

Goal: The hearers rejoice in their sufferings as they look to God in hope.

A great philosopher once said about pain and suffering, *“Paths to the Dark Side these are.”* His name was Master Jedi Yoda, for you Star Wars fans. Good words of warning, whether from a Sci-Fi movie or in our world today. Over these past few weeks we have witnessed horrific events suffering and death as evil has impacted our young people in schools, and some of our family members have found themselves in hospitals due to cancer or another afflictions. What’s a person to think about all of this pain and suffering? Are they paths to the Dark Side? Are they paths to doubt and despair? Are they paths to forsake God for not intervening? The world thinks so.

C.S. Lewis articulates the world’s mindset this way: *“If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.”* (*The Problem of Pain, Ch. 2*) That’s the problem. If God is almighty and good, why does pain and suffering happen? Why do youth massacre students at schools? Why do natural disasters harm? Why do diseases flourish? Why do some physically and sexually abuse? The answer is simple, sin. Pain and suffering exist because of sin. Evil exists because of sin. And why does sin exist? Because our first parents, wanting to be like God, succumbed to temptation, disobeyed God, and therefore brought sin, death, and destruction into the perfect world God had created.

God wanted us to live from every word that proceeds from His mouth and enjoy His perfect creation, without pain or suffering, but we’re the ones who messed things up. Not God. Pain and suffering are in this world because of our sinfulness, our selfishness, our disobedience. Does this mean that God lacks power or goodness? No!

The fact that evil exists doesn’t negate the fact that God is almighty. While evil seems to run rampant in our world, it doesn’t happen apart from God’s will. In other words, God limits pain and suffering and lets it advance only according to His purposes and no further. He isn’t the author of evil, but since evil exists as a result of our sin, He uses it to carry out His will and here are a couple examples.

Cain killed Abel. That was evil. But out of that evil God reminds you that you are your brother’s keeper and you’re to love him as much as you love yourself. That’s good.

Paul endured some sort of thorn in the flesh. That entailed suffering. But out of

that suffering Paul learned to find his identity and strength in God's grace. That's good.

The tsunami of 2004 killed over 240,000 people. That's a tragedy. But out of that tragedy God has opened wonderful opportunities for Christian missionaries to bring the Gospel and aid to areas in which it was previously illegal. That's good.

These examples, and countless others, remind us that while evil exists because of our sinfulness, God will turn that evil into something good. That's why Paul says that God ***“works all things according to the counsel of His will.” (Ephesians 1: 11)***

Even pain and suffering can serve God's good purpose. Paul knew that, so he wrote: ***“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” (Romans 5: 3 – 4)*** How can that be? How can Paul rejoice in his sufferings? Remember, the pain and suffering you endure is a result of sin. But God uses that pain and suffering to build endurance, character, and hope within you. That's like turning a lemon into lemonade.

Now, if you were thrown into prison for no good reason, wouldn't you be tempted to sulk and mope and cry injustice? Paul and Silas, while sitting in jail in Philippi for no good reason, prayed and sang hymns to God. Why? What better way to endure than to rely on God? And relying on God builds character. And character rooted in God's Word and promises produces hope. Hope that God will work all things for His good.

James shares this same hope when he writes, ***“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.” (James 5: 13)*** Peter writes, ***“After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” (1 Peter 5: 10)***

And that brings us to God's goodness. The fact that evil exists doesn't negate the fact that God is good. Where is God's goodness manifested? On the cross! ***“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5: 6 – 8)*** That's where God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, the Sinless One, to endure the pain and suffering, the evil, the consequences of our sin. That whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life. That's why Paul begins the 5th chapter of his letter to the church in Rome with these words: ***“Therefore,***

since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God...And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5: 1 – 2, 5)

So, when you endure pain and suffering, when evil comes your way, look to Jesus. Remember His suffering and death in your place, as your substitute. Remember that He conquered sin and death, pain and suffering, once and for all. Yes, you still feel their effects in your life, but clinging to Christ, they can't ultimately harm you. No wonder Job, who had everyone he loved and everything he owned taken away, still confessed, ***"The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD"*** (Job 1: 21)

Yeah, pain and suffering are all around you. For many, they are paths to doubt and despair, paths to forsake God for seemingly not intervening. But not for you, pain and suffering provide opportunities for prayer...opportunities to call upon God in trouble ...opportunities to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus...opportunities to ***"look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."*** (Hebrews 12: 2) Your day of deliverance is coming too so hang on, cling to Christ, and say with faith, ***"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."*** (Romans 8: 18)

So, when you find yourself overwhelmed by pain or suffering, stop in and see me or give me a call. As your pastor, I'm more than willing to be a companion in your suffering, to share in your grief, and most importantly to bring you the comfort of God's Word and sacraments. I won't always have quick answers but I will offer you what God offers. His forgiveness, strength, comfort, and peace.

In the end, you and I may not have the wisdom Yoda, but when it comes to pain and suffering, we know this much: Paths to God's grace in Jesus Christ these are! Paths to endurance, character, and hope these are! Therefore rejoice, even under your crosses, for in pain and suffering you see most clearly that Jesus is your all in all! His grace is sufficient for you! Amen.