

THEODICY
Acts 14:22

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Amarillo, Texas
June 17, 2018

THEODICY: God all powerful. God all good. Yet the innocent suffer.

There has been a lie in some churches for years. The lie goes something like this: If you'll only accept Jesus, if you'll only have enough faith, if you'll only be part of the people of God you won't have any suffering, you won't have any pain, you won't have any challenges, any frustrations, and depression. Be a man of faith. Be a woman of faith. You just name it and you claim it. You rebuke it and you bind it. And Satan and all suffering will soon flee from you.

When one televangelist was asked what he would do if he had AIDS, he said, "The moment I woke up in the morning, before I did anything else, I'd take Communion. I'd say, 'I take Jesus' pure blood, shed for me.' Then I'd rebuke the devil. Then, all day long I'd thank God for my healing. Then in the afternoon, I'd praise God and receive Communion again. Why? To remind myself that the blood of Jesus is in my veins... That night before bed, I'd receive Communion again. And I'd say, 'Well, I'm going to bed tonight with the taste of His blood and His body in my mouth'... If I woke up in the night, I'd reach over and get my Bible and read all the healing scriptures again... (and) praise myself back to sleep. (...By the way, this will work to rid your body of any sickness, if anyone will do it). (*Voice of Victory*, October 1987)

The same evangelist said in a publication dated November 1987, "You can absolutely believe God for anything in the world and get it." (*The Discerner*)

This evangelist says, "You need to fight the temptation to be sick just as you would fight the temptation to lie or steal. Satan will tempt you with sickness, but you don't have to give in. You can resist him with the word of God as Jesus did." (David Napier, "The Health, Wealth and Prosperity Movement," www.christian doctrine.net)

Such thinking associates suffering with Satan and health and prosperity with God. That's a lie. That's a lie that has been going around in churches for a long time. I see it a lot on television churches, from TV evangelists.

But it's a lie. It's not what Paul says.

Our focal passage comes this morning from Acts 14:22. This is what God's word says. "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

God's people have their trials. It was never designed by God, when he chose his people, that they should be an untried people. They were chosen in the furnace of affliction; they were never chosen to worldly peace and earthly joy. Freedom from sickness and the pains of mortality was never promised them; but when their Lord drew up their charter of privileges he included chastisements among the things to which they should inevitably be heirs. Trials are part of our lot; they were predestined to us in Christ's last legacy.

Good men must never expect to escape troubles; if they do, they will be disappointed, for none of their predecessors have been without them. Mark the patience of Job; remember Abraham, for he had his trials, and by his faith under them, he became the "Father of the faithful." Note well the biographies of all the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and you shall discover that none of those whom God made vessels of mercy, who were not made to pass through the fire of affliction.

It is ordained of old that the cross of trouble shall be engraved on every vessel of mercy, as a royal mark whereby the king's vessels are of honor and distinguished. But although tribulation is thus the path of God's children, they have the comfort of knowing that their Master has traversed it before them; they have his presence and sympathy to cheer them, his grace to support them, and his example to teach them how to endure; and when they reach "the Kingdom," it will more than make amends for the "much tribulation" through which they have passed to enter it. (Charles Spurgeon, www.heartlight.org/spurgeon/0308-am.htm.)

The Bible is full of the message that God's people will suffer – even as they do ministry for the kingdom.

Job confessed, "Man, who is born of woman, is a few days and full of trouble" (Job 14:1).

Here in Acts Paul says we must, through many tribulations, enter the kingdom of God.

In 1 Thessalonians 3:3, Paul says to the church of Thessalonica concerning their suffering, "...you yourselves know that we are appointed for this."

In fact, we find in the Bible that suffering is at the very heart of the Christian experience. Patriarchs, psalmist, prophets, and even our Lord and His apostles all followed the path of suffering before they entered into glory. Paul warned Timothy, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

In Acts 9:16, Jesus showed Paul, "how much he must suffer for Christ's sake."

Paul said in Philippians, "And for the value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" he had suffered the loss of all things. He wants to know the power of Christ's resurrection, but also the fellowship of His sufferings and being conformed to the death of Christ.

In Romans 8, Paul says that we are children of God, "and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:16-18)

In our passage this morning, Paul has had a very difficult time in ministry. Turn to Acts 13:45. Paul has preached in Pisidian Antioch for the second Sabbath. The whole city assembled in verse 44, “but when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.”

Paul’s popularity was more than the Jews could take, as was his new message of Jesus as the Messiah. Therefore, the Jews began to contradict Paul as he preaches. In verse 50, notice the Jews aroused the “devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.”

In chapter 14, they go to Iconium, which is about 90 miles southeast of Antioch. But in 14:2, they had troubled again with the Jews who disbelieved. “They stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against Paul and Barnabas.” But despite that, they spoke boldly (14:3), relying on the Lord.

They try to mistreat and stone the apostles (verse 5), and they have to flee to cities in Galatia. In Lystra they start out with the miraculous healing of a man who was born lame. Look at 14:10. “Stand upright on your feet,” Paul said. “And the man leaped up and began to walk.”

They began to worship Paul and Barnabas, thinking they are the gods Zeus and Hermes. Paul and Barnabas insist they are just men, that they come preaching the gospel. But look at Acts 14:19. “But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But the disciples stood around him, and he arose and entered the city. The next day he went with Barnabas to Derbe.”

And that’s when he tells them – as they make their way traveling back through the churches they started, including those in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch, circling back – this Paul, stoned and left for dead, says, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Remember, I said that in Acts 9:16 Jesus said, “I will show Paul how much he will suffer for my name’s sake.” Well, he’s stoned and left for dead in Acts 14. But listen to the catalogue of suffering that comes in Paul’s life. It’s found in 2 Corinthians 11.

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.

Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned (referring back to our Acts passage in chapter 14), three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;

I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?

Ministry for the Gospel is tough, Paul is saying. “Hey, whoever said this is going to be easy anyway, I ask you?”

Somewhere along the line we have gotten the idea that doing ministry ought to be easy. If we’re serving God, He ought to smooth our pathway. If we’re walking in God’s way and God’s will, then we should never stumble, suffer or falter.

That’s really not the case we find in scripture. Jesus, Himself, experienced suffering. He was hungry, weary. He had a scourging, a crucifixion. He had emotional pain as He wept for Lazarus. He showed sorrow for the fall of Jerusalem. But He saw His suffering as the plan of God. “The Son of Man must suffer many things,” He said in Mark 8:31.

When He told Peter that He was going to suffer, Peter refused to accept the idea. Peter rebuked Him. But Jesus said all who would be His followers must be prepared to humble themselves and go the way of the cross. In Luke 9:23 He says, “If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” Those words come out of His mouth right after He’s told them He is going to be killed and be rejected and suffer.

God’s people don’t have a lot of staying power any more. We have accepted the lie and we think that everything ought to be easy. It wasn’t easy for Jesus. It wasn’t easy for Paul. Why do you think it’s going to be easy for you?

Men and women in the ministry feel abandoned by God. They are afraid that the God who first found them, the God who guided them into a once-fulfilling ministry has now abandoned them and left them to the whims of ministry.

If ministers think they have it bad today because they have a few carping church members, they ought to remember that earlier in our country Baptist preachers in Virginia were whipped, arrested, fined, and imprisoned on bread and water for preaching a theology deviating from that of established Anglicanism.

People in ministry like Paul, people in ministry like me and like you – can feel isolated, invalidated, trapped, empty, worn down, and beaten up. Clergy moral is at an all-time low, and people are walking out of ministry right and left. But to them I want to say, “Whoever said this was going to be easy anyway?”

It’s not just pastors. It’s lay leaders, too. You do well if you can get someone to commit to teaching Sunday School for a year or two these days. People don’t have any staying power, any commitment, any stamina, any sense of being long-suffering in regard to doing ministry. Someone volunteers to teach a children’s class. The children wiggle and giggle. They don’t see the response they want at first. They don’t feel appreciated by the parents, the children, or the pastor of the church. The next thing you know, they are throwing in the towel. It’s just too hard, too much trouble, and they’re not going to put up with it.

Compare that to the teachers of old. You'll find a plaque by the aquarium in the hallway of the children's division that says the following teachers had extended tenure:

Stan Davis – 38 years

Marvin Standefer – 40 years

Edwin Stulce – 47 years

Lois Hill – 41 years

Grace Dial – 55 years

Martha B. Stulce – 47 years

Marilyn Cates – 30 years

Yvonne Franklin – 45 years.

Those eight Sunday School workers, now deceased – those eight people logged 343 years of service teaching children about Jesus. Don't think there weren't some Sundays they wanted to quit, throw in the towel, give it up, felt unappreciated, felt undervalued, felt as if they were spinning their wheels and getting nowhere? You bet they felt that – felt it all the time. But they persevered. They endured. They kept on keeping on.

Someone wrote:

I asked God to grant me patience.

God said, "No. Patience is a byproduct of tribulations; it isn't granted, it is earned."

I asked God to give me happiness.

God said, "No. I give you blessings. Happiness is up to you."

I asked God to spare me pain.

God said, "No. Suffering draws you apart from worldly cares and brings you closer to me."

I asked God to make my spirit grow.

God said, "No. You must grow on your own, but I will prune you to make you fruitful."

I asked God for all things that I might enjoy life.

God said, "No. I will give you life so that you may enjoy all things."

I asked God to help me love others, as much as God loves me.

**God said, "...Ahhh, finally you have the idea."
(www.homileticsonline.com)**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering of Christ. It is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 101)

Someone once said suffering colors life, but you can choose the color. That’s true. You can choose to be bitter, or you can choose to be better because of the suffering that is placed before you.

I told you there was an old lie going around that God’s people should not and cannot suffer. It’s a lie. For Paul says in Acts 14:22 that it is through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom of God.

Probably the king of the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel was Jim Bakker. Jim Bakker, who spent a lifetime promoting this pseudo-gospel, concluded in a book whose very title bears the message – *I Was Wrong*. He opens that book with, **“The words ‘I was wrong’ do not come easily to me. For most of my life I believed that my understanding of God and how He wants us to live was not only correct but worth exporting to the world...But my previous philosophy of life...was fundamentally flawed. God does not promise that we will all be rich and prosperous, as I once preached. When I really studied the Bible while in prison, it became clear to me that not one man or woman – not even prophets of God – led a life without pain. God does promise that He will never leave us or forsake us, no matter what trial or pain we must go through...whether it be the loss or reputation, loss of position or power, financial calamity, addiction, separation, divorce, or imprisonment... Not only was I wrong, but I was teaching the opposite of what Jesus had said.”**

Folks, if you’re frustrated in your ministry, if you’re stumbling in your walk, I want to remind you that nobody ever said this was going to be easy. But He did say He would never leave us or forsake us.