

meeting God
on the
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Biblical Voices on God's Presence in the Face of Tragedy

SESSION FIVE: May 11, 2010

The Godforsaken Son

God on the Cross

food for thought...

Suffering For

"What is new about the New Covenant, therefore, is not the idea that God loves the world enough to bleed for it, but the claim that here he is actually putting his money where his mouth is. Like a father saying about his sick child, 'I'd do anything to make you well,' God finally calls his own bluff and does it. Jesus Christ is what God does, and the cross where God did it is the central symbol of New Covenant faith."

—Frederick Buechner

Suffering With

"...When someone we love suffers, we suffer with him, and we would not have it otherwise because the suffering and the love are one, just as it is with God's love for us."

—Frederick Buechner

Creative Suffering (With Jesus)

"Martyrs are not victims, overtaken by evil, but hunters who stalk evil into the open by offering as bait their own bodies."

—Walter Wink

"Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame."

—Hannah Szenes

The Crucified God: Learning to Speak the Unspeakable

Martin Luther wrote, "The cross alone is our theology," and wrote that we only really catch an honest glimpse of God when we look at the cross. He even went as far as to say that we worship a "crucified God." The whole idea boggles the mind if we take it seriously—it means saying the infinite, immortal, all-powerful Lord of the universe submitted to death—and not just any death, but the ugly, shameful, and humiliating death of a public execution at the hands of an empire, which gloated over the scene. In our discussion, we will look at how the New Testament writers, standing behind Luther's phrase, teach us to make sense of the cross as a response to our experience of tragedy and suffering. We will see at least these three themes: Jesus as one who suffers for us, who suffers with us, and who opens a way for us to suffer creatively walking after him.

Jesus and the God Who Suffers For Us

The first place to start is with the Trinity. Christians believe that in the life of Jesus, we get no less than the very presence and Being of God in human flesh. God the Son, incarnate in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." The New Testament itself insists that in Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9) and that Jesus "was in the form of God" but "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (Phil. 2:6). That is to say, Christians believe that what Jesus endured, God endured. So rather than picturing the cross as God the Father demanding a pound of flesh from humanity and arranging for any old Messiah to pay for it, the cross is not only about God the Son dying, but also God the Father suffering son-less-ness, and the Spirit (often spoken of as the Bond of Love between the Father and the Son) is pulled to the breaking point. The New Testament writers use different language to talk about what happens at the cross—sometimes it is the imagery of *paying a ransom*; other times it is like the killing of an animal in a *sacrifice*; and at yet other times, it is compared to a great exchange of places, where Jesus absorbs the stain of our sinfulness and gives us his own purity. In any case, the New Testament keeps coming back to the idea that the cross is "for us" and that at the cross it is no less than God who endures the suffering that happens there. The Bible does not go behind the scenes to tell us always *why* God's suffering for us could be redemptive—it just says that it *is*. Somehow, what God undergoes in the cross is for our life and redemption.

The Godforsaken Son: God on the Cross

Jesus, the Spirit, and the God Who Suffers With Us

Okay, we believe that in the cross, Jesus suffered *for* us—that is, somehow, in our place, or in a way that spares us some other kind of suffering. But let's also be honest: we still suffer in this life. Our whole series has been built around the question of where we find God when we *do* suffer, not about how delightful our lives are now that Jesus has ended all suffering. So while it is true to say that the cross is *in part* about God-in-Christ suffering *for* us, the New Testament also speaks of the cross, as well as the ongoing presence of the Spirit, as signs of God's suffering *with* us. That is, God continues to abide *alongside* of us and, without taking away our suffering, goes through it *with* us. Take for example, the letter to the Hebrews, which reminds us:

"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death..." (5:7)

And then also:

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." (4:15)

Without suggesting that we are without pains in this life, the writer to the Hebrews does say that we are not *alone* to face our sufferings. Similarly, Paul writes to the Romans about the Holy Spirit that:

"...The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." (8:26)

In both books, the idea is that we do not face trouble alone. And when we talk about God being *with* us in suffering, we do not just mean "up there" but alongside us, having gone through it before in the human life of Jesus and continuing to go through it in the abiding presence of the Spirit. God continues to suffer *with* us.

Jesus Opens the Way of Creative Suffering

The Scriptures insist that Jesus was not a hapless or unlucky *victim* at the cross, but willingly chose to give his life—as a sacrifice for sin, as a way of sparing his friends from the violence of the Romans, as a way of rejecting the violent alternatives in front of him, and at many other levels, too. Rather than rejecting all kinds of suffering, and even rather than keeping his followers from all kinds of suffering, too, Jesus opens to us a pattern of life that uses suffering *creatively*. As George MacDonald writes, *"The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like his."* I Peter uses this idea to guide Christian witness in the first century: "If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter. 2:20 and following). Jesus himself in John's Gospel commands his followers to love "as I have loved you," and then highlights that his kind of love is expressed in the humility of washing feet and "laying down one's life for one's friends."

The idea here is that while suffering itself is not inherently *good* (and let's not pretend that it is), it is possible to suffer in ways that are creative and redemptive, much the same way a mother's pain in giving birth (and then both parents' pain in raising the child) involves *suffering* that is used for good. The followers of Jesus are called not to avoid all suffering at all costs, but neither to seek out all kinds of suffering (*sometimes the Christians in jail in Acts are freed, and sometimes they stay in prison even when the earthquake opens the doors!*). The question is whether we can use conscious, chosen, intentional willingness to suffer in ways that bring healing for others. The sacrifice of time, money, or energy for someone else. The vulnerability that leads us to risk that our hearts may be broken by others. The willingness to spend ourselves in little unnoticed actions and words. These are part of what it looks like to lay down our lives and to do it over the course of our lives, in a way that is used for creative purposes, to make others whole and well. That is a kind of suffering Jesus does not spare us *from* but invites us *into* as his witnesses.
