY SHADOWED VALLEY OF DEATH.

WE ARE SUFFERING & THAT SUFFERING PRODUCES AN INWARD GROANING THAT GOD HEARS. THE SPIRIT TAKES UP OUR GROANING & WORDLESS PRAYERS OF SUFFERING & LAYS THEM BEFORE GOD’S THRONE. CHRIST IS DOING EVERYTHING IN HIS POWER TO SEE US THROUGH, THE SPIRIT INTERCEDING FOR US, GOD SEARCHING OUR HEARTS & NO CONDEMNATION...GOD IS WORKING IN ALL THESE THINGS WE SUFFER FOR OUR GOOD. BECAUSE OF THAT – WE CAN ENDURE OUR PRESENT TRIALS AND SUFFERING. GOD IS NOT WAITING UNTIL CHRIST RETURNS TO WORK FOR OUR GOOD – GOD IS WORKING FOR OUR GOOD HERE & NOW.

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WHAT THEN SHALL WE SAY? WE SHALL SAY: IF GOD HAS GONE TO SUCH GREAT LENGTHS ON OUR BEHALF – WHO CAN BE AGAINST US? IF GOD HAS ALREADY BEEN AT WORK FOR OUR GOOD...IF GOD HAS ALREADY DEALT WITH SIN THROUGH CHRIST...IF GOD HAS ALREADY JUSTIFIED US IN CHRIST...IF GOD HAS ALREADY DESTINED TO CONFORM US TO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST...IF GOD IS ALREADY NOW AT WORK GLORIFYING US IN CHRIST...CAN ANYTHING GET IN GOD’S WAY?

THERE’S NO POWER IN ALL CREATION TO UNDO WHAT GOD IS AT WORK DOING BECAUSE GOD CREATED EVERYTHING & GOD IS USING EVERYTHING UNDER HIS POWER TO SAVE US AND TO WORK ALL THINGS FOR OUR GOOD. THAT’S WHAT WE SHALL SAY.