

February 26, 2006
 The Sum of All Human Fears—Intense, Prolonged Suffering
 Psalm 88:1-18 / Job 3:1-26

In last week's message I mentioned how MOST Christians I know, or have talked to about death, don't really fear death as much as they fear the PAIN so often associated with death.

I myself fall into that category, and all the moreso, since my pastoral duties have often had me standing, or sitting, at the bedside of suffering and dying people—sometimes writhing in pain and crying out in anguish. Times at which I have prayed under my breath, "Lord, take them quickly." And have also, after leaving their presence, prayed a similar prayer for myself: "Lord, when it comes to be my time, please take me quickly."

I believe that would be the prayer of most. The more painful something is (physically, emotionally, socially or spiritually), the more we tend to fear it. And the more we fear it the more we want to avoid it. Which is why I would contend, that the thought of having to endure intense, unspeakable pain, or immense suffering for prolonged periods of time, is (as my sermon title suggests): "The Sum of All Humans Fears."

Job even says that in verse 25, where in regard to his prolonged state of intense suffering he laments:

*"What I feared has come upon me and
 what I dreaded has happened to me."*

Or more literally in the Hebrew:

*"The dreadful thing I dreaded has come upon me, and that which I
 feared (and the implication is, feared the most) has overtaken me."*

And what is that "dreadful thing he dreaded so much"?

*It is quite obviously (from the context) Suffering intensely, yet not to the
 point of dying. Being in immense pain, yet not being released from having
 to feel that pain through the escape of death— which would deliver him
 from that pain— forever.*

You see, if suffering and death were "guaranteed" to be painless, very few people, and especially very few Christians, would ever fear it! But death is often painful, and suffering is by its very definition, "the endurance of pain." Or literally, "bearing up under" or "continuation" in a state of pain.

Thus Job tells us that his greatest fear (just like most people) was that he might some day have to suffer immense pain for a prolonged period of time without any means of relief. And that's precisely what happened to him. He suffered pain so intense, and for such a prolonged time, that he considered death to be a far more desirable alternative than life, if life meant suffering more of the same.

You see, this passage should be enough to show us, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the whole debate concerning "euthanasia" (and the attending "quality of life" paradigm out of which it flows) is nothing new by any means! In fact, if the Book of Job is, as some have suggested, the oldest book in the Bible, then it would mean that it was a philosophical issue that ancient people wrestled with in a very profound and extensive way even from the very earliest of times—maybe even moreso, since they did not have all the pain diminishing drugs we have today.

So, let's look at the passage and see what it has to tell us about this whole issue of pain, the quality of life we desire, and how suffering affects our emotional and mental state and forces us to wrestle with some pretty difficult moral issues.

FIRST, then, let's look at Job's response in a general sense to set the context for what he'll go on to say. In Chapter 1 Job suffers intense emotional pain for quite some time as a result of losing all his possessions, his trusted servants, and every one of his 7 sons, and 3 daughters. Then in Chapter 2, while still suffering the emotional pain from all those losses, Job suffers intensely in the physical sense, for at least 7 days (most likely more than 7 days). Unspeakable physical pain.

And today, in Chapter 3, we see that for that entire week Job hadn't been sitting there passively doing nothing! He'd been sitting there scrapping his pussy wounds with broken shards of pottery, and feeling all that physical and emotional pain—and obviously, in that state, actively (with his mind racing in a million different directions) agonizing and wrestling with some pretty serious moral issues.

Which means that Job's thoughts here, are not the objective, detached, academic thoughts of an unaffected moral philosopher, or schooled theologian, sitting in a comfortable office, surrounded by all his books, and totally oblivious to the struggles suffering people really go through.

Not at all! Job's pain is like a fire that enflames his thoughts, makes him look at things from a perspective only suffering people can see it from, and obviously pushes him to the brink of despair, and with it, the contemplation of suicide.

Remember that as we continue through Job. To understand Job, you must AT LEAST TRY to imagine the degree of pain he was experiencing, and consider that his WORDS are the product of thoughts formed in the furnace of affliction!

 You see, many of our ethical choices, and our hard moral stands, and our tendency to judge others for what we THINK are clearly black and white issues, flow out of ethical reasoning we've arrived at APART from trying to put ourselves in the position of the sufferer!

And because that is true, we can tend to lack empathy, come off as cold and unfeeling, seem to lack the compassion Jesus had, and thus make people think that Christianity is simply a religion of hard and fast, and inflexible moral rules and regulations.

It's not! In fact, Jesus used to get the most angry with those who used the Law that way—as a rule book to be followed without any love or compassion for suffering people. Thus, He purposely healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath! In fact, Mark makes a point to tell us, "Jesus looked around at them in anger, and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' And he healed it." It angered Jesus when people placed moral rule keeping before compassion.

And it's NOT that we shouldn't hold to moral principals! As Christians we must! But we must always remember—our faith isn't about moral rules and regulations! It's NOT about unbending compliance to an endless list of ethical do's and don'ts! That's what the Pharisees tried to make it! It's about the grace of God in Jesus Christ! It's about sin and forgiveness and a life of love! It's about showing others the same kind of grace and kindness and mercy that God has shown to us!

It's about putting RELATIONSHIPS before RULES; and MERCY before a meticulous adherence to some list of RELIGIOUS REGULATIONS—NOT abandoning our moral standards—but simply refusing to think that somehow that's the most important thing! Because it's NOT!

And to the people who thought it was, Jesus (on two occasions) sent them back to consider what God said in the Book of Hosea:

"Go and learn what this means, said Jesus, "I desire mercy (that is, loving kindness) and not sacrifice."

What does He mean? Strict adherence to the law or religious rules, outwardly, apart from a heart that is tender toward God and others, inwardly is NOT what God desires from us.

The **SECONDLY**, let's take a closer look at what Job actually says once he opens his mouth & this torrent of negative, angry, bitter words spew forth—a torrent of curses and laments. In fact, that's CLEARLY how Chapter 3 is divided up:

The first half (verses 1-10) are curses—literal curses that Job invokes upon the day he was born! “May the day of my birth perish,” he says, “and the night it was said, ‘A boy is born!’”

We see a continuation of the same thing in verses 5, 7, 8, and 9:

“May darkness...,” “May that night...,” “May those who curse...,”
“May it's morning stars....”

Each time the word “*may*” is used, it begins a request that ANYTHING to do with that wretched day he was born might be cursed!

He not only curses the day of his birth, but the night as well! He curses everything about that day, including his parents delight in having him (v. 3), the “shout of joy”(most likely as his parents announce his birth to the neighbors!) (v. 7), and he even curses the peacefulness of the dawn, and the morning stars, and warm rays of the early sun, which welcomed that day—a day that would eventually lead to SUFFERING LIKE THIS! (v. 9).

After all, Job would say, how could being born, to eventually suffer this, be something to rejoice about? “Curse it,” says Job, “it's a day that should not have been!”

But all those curses end at verse 10, and the second half of the chapter (verses 11-24) contain one lament after another—5 laments in all—one for each of the five curses! Which means that instead of asking, “May such and such be cursed,” Job now begins to ask “Why...?”

“Why did I not perish at birth?” “Why were there knees to receive me?” “Why was I not buried in the ground like a still-born child?” “Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul?”

Five times Job asks the question, “Why...?” The first three times he asks “Why me?” type questions, and the last two times he asks “Why anyone?” type questions. “Why is life given to people, if that life will include intense suffering?” Or, “Why is death withheld from those in immense pain and agony?”

And LISTEN: Regardless of where you personally come down on the issue of abortion or euthanasia, the questions Job asks are essentially the same exact type of questions that stand behind that whole “quality of life” argument used by advocates of both those things.

In relation to unwanted pregnancy some people ask:

“Isn’t abortion preferable to a life of emotional suffering—being a child no one wants, and might therefore abuse, or put in the state foster care system only to go from house to house and possibly end up in prison?”

Or of terminally ill people they will say:

“Isn’t assisted suicide (that is, a quick, painless death) preferable to a prolonged life of intense suffering, when there is no chance of a person getting better, or if that person is going to die anyway?”

Now Job isn’t advocating either one! But he is very clearly wrestling with each one intensely in light of all he was going through—3000 years ago!

In fact, as much as we might take exception to what Job suggests here in this passage, all we can say is this:

“The pain he was suffering at the time was so intense, that at this particular moment in his life, he essentially declares that he himself wishes he HAD BEEN ABORTED (or still-born) and buried in the ground (v. 16), or that he COULD die, or HAD died, because at least in death he would be freed from his suffering (vv. 20-22).”

In fact, in verses 20-21, Job says that those in “*misery*” (the Hebrew word used here is the same word used in Deut. 26 to describe the hardships of the Israelites in their abusive slavery, and the agonies experienced by the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53)—“*those in misery, or the bitter of soul (says Job) long for death that does not come, and search for it more than hidden treasure.*”

In fact, in verse 22 he goes on to say that such people, “*are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave.*”

That is, people who suffer immensely, says Job, not only YEARN to die, they WELCOME it with a sigh with relief, and CELEBRATE its arrival with rejoicing! They seemingly let out a CHEER when the release of death, that they so intensely yearn for, finally comes to them!

As Norman Habel notes in his Commentary on Job,

“the afflicted person longs for death as a welcome savior. The intensity of that longing is compared to the drive of treasure hunters to locate hidden wealth.... Those who find their grave, cries Job, are as elated as those who dig for treasure and celebrate their discovery. For each party, there is hidden joy in a [hole dug in the ground].”

Thus after at least one week of SUFFERING IN ABSOLUTE SILENCE, Job opens his mouth and shows us he’s been wrestling with the very question that underlies the entire euthanasia debate:

“Is not DEATH preferable to a LIFE OF CONTINUAL, UNAVOIDABLE, SUFFERING?”

Do you see, then, what intense suffering does? It twists the way one thinks. It makes them contemplate things they wouldn’t normally contemplate, and endorse things they wouldn’t normally endorse, and do things they wouldn’t normally do—like Job cursing the day of his birth, and wallowing in self-pity, and questioning God’s wisdom in giving him life, or bringing him into the world.

Do I agree with it all? No! But I do think I understand where Job’s coming from, and why he would SAY or DO such things in light of his affliction. I do. I can’t even imagine the degree of pain Job must have been going through. And maybe it’s not even necessary that I do. Maybe all I’m supposed to take away from this passage is the assurance that I need to be more compassionate with suffering people.

More understanding of their plight, realizing (as this passage implies), that intense pain makes people consider, and do, and endorse things they wouldn’t ever normally consider, do, or endorse.

For instance, I am not in favor of EUTHANASIA, or SUICIDE—I’m not! But I certainly understand why people in great pain (like Job in this passage) would consider it, and even desire it. I do. Just like I understand why people ask for nova cane at the dentist and morphine on the battlefield! I don’t like pain! No one I know likes pain—especially intense unrelenting pain!

And thus, although I would not advocate either euthanasia or suicide, I do understand why someone might consider them. Job helps me see that the suffering person entertains it as a viable option in light of intense unrelenting pain that just doesn’t seem to go away.

And the same is true of **ABORTION**. I believe abortion is wrong. I've even marched against it in Washington, and spoken against it in rallies. But you know what? I also think it's wrong for Christians to speak out against it if they are not willing to adopt, or care for, or house women who choose to keep their baby's.

The way some Christians speak of it, you would think that somehow there are no women who agonize over the choice / no girls forced by their parents to get one; no women pressured and even threatened with abandonment by irresponsible husbands or boyfriends if they refuse / or that no women (Christian women) shamed or cajoled into it by social or religious pressure and threats of shunning.

Nancy and I had one foster daughter who was thrown out of her house because she got pregnant, and would not submit to her father's command to get an abortion.

Which means I'm not saying abortion is right—I'm saying that our beliefs about what's right and wrong can't make us callous, unfeeling, moral judges who refuse to try and understand what many women do indeed go through—even Christian women—both before and after they have an abortion.

In fact, I've seen people's hearts softened, simply by helping out at a Pro-life Center and getting to know the women with unwanted pregnancies. They still think it abortion is wrong, but they also come to know the agony many women go through, and thus choose to show compassion, and offer understanding, instead of merely judging them, or writing them off as evil.

What we can learn from Job is this: That although some things are and should remain unacceptable, it doesn't mean they're not understandable. I don't accept all Job's conclusions. But I sure do understand why he would contemplate or endorse them given what he's going through.

Then **THIRD**, this passage teaches us that people suffering immense pain need to be given the freedom and the opportunity to voice the issues they're struggling with internally—without having us correct them, preach at them, judge them, or give them a verbal spanking for doing so (as Job's friends will begin to do in the very next chapter, starting with Eliphaz).

My dad's generation (whom Peter Jennings called, "The Greatest Generation of Americans") are what I call "Silent Sufferers." They were taught (and they still believe) that you "don't air your dirty laundry"—ever! And when you go through immensely painful things, you simply "keep a stiff upper lip," "accept the lot God doles out to you," and keep on plugging away.

That's why I call them "pluggers." People who keep on keeping on no matter what hardships befall them along the way.

They're a generation that believes that the worst thing you can do is burden others with your own personal problems! They loathe self-pity, see complaining or lamenting one's situation as "whining," and feel "whining" is totally inappropriate!

Their motto seems to be: "Keep it all to yourself, deal with it privately, don't let anyone know you're struggling, and above all else, refuse to burden others with your own personal issues." And I must say I've come to respect that. There's something admirable about it. There's something attractive about the lack of self-pity and lack of complaining, so characteristic of my generation, and many in the younger generations.

Yet, in light of this dialogue in Job, I DO have to say that it's NOT WRONG to voice your struggles. It's NOT WRONG to vent your disappointments. It's NOT WRONG to verbalize the physical or emotional pain your feeling inside. It's NOT EVEN WRONG to ask the philosophical or seemingly selfish question, "WHY ME?" (any more than it's wrong wonder why people in general must suffer, or why some just seem to suffer more intensely than others from no fault of their own (like Job).

In fact, I encourage people to share their struggles. I believe it's good to get the poison out. I believe there is healing in sharing and being understood—especially when it's done with a Christian brother or sister and in the invoked presence of God. I wholeheartedly agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer who once said:

"Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of the person. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. It is a hard struggle to confess hidden sin (but in confessing it) in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. Expressed, acknowledged sin loses its power... The person is no longer alone with his evil, for he has cast off his sin in confession and handed it over to God. It has been taken away from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Now he can be a sinner and still enjoy the grace of God."

Sin concealed increases its power over the person; but sin confessed loses its power.

Then LAST, we need to understand that what people wrestle with most often is not suffering, but the seemingly arbitrary nature of suffering—the fact that it befalls some while totally by-passing others! That some suffer a lot while others don't seem to suffer at all. That some live a pampered life, while others live a life wrack-ed with pain from beginning to end. That's what most people wrestle with. If everyone suffered equally, it really wouldn't be that much of an issue.

Take Heman the Ezrahite who wrote Psalm 88. Here's a man, who (if we take the Psalm at face value) has suffered his entire life! "From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death, he says, I have suffered your terrors and am in despair." He feels that God hates him, or that God's wrath rests upon him—even though he's a believer) something that overwhelms him (v. 6). He has no friends, is apparently shunned by others (v. 8), and spends so much time crying that his eyes are dim with grief (v. 9). He cries out to God every day, and wants to sense God's love—but all he ever feels is rejection from God, and that God has hidden His face from him (vv. 9b-14). He is totally alone (his family seems to have been taken from him in death), and darkness (in this case, I believe, meaning depression) is his closest friend (v. 18).

It merely goes to show us how constant, habitual, trauma, and an unrelenting parade of painful events can make a person feel and think. How it can color a person's perception of God; numb their ability to feel joy or sense His love; overwhelm them with depressive feelings; rob them of the ability to hope; spawn dark thoughts; and make them feel that God is out to get them, or hates them. How it can make people pessimistic, cynical and even paranoid.

In fact, Heman doesn't even ask, "Why Me?" He's far beyond that, because unlike Job, he's never had anything go good for him! That's why he merely states all his fears as facts, and perceptions as realities. He's suffered so many hurtful things, that he's convinced himself God hates him, has forsaken him, cast him off, and will continue to punish him. He's not wondering if it's true, he's declaring it as a fact! It's sad, but NOT unusual for a person who has suffered a life-long and unrelenting barrage of painful circumstances, one, after another, after another.

We might even say Heman had gotten to the point where he couldn't even believe there was a light at the end of the tunnel / quiet after the storm / warmth after the long winter chill / sunshine above the stormy clouds. He'd lost the ability to even muster up the faith to believe that things could ever get better.

EVER FELT THAT WAY? If you have, let me leave you with these words of encouragement, written by William Cowper a Christian who lived a lifetime of mental distress, spent years in an insane asylum, was haunted by continual depression, and thoughts that God had forsaken Him and would doom him to hell

He wrote this:

"Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so much dread, are big with mercy and will break, with blessings on your head / Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace, behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face / His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour, the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower / Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain, God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain / Good when He gives, supremely good, nor less when He denies, yes, even crosses from His hand, are blessings in disguise."

But you don't ever realize that, unless like Job, you fight that desire to end it all, and stick it out in your suffering, until that time when, like Job, you also see those crosses become blessings!