

WHY IS HARRY SUFFERING?

Text: Job 4:7-9; Job 42: 1-6

Introduction: November 29th, 2007 – Dr. Harry B. Hunt, Jr., long-time friend and long-time professor of OT at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX – who had inherited a farm from his mother in East Texas - farming accident – post-hold digger attached to a tractor – tried to hold it down with the weight of his body – shirt got caught in the auger – severed his left arm at the shoulder, badly damaged his right arm, paralyzed him from the waist down.

Harry is a good, man. Pat, his wife, is a good person. Both are people of faith, and integrity, persons with high ethical standards, a love of family, and good friends to have. Because of Harry’s accident, their lives have radically changed and will never be what they once were. Both in their own respective ways have and are experiencing suffering.

I. Why do we suffer? Or, put another way, *does God cause us to suffer?* **This is an age old question!** The ancient story of **Job** addresses this question and provides direction for every generation. Job was a good, successful, family man, whose life was radically upended. He lost everything – family, possessions, home, health. He finds himself on the local trash heap, covered with sores, trying to figure out why this has happened to him. His less than sympathetic wife tells him to simply curse God and die!

Job’s friends try to explain to him that when such terrible things happen, it is God punishing one for doing really bad things, known or unknown. But Job refuses to accept the simple answer that if you are good, God blesses you and if you are bad, God punishes you. ***If Job was right, then why do we suffer?***

God certainly has created a world in which suffering is a possibility. And humanity has both the capacity to suffer and to understand suffering. In such a world, then why do we suffer?

A. We suffer because of our own mistakes and misjudgments

1. Steve, my brother, and I found a long black wire about the size of my middle finger, or smaller – cotton wood trees along the south boundary of our yard – one had a real nice overhanging limb that was great for swings – built an “airplane” out of an orange crate and some boards – attached to the wire – 55 gallon barrel – could not decide who got to fly the maiden voyage –so we both did – great acceleration – began to soar – reached the peak of our climb –

and the rope broke – crash. This was *not God punishing us*. We simply made a mistake in judgment and paid the consequence.

2. Riding a bicycle with my eyes closed - I had a paper route when I was in grade school. When I finished delivering the St. Louis Globe Democrat I would ride down a dividing street from about 10 blocks on my way home. I decided to see how far I could ride with my eyes closed. I had it all figured out! The street was not level but was rounded from the shoulders to the center, it was "oiled" or tarred with gravel on each shoulder, which I would hear and feel if I got over too far. I could hear cars coming and open my eyes. The only calculation that I missed was realizing that parked station wagons make no noise. Did God cause me to suffer? Of course not!

3. Harry's accident – I know that it may sound rather cold, and I certainly do not intend to convey that idea. But the bottom line is that a good friend, a good man, made a mistake that cannot be rectified, at least in terms of going back to the way that things once were. We suffer sometimes because of our mistakes and misjudgments.

B. We suffer because of the mistakes or misjudgments of others

1. Accident in which my grandparents were killed – August 24, 1955 - another driver crossing a yellow line and passing on a hill – hitting the car in which my grandparents, my uncle, my brother, and I were riding. My grandparents were killed because of someone else's mistake. Describe the events. Add, that I was in the emergency room, holding my grandfather's crushed leg, and as an 11 year old, watched him pass away. *My grandparents did not die because God was punishing them*, but because someone else made a tragic mistake and they suffered because of that.

C. We suffer simply because of an indiscriminate act of nature, a failure of a piece of machinery, a random illness

1. Tornado – strikes one place, misses another

2. Machinery failure or some accident related to an inanimate object? E.g. a few years ago a family of three with one on the way who had moved from New York after 911, killed on I-70 after a girder failed and sagged crossing the interstate. 3.

Betty, my sister, developed and died from breast cancer in 1999 – Why her? I know of no one else in my family that died from breast cancer (most had heart problems). We sometimes suffer simply because of some unexplainable situation, not because God is out to get us. *Betty did not*

die of breast cancer because God was punishing her or others but because cancer chose to indiscriminately enter her body, as it does to so many. Why her, in this case I simply don't know, but it did.

D. *We suffer sometimes because of vicarious suffering* – we choose to suffer for the good of others

1. *Soldier* sacrifices himself for others – PBS series called *The War – WWII* – story of a Marine on a Pacific island who jumped on a hand grenade, lost his life, but saved the life of two fellow Marines – given posthumously the Medal of Honor -

2. *Jesus* voluntarily dying by execution on a cross – He chose to sacrifice his life for the good of all of us. Sometimes we choose to suffer.

E. **In my mind God does not cause us to suffer in order to punish us or even others, or to get our attention, or simply because he enjoys seeing us in agony. If I am right, then is there any good that comes out of suffering?**

II. **Hence, we can ask ourselves, what can be accomplished through suffering?**

A. *We may gain a better understanding of life* – *suffering can be a great teacher*, if we are willing to learn and to apply what we learn. When I saw my grandfather die, I immediately knew that there are no guarantees in life. Therefore, we need to strive to do the best we can and what we can in light of who we are. Shortly after this I also realized that when we have the opportunity to do something good, we need to do it. We may not get a chance to respond in a positive manner again in a specific circumstance

B. *Suffering can enlarge our capacity to care for others*. Or, we can become self-centered and selfish. It is *our choice*. We can become bitter, or we can use our suffering as an opportunity to help, to encourage, and to provide a model for others who also encounter suffering.

C. *Suffering may strengthen our character*. I have seen this in many people. I am beginning to see it in Harry, as I read the almost daily and now weekly reports on Harry. E.g., in one of the posts by Pat, she describes Harry in a new motorized chair, heading off for Target and out running the family. I do not expect to hear of Harry withdrawing into a shell of bitterness. Through Pat's posts it is apparent that both she and Harry have developed new strengths, which could not have been achieved without the suffering that they have endured.

D. *Suffering may deepen our faith in God.* I am sure that Harry's suffering has given him and given Pat a newer understanding of God, and has strengthened the faith of both.

Suffering did the same for Job. He demanded to meet God to understand his suffering. God appeared to him in a whirlwind. The encounter did not answer the question of suffering. But it does *reject a utilitarian approach to how we serve and understand God.* We do not serve God so that he will bless us, protect us from harm, keep us completely healthy, and reward us at every turn. *We serve God because He is God and we are not, not in order to live the good, healthy, wonderful life.*

Conclusion: Job responded to his suffering and his encounter with God by concluding that “*I had heard of You by hearing, but now I see You – I know You - through the eyes of my suffering.*” Chances are great that none of us will avoid suffering in our lives. But how we respond to suffering is the challenge for all of us – we can respond by helping others, by strengthening our character, by maturing in our faith, and perhaps by even taking on suffering for the good of others. That is the nature of vicarious suffering, and when we respond in this way, we can accomplish so much in a constructive manner.

This morning we sung one of the most well-known hymns in Christianity, *It Is Well*. The hymn was written by Horation G. Spafford, a Chicago businessman. He and his wife had lost a son, and he had experienced a financial crisis resulting from lost investments after the Great Chicago fire. In 1873 he planned a trip to Europe with his wife and four daughters. At the last minute he had to deal with a situation in his business, so he sent his family ahead with plans to join them as soon as possible.

Tragically, the ship carrying his family collided with another and sank in the Atlantic. Only his wife survived. She sent him a cable with the message "Saved, alone." Spafford immediately sailed for Europe. As they neared the place of the accident, the Captain informed Spafford and he went on deck. There as he passed over the place where he lost his four daughters he penned the words that would be put to music. "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou has taught e to say,; it is well, it is well with my soul." Spafford's tragedy has encouraged and blessed millions of people over the years and reminds us today of good that can come from sorrow and loss.