

April 2, 2006

Lord, Don't Allow My Pain to Drive Me Away From You
Proverbs 30:7-9 / Romans 8:28-39 / Job 6:1-10

This morning I'd like to begin by asking a simple question:

What's your greatest fear as a Christian?
(Everyone has fears. What is your greatest fear?)

I've asked that question many times, to individuals and groups of various sizes, and I've been surprised by the great variety of answers. Some (especially in the missionary community) said that the thing they feared most was: "Getting to the end of their lives, without having accomplished anything of great significance for the Lord," or "getting to old age, and having to live with unchangeable regrets."

Some in their early 20's said, "Marrying the wrong person," or "Being out of the center of God's will for their life," or "Not accomplishing the task God placed them in this world to fulfill." Others said that their greatest fear was "Dying before their kids were out on their own," or "Committing the unforgivable sin," or "Not hearing God say on that Final Day, 'Well done my good and faithful servant.'"

And still others said that their greatest fear was, "The fear that they might (at some point of weakness, or emotional stress, or mental instability) dishonor God, and thus irrevocably ruin their testimony."

So I ask you again: **"What do YOU (as a Christian) FEAR the most?"**

And it's not an irrelevant question! In fact, listen once again to our reading from Proverbs 30:7-9. Because there we hear Agur (the author of these verses) express two of his own personal desires that reflect personal fears. He says this:

"Two things I ask of You, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread" (Jesus seems to have alluded to this very verse, in the Lord's Prayer). "Otherwise," says Agur, "I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

Why would he ask that unless he had some degree of fear that he might possibly fall prey to the two sinful tendencies spawned in people who live in either of those two extremes—the tendency to forget God due to having too much, or dishonor God due to having too little.

Maybe Agur had looked around and seen people—(people who were once zealous for God)—yet who because of prosperity or poverty had succumbed to the spiritual dangers that living in either one of those two extremes exposes one to.

Like Jesus, he seems to be acutely aware that riches (or having more than we need) inevitably lessens the sense of our urgency in prayer, and our dependence upon God for the supply of our “daily bread.” When the refrigerator, freezer and cupboards are full, praying that God would supply our daily bread seems a bit awkward and unnecessary.

The rich may offer thanks for their food, but they rarely pray in earnest that God will provide it for them. They don't need to. It's pretty much a “given”—along with many other things as well—like housing, and health care, and education, and heat, and clothes, and electricity, and much, much more. Agur surely knew that the times Israel strayed the furthest from God were NOT the times she struggled, but the times she prospered. Her riches made her “forget her God,” or for all intents and purposes, as he puts it, “disown Him.”

And the 2nd equally dangerous financial extreme is abject poverty—poverty that causes pangs of hunger so intense, and a persons children to become so lethargic from lack of nutrition, that it becomes easy (as the drive to survive kicks in) for people (or parents) to justify stealing food, and in doing so, dishonor God.

And if you don't think it's a big temptation, try fasting some time. It will give you great empathy for the poor and hungry. In fact, back when I was young and idealistic I once went without food for 7 days (though I had a friend who did it for 21 days).

And I remember how intense the cravings for food were, sometimes laying awake at night thinking about eating, or dreaming that I WAS eating while I slept (“wish fulfillment” as psychologists would call it)!

It helped me understand the poor a little bit better—although unlike them, I had the ability to break my fast whenever I wanted to—and they don't, which means that try as I might I could NEVER REALLY relate to their plight.

Try it some time, even for only 4-5 days. And if you do, tell yourself this (just to see how intense the struggle actually is): Tell yourself beforehand that breaking the fast, and eating something before the 5 days is up, would be equivalent to “stealing.” And then see how intense the desire to “STEAL” becomes, or the desire to “LIE,” as you actually find yourself telling yourself that you NEVER REALLY committed to 5 days in the first place! You just thought you’d give it a try!

You see, the comfortableness of prosperity, and the pain and struggle of extreme poverty can have a way of doing that—of eroding one’s resolve, and altering their values, and causing them to sell out their ideals, or break their promises to themselves, and to God—that is, they do have a very real potential to cause us to “disown” or “dishonor” Him. And Agur, being a godly man, and never wanting to fall prey to either one of those two dangers, asked God NOT to give him either one—not riches nor poverty.

In fact, let me pause and ask you another question:

Is your personal desire to honor and glorify God THAT strong? Is it SO strong, that like Agur, knowing the spiritual dangers of being RICH or POOR, you would ask God to keep you from BOTH? Most people would have no problem saying, “Please don’t give me poverty.” But could you say, “Lord, please DO NOT give me riches?”

In fact, is your desire to honor God so strong that like Job you would rather die than dishonor Him?

Because that is what Job seems to be saying in verses 8-10. In fact, if I may paraphrase verses 1-10, this is what Job seems to be saying in response to the rebuke Eliphaz has just finished giving him. Job essentially says this:

“If you only knew the depths of the pain and anguish I’m suffering, you would understand why my words are so impetuous (or “rash” as the NASB puts it) (vv. 1-3). God, says Job, has shot me with arrows (poison tipped arrows), and my spirit drinks in their poison (v.4). His terrors are marshaled against me like a great army whose lines of troops just keep on coming (v. 4b)! That’s why I speak as I do. I’m looking for spiritual food to alleviate my hunger and pain and all you give me is tasteless, flavorless, nothing! Does a donkey bray when it has grass to eat, or an ox bellow when its stomach is full. NO! When it is contented and full it keeps quiet! And so would I, if you’d given me some substantial, nourishing, nutritious spiritual food to chew on—food that would satisfy my hunger and alleviate my pain. But all you’ve given me is tasteless food—like the flavorless white of a raw egg—and I refuse to touch it. Such food makes me ill” (vv. 6-7).

Then in light of all that, in verses 8-10, Job tells us (like Agur did) what his real wish is—the inner yearning of his heart. What is it?

“That God would kill him before his pain caused him to do, or say, anything that would dishonor the Holy One by denying His Words.”

“Oh” (says Job, with a sigh of deep inner yearning) “Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant what I hope for, that God would be willing to crush me, to let loose his hand and cut me off! (That is, “kill me!”)(And in this case I believe that given the context, the NIV captures the meaning of Job’s words in verse 10 more accurately than the NASB) “Then,” says Job, “I would still have this consolation—my joy in unrelenting pain—that I had not denied the words of the Holy One.”

In other words, “Lord, please, I really want you to kill me—to get it over with quickly—because I’m afraid that if this suffering continues, I’ll do something I don’t want to do, and in doing so dishonor You. So please God, please crush me or kill me before I do something I’ll regret—because at least if I die before I do, I’ll have the consolation and joy of knowing that even though I suffered intensely, I remained faithful unto death, and did not deny the words of my Holy God.”

It’s almost an exact paraphrase of the fear that some have expressed to me:

“The fear that they might, at some point of weakness, or emotional stress, or mental instability, dishonor God, and thus irrevocably ruin their testimony.”

In that sense Job would have made a good Marine. Isn’t their motto:

“Death before Dishonor.”

Job’s is similar (though with an obviously God-ward slant). His seems to be:

“Lord, please let me die, before you let me do something that would dishonor You.”

Even the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, realizing the potential that intense pain has to drive one away from God, suggests this as part of one of the prayers to be read at a Funeral Service:

“O Lord Most Holy, God Most Wise—Most Worthy Judge and Merciful Saviour—suffer us not, in our last hours, for any pains of death, to fall from Thee.”

In other words, as my sermon title puts it, “Lord, Don’t Allow My Pain to Drive Me Away From You.” And I say that with all earnestness, because it is a very real danger.

Which brings us to our **FIRST** point for this morning. That pain (as I’ve mentioned before) tends to do one of TWO things: It either makes people better, or it makes people bitter / conforms them to the image of Christ, or drives them away from Christ—or BOTH! And I have seen BOTH.

My own brother (who spoke at my Installation Service) experienced such a time in his life. He was converted during the days of the “Jesus Freaks” (as they used to be call-ed) back in the early 1970’s—in fact, around 1971. He was at a Bible Study one night, with some ex-hippies who had left drugs behind to follow Jesus, and as they were there that night the Holy Spirit came upon him as they were studying the Word, and he also came to faith in Jesus Christ.

So, in accordance with Acts 8:36, and 10:47, they said, “What’s keeping him from being baptized, now that he’s received the Holy Spirit?” So they took him into the bathroom, filled up the bathtub, and baptized him right there on the spot!

From that time on he went to Bible Studies, Christian Concerts, and church every Sunday. It was quite a tight knit little group, and very evangelistic. I remember well how his friends would witness to me all the time (heathen that I was and would be for another 10 years)! He also met, and started dating, a very pretty Christian girl from the next town over—a girl who worked part time as a model—and soon they were engaged.

THEN the night before my 17th birthday (about 3 years after his conversion), I remember waking up in the middle of the night to hear my brother sobbing uncontrollably—all night long. I woke in the morning to discover that around midnight, as he was driving her home in my dad’s VW Beetle, a big Chevy Impala (full of teenagers), went right through an intersection at high speed, totally disregarding the stop sign. (It was rumored that they were playing “bullet.” That is, driving from Point A to Point B without stopping—going through intersections, and stop signs, and red lights—sort of like playing Russian Roulette with a car.)

They struck the VW on her side, threw the car nearly 60 feet, and it landed between two trees. My brother was essentially unharmed, but his girlfriend was slammed into the windshield, and suffered facial and brain damage. The right side of her face sagged, her speech became slurred, and she had difficulty walking.

After months of therapy, the relationship dissolved, and as time passed I saw my brother drift spiritually. He stopped going to Church, stopped going to Bible Studies, isolated himself from the group, struggled with anger, and from all outward indications—gave up on the Christian life—for at least 5 years. In fact, he didn't return to the Lord until after I came to faith, and left for the Dominican Republic six years later, in 1980.

You see, PAIN has a way of doing that. It has a way of driving a wedge between us and God. It stings, and can even make earnest believers (like Job) bitter for a season, while others who don't have the Lord in their life, can remain bitter toward God the rest of their earthly lives.

Which means the "becoming BETTER part" takes time. It doesn't usually happen right away. Hebrews 12:11 tells us that! After encouraging the Hebrew believers not to lose heart when they go through trials or hardships, he says this:

"No discipline (or hardship) seems pleasant AT THE TIME, but painful. LATER ON HOWEVER, (and that's the key!—"later on," "in time and not right away") it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace in those who have been trained by it."

That is, it makes them BETTER. But that only happens LATER ON (says the Author of Hebrews) AFTER the person has had time to deal with the disappointment / and process all the pain / and work through all the anger and bitterness / and sort through the feelings that somehow God turned against them. Sort of like Job dealing with the sense of divine betrayal that he expresses in verse 4, where he tells us that he feels like God has turned on Him, and made him a target for His arrows—poison tipped arrows—that are poisoning his spirit.

Job can feel the toxins released into his spirit by virtue of his intense suffering. He can sense that he's dying inside, from all the poisonous THOUGHTS and FEELINGS that pain has spawned and released into the blood-stream of his spiritual life.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. Regardless of what we KNOW, when we go through extremely difficult times it often FEELS like God is our Enemy. It FEELS like He has turned against us—that instead of protecting us FROM pain, He's the One INFLICTING the pain! And that sense of being targeted and shot at by the Almighty, who pulls back the bow of His providential decrees, and lets the arrows of circumstantial hardships or afflictions fly—when those arrows strike, it's like they emit poison into our spirit.

In fact, depending on the intensity of the pain, it can so poison us against God, that it makes us struggle with hateful feelings toward the God we FEEL hates us.

And as the great Puritan, Jeremiah Burroughs once pointed out, *"It is all but impossible to draw near to God, or run into His arms for refuge, if we perceive Him to be against us, or to be our enemy."*

(If we perceive Him, as Job put it, "To be shooting poison arrows at us, that are striking us left and right!")

Devout as any believer may indeed be, they will find it difficult to draw near to God for help, if they perceive His terrors to be marshaled against them, and His arrows to be flying right at them!

EVER FELT THAT WAY? That instead of protecting you (like you thought it was always supposed to be), God instead seemed to be attacking you? Buffeting you. Shooting at you. Singling you out, and making you a target of His poisoned arrows, when you thought He was supposed to be sheltering you from the fiery darts of the Evil One? Believe me when I say it causes extreme confusion, disappointment with God, and can spawn an immense spiritual struggle just to keep those things from poisoning your spirit!

You see, like Job, we are often unable to gain, or hold on to a correct perspective of things, while we are still stinging from the pain of God's arrows striking our body!

It is only "later on" (as the Author of Hebrews tells us)—AFTER we have regained some degree of composure, and worked through the initial trauma and shock of being struck, and had time to deal with the disappointment of feeling God did not "deliver us from evil," that we can even begin to think straight. (Which means we shouldn't expect people to do it right away!)

Only AFTER our faith has been strengthened by the promises of God in the Gospel and the Holy Spirit has graciously worked to restore a right perspective within us, can we again acknowledge what we SHOULD HAVE acknowledged all along—that all the pain, and adversity, and heartache we experienced—all the "arrows" God shot at us in our time of affliction—WERE FOR OUR GOOD.

That's our THIRD point. We need to understand that ALL the trials and afflictions that come our way in this life, are ordained, administered or superintended by God / in love / and for our spiritual growth. They are ALL, in some way, for the purpose of conforming us to the likeness of Christ, and making us to be partakers of God's holiness (Heb 12:4-11).

As another great Puritan, Samuel Bolton, once put it:

"God has thoughts of love in all He does to His people. The ground of His dealings with us is love, the manner of His dealings is love, and the purpose of His dealings is love. He has regard, in all, to our good here (to make us partakers of His holiness), and to our glory hereafter (to make us partakers of His glory)."

It's true. *Painful as the "arrows of the Almighty" indeed are when they strike us, NOT ONE is released from His bow, and NOT ONE strikes the flesh of even the least of any of His beloved children except from a motive of transforming love. NOT ONE THING comes into the life of a believer, that hasn't first passed through the grid, or the filter, of God's tender love for his children. NOT ONE THING!!!*

That's why Jerry Bridges can say, "There is no such thing as pain without purpose in the life of a believer." He's right. Though Rabbi Kushner, in His book "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People," says: "Bad things do not happen for any good reason," the Bible would say just the opposite, "Bad things do not happen except for a good reason"—even if we can't understand how that can possibly be true.

"Although all pain has a purpose in the mind of God," says Bridges, "that purpose is often—it is safe to say usually—hidden from us. The Apostle Paul wrote of God's ways, 'How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out (Romans 11:33)

So, let me close with this one **LAST** admonition: Most of us (I think) can understand Job's desire to die rather than dishonor God. Job knew himself well enough to know he was at the "breaking point." He felt the poison his struggle with pain being released into his spiritual bloodstream. And he didn't know how much more he could take, before he would possibly succumb to the effects of that poison, and deny God's Word (which is tantamount to denying God Himself). So sensing he was at that point, he essentially prayed, "Lord, please kill me rather than allow me to do something that dishonors You."

But in spite of all that, I believe there is a BETTER way to pray, & BETTER things to pray for, than for God to KILL US in times of immense struggle! It's true that the earnest believer would NEVER want to dishonor God. But there are other options!

- 1.) Like confessing we are at the breaking point, and pleading for leniency or mercy.
- 2.) Like acknowledging how weak we are, and how much we need God's grace. Sometimes we forget God is NOT waiting for us to prove how strong we are, but to admit how weak we are, and cast ourselves upon His grace for help in time of need! It wasn't the boasting Pharisee who said "Look at me and what I have and can do," but the struggling, despairing Tax Collector who realized he was powerless to do anything but plead for mercy, who received God's help.
- 3.) Like telling God that in our despair we need hope—some tangible sign of His love for us to counter the sense that we feel He has made us a target for His poison arrows.
- 4.) Like asking for some type of encouragement—something to counteract the accusations of the Evil One that poison our thoughts and feelings. Whisperings of the Holy Spirit that confirm to us God's love for us, while Satan is trying to convince us God hates us, and always has. That He's just playing games with us.
- 5.) Like asking God to help us BELIEVE in our heart (and in spite of our pain) the things we KNOW to be true in our heads! Some have even suggested that that's what Job is all about. In the BEGINNING of the book, Job affirms the Sovereignty of God over all things. But as we get into the MIDDLE of the book that affirmation falters terribly—almost totally! Yet by the END of the book, he affirms it with even greater conviction when he says in Chapter 42: "Now I KNOW (that is, beyond any shadow of a doubt, deep down in my heart) that You can do all things—no plan of yours can be thwarted." What he affirmed as correct doctrine in the BEGINNING of the book, and loses by the MIDDLE of the book, he declares as emphatically authenticated truth, validated by experience, and direct revelation from God, at the END of the book.

So maybe I can end by leading you all in a prayer. Let's pray:

Lord, I know there are some here who either have, or are suffering. People who feel they're at the breaking point, and that if something doesn't change soon, they may falter and do something that dishonors you. It is for them that I pray. Let a ray of light, ever so small, rise on the horizon of their life. Let them see even the slightest glow of a distant candle at the end of the dark tunnel they've been walking through for so long.

Like all of us, they know the sun shines above the dark storm clouds, and that at some point a shaft of sunlight will break through those clouds and touch the earth like a divine

finger pointing the way to a land of wonder and awe. They know that at some point the sense of peace and rest and awe at Your splendor will return! But right now, Lord, they're not sure they'll be able to hold on until that happens. So please, Lord, God of Merciful Love, whose Transforming Grace sometimes seems brutal as it stings us with the intense pain of purposeful afflictions—please, before they break, or do something they would never want to do, take this trial from them—not their life, but the trial that sometimes makes them despair of life.

Help them BELIEVE in their heart, what they KNOW in their head—that You are Sovereign even over their trials! That You do indeed see ALL their afflictions—nothing escapes the Your watchful gaze! That You care for them more deeply than they could ever know! And that they can NEVER be severed from Your Love—EVER!

Hard as it is to say it when Your arrows are striking their flesh, reassure them that NOTHING comes their way that doesn't first pass through the filter of Your sovereign, purposeful and providential love for them. They know that—they're just struggling to believe it! So whisper in their ears once again. Remind them of Your promises in the Gospel.

Give them grace to see Your invisible hand working out Your will in every painful affliction. Strengthen their weak arms, and shore up their buckling knees! Restore the skip to their faltering step, and lift their eyes toward heaven, that they might see You, and sense once again, the joy of Your presence. "Let the bones you have crushed rejoice, and renew a right spirit within them. Restore to them the joy of Your salvation, and grant them a willing spirit to sustain them." This we ask in Jesus name, Amen.