

August 20, 2006

Is Present Suffering Punishment for Former Sins?  
Galatians 6:7-10 / Romans 8:1-4 / Job 13:25-28

Last week we looked at verses 1-24 of this same chapter and I pointed out that in those verses Job was essentially pleading with God to tell him why he was suffering as he was. He had done nothing different in his relationship with God, yet overnight everything had changed!

For no apparent reason whatsoever (since Job had done nothing different), he is all of a sudden Cursed instead of Blessed; receives Poverty instead of Prosperity; Loss instead of Increase; Sickness and Disease instead of Health — and is TARGETED FOR Intense Suffering, instead of being PROTECTED FROM all Suffering as he had been up until the day when it all began.

And THAT ABRUPT CHANGE in God's dealings with him, and the fact that he didn't have a clue as to why it all changed, causes him to plead with God to tell him why, as we saw in verses 22-24.

In fact, it not only causes Job to ask God WHY it's all happening, it also causes him to offer a possible suggestion of his own. One of the most common and repeated suggestions I hear from the lips of people: The suggestion that present suffering is somehow delayed punishment for past sins (or as Job puts it—"the sins of his youth"— sins he committed when he was a teenager or young man).

Verse 26: "You write down bitter things against me, says Job, and make me inherit the sins of my youth."

You see, Job can't think of anything in RECENT TIMES that would be the cause of such suffering. So, he figures, it must be something he did in his YOUTH — implying that as with so many, many others, Job went through a time of rebellion against God in his younger days.

He apparently had some "skeletons in the closet," so to speak — lingering memories of a sinful past — and now, for some reason totally unknown to him, he feels that God has chosen to punish him now, for those sins he committed long ago.

King David seemed to fear a similar scenario when he pleaded with God, in Psalms 25:4, saying:

*"Remember not the sins of my youth, and my rebellious ways, according to your steadfast love, remember me, for you are good."*

It's his way of asking God not to remember the sinful things he did when he was younger, but to remember to be merciful! To remember His love for David, and not hold his youthful rebellion against him.

It should be a reminder to all of us, that a sordid past, or rebellious teenage years, or youthful sins do NOT disqualify us from being used in God's service. And I say that to everyone here! We can sometimes think that our past failures or former sins somehow disqualify us from serving God now, just as a felony or other crime may disqualify us from being a police officer, or civil servant.

But that's NOT true with God! God is in the business of taking people who were failures and misfits — "the worst of sinners" — and turning their lives around, and using them in his service.

Paul makes that clear in 1 Corinthians 6:9, where speaking to the people who were sitting in there in the house church in Corinth, he says:

*"Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. AND THAT IS WHAT SOME OF YOU WERE... BUT you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."*

Quite a motley crew sitting there each Sunday in Corinth! Those who had formerly been slanderers, swindlers, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexuals, thieves, and drunkards — just to name a few! Many of whom had obviously come to Christ with quite a sinful and sordid past. Yet THEY were the people God had chosen, and would use, to reach the city of Corinth with the Gospel message! Their past in no way disqualified them!

And the same is true for any of you sitting here today. When you come to Christ, your slate is wiped clean, and your past is totally forgiven! It is not held against you.

In fact, your transformation from rebellion to reverence, and a person with a sinful past to a person with a godly present, can even be used by God to bring glory to Himself through the change He has made in your life.

Even if you've messed up big time in your youth — like Job did, or King David did, and so many others with them including myself — it doesn't mean you can't be used in God's service, or must hang your head in shame for the rest of your lives.

Because God takes sinners—thieves and slanderers and drunkards and prostitutes—the trash (so to speak) which everyone else discards, and He recycles it into useable products! He forgives and washes and cleanses and sanctifies, and gives people a new start — often MORE than just once!

---

Which brings me back to the TEXT, and prompts me to say something that as a pastor I need to stress with all my might, to every single person here — not by yelling, but by way of earnest exhortation:

***Please do not fall into the trap that Job falls into in this passage. As a forgiven, washed, justified and sanctified believer DO NOT — when you come under pain, or trial, or intense suffering, or affliction — DO NOT start recounting the sins of your past, and somehow thinking that your present affliction is punishment for past sins. DO NOT DO IT!***

I know how tempting it is, my friends. I know how natural it is for us to think that way, even as believers! But don't do it! One of the saddest memories I have to this day, is that of going down to see my mother's best friend, a godly Swedish Baptist lady, just before she died at an early age, of brain cancer.

She was one of the sweetest ladies I ever knew. A lady who lived in the neighborhood where much of my teenage rebellion took place. For four, five, six years running, my friends and I would stand out in the street in front of her house drinking, swearing, carousing and even on occasion making fun of her and her husband for what my friends and I then felt was their naïve faith and devotion to Jesus — one time even taking a case of empty beer cans and dumping them all over her front yard.

Yet at the end of that period of my life, when I was 22 years old, just before I headed off to backpack around Europe for three and a half months (what I now refer to as the outward manifestation of my in-ward search for God) I went down to her house to see her. Actually to say goodbye to her, because the doctors had told her she only had a few weeks to live, so she wouldn't be alive by the time I returned — and I wanted to apologize to her for all the things I'd said and done.

So I walked into her house one night, and sat down by her bedside. She smiled, like always, and was happy to see me. And after getting up my courage, I confessed and asked forgiveness for all the things I had done — thinking she couldn't have known who had done them, since she was my mother's best friend, and she had never said anything about them to my mom.

Yet as I soon found out, she wasn't as naive as I'd thought! Because as I was confessing, she looked up, grinned and said, "Jeff, you don't have to apologize. I knew it was you all along. And I want you to know that every time I saw you out there, I got down on my knees and prayed for you." And she added, "I knew all along that sooner or later you'd become a Christian."

---

But she also said some words that have saddened my heart ever since. I don't remember how it came up — whether I said I wished it were anyone but her, or how I thought it all seemed so unfair that such a godly example should be dying of cancer, but she interrupted me, and closing her eyes, and looking down somewhat shamefully, as if she were recounting some horrible thing she'd done in the past, said to me, "Oh no, I know exactly why this is happening to me."

And I didn't ask her what it was. It was none of my business. But as I recounted her last words to me I thought, How sad it is that a dear forgiven saint thought her cancer was somehow the result of (or punishment for) some bad thing she had done in her past.

And though I believe she was wrong in her estimation — that her cancer was in no way a punishment for something she had done in the past, what she did is not un-common. In fact, that's exactly what Job does when he suggests that his present suffering is due to God punishing him for the sins of his youth.

And it's not just Job, or her. Another man — a missionary in Honduras — once told Nancy and I the story of a teenage boy who had raped a girl, and later became a Christian. "A few months later," the man went on to say, "that boy drown in a swimming accident." And to our great surprise, he also added, "It was God punishing him for what he did to that girl."

---

But I ask you, is that true? Does God punish believers in the present, or will He punish them in the future, for sins they committed in the past? Let me give you my answer by offering you TWO clarifications.

---

**FIRST** is the necessary distinction between being purged of sin, and punished for sin. In terms of how it FEELS, the difference may appear to be slight. But in terms of God's attitude and purpose in each case, there is not even the faintest similarity!

Let me explain. God's stated purpose in the life of a believer is to restore in them the divine image He originally created them to reflect—the image of God which our first parents bore, before it was marred and distorted by their sin and rebellion and their fall from innocence.

Through the Gospel, and the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification, and through the things God sovereignly ordains in His Providential oversight of our lives, He is habitually seeking to uproot, or purge us of the indwelling sin that continues to twist and distort that image.

It's the ongoing process we call "sanctification," whereby God relentlessly, and letting nothing deter Him, actively works to carry out the purpose for which He has called us in Christ Jesus.

As Paul made plain in Ephesians 1:4: "God chose us in Christ, before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight." That was His stated purpose in choosing us to be in Christ—that we might be holy and blameless. Not sinless! (That will never happen as long as we live in this flesh!) But holy and blameless—so we reflect His image to an on-looking world!

"Those God foreknew," Paul says in Romans 8:29, "He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son." That is, God looked down the annals of history (before time as we know it began) and He predestined certain people (all whom He would ever effectually call to come to faith in Jesus Christ, justify and eventually glorify) to be conformed to the image of His Son Jesus Christ who "is the image of God" as Paul says in II Cor. 4:4, or as the author of Hebrews puts it "who is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of His being." (Heb. 1:3)

So, if you are a believer—foreknown, predestined, and called by God the Father to be His child by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, then His stated lifelong purpose for you is to restore His image in you, or form you into the likeness of His Son, who "is the image of God," and "the exact representation of His being."

---

How does He do that? Paul tells us—by the washing of rebirth, and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). In the new birth God gives us His Spirit to live inside us — a Spirit whose job it is, once He regenerates, washes, indwells and seals us, to produce in our lives the Fruit of the Spirit, or the Fruit of Christ-likeness which is the restoration of His image in us.

---

And it's not just His Spirit that He uses to do so. He also uses His Word — "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her," says Paul, "to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the Word" (Eph. 5:26).

Or as Paul put it elsewhere, God produces His likeness in us by the power of the Gospel, "For the Gospel," says Paul in Romans 1:16, "is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe."

And we must remember that "salvation" (according to the Bible) is not merely going to heaven when you die! Rather, "salvation" is primarily being to be "saved" from the POWER and PENALTY of sin — from God's wrath against our sin, and from the enslaving and destructive effects it wreaks upon our lives.

When God REGENERATES US He liberates us from sin's dominion, or the rule of sin over our lives. "He breaks the power of canceled sin, and sets the prisoner free," as Charles Wesley rightly noted in his hymn "O For A Thousand Tongues To Sing."

And when He SANCTIFIES US He begins "saving us" from the destructive effects sin HAS had, and CONTINUES to have in our lives. Which means that there is an aspect where "to save" carries with it the meaning "to salvage something."

Like a car that's in the junkyard because it was smashed up in an accident, so also God takes us, bruised and broken by the Fall, or "weak and wounded, sick and sore" as the old Negro spiritual says, and He begins to pull out all the dents caused by taking the wrong turns in life, and straighten out the twisted frame that came from going off the road to godliness and hitting that tree. He repairs the upholstery ripped and stained by partying and poor judgment. He overhauls the engine ruined by using the wrong fuel, sands off all the rust caused by chipped paint, primes it, and gives it a brand new paint job. He gradually salvages it, or restores it to its original condition.

Like that car, God is in the process of saving or salvaging us from the damaging effects of sin — sanding away the rust with the abrasive effect of trials / steam cleaning the engine with the heat of afflictions / cutting away the jagged pieces of twisted metal with the metal shears of suffering / and banging out the unsightly dents with the ball pine hammer of hardships!

Not because He's mad! He doesn't sand and grind and pound and cut using all those things because He's punishing the car? NO! It's because He fixing the car! He's using all the tools at His disposal to make that car into one He can put on display. He's restoring it so that it will be just like it was when it originally came of the assembly line as the designer intended! So it will be the work of art it was originally intended to be, and thus bring its Designer and Maker the glory he deserves! THAT is the purpose of trials and suffering in the life of the believer.

Does it hurt? Yes it frequently does. On occasion it's very painful when we feel God grinding away, or hammering out those dents, or melting the metal of our lives into liquid steel when He applies the heat of the welding machine.

But don't misunderstand it! It flows out of His loving purpose to restore you, and make you into an object of beauty, NOT merely out of an angry and punitive desire to inflict pain or punish you.

From OUR EARTHLY perspective, as I mentioned before, the difference sometimes seems slight. But in terms of God's attitude and purpose behind each trial and affliction, there's not even the faintest similarity!

God's purpose in the lives of His people is always formative and not punitive! It's always instructional and formational and never merely to punish in a hard, vindictive, angry fashion. It is God carrying on His unrelenting, lifelong purpose of "salvaging us" (like that car) from the damaging effects we received from sin and the Fall. ***KNOW IT, and be encouraged!***

And then **LAST**, how do we know all this is true? How do we know that the trials, afflictions and suffering that comes into our lives are always instructional and formational and never merely to punish in a hard, vindictive, angry fashion? And the answer? We know it because of the Gospel which tells us that God has forgiven all our sin! As Colossians 2:13 tells us: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ, and forgave all your sins..."

**Notice what Paul did NOT say.** He did **not** say: "He forgave some of your sins," or "many" or even "most" or even "all but one of your sins." NO. He said "God forgave ALL OF YOUR SINS"!

Why? Because an atonement that only paid the penalty for SOME of our sins, would be of no use to us! Partial forgiveness is equal to no forgiveness! In fact partial forgiveness would be nothing more than a cruel joke!

If Christ left any of my sins un-atoned for — past, present or future — if in His death He did not atone for every single one — then that would leave me to have to pay the penalty for the ones He did not die for, in which case I could only be eternally lost. It would do me as much good as nothing at all! Only if Christ died for ALL THE SINS of every one of His believing people, can they ever have the hope or assurance of being saved.

And likewise, if Christ did **NOT** die to pay the penalty for **ALL** the sins of His people, it would indeed lead us to understand (like Zophar, and Bildad, and Eliphaz) that the trials and afflictions we endure are indeed vindictive and punitive expressions of God's wrath lashing out against those "unforgiven sins," and not the instructive, formational, expressions of His loving and eternal and sanctifying purpose of restoring to us the divine image by making us more like Jesus.

As Mike Mason pointed out in reference to Job 11:6, where Zophar said to Job: "Know this: God has even forgiven some of your sin"—

*"Zophar's words contain a serious theological flaw. For does God ever forgive only some of our sin? Is partial forgiveness even possible? No, it is not. There is no such thing as partial forgiveness, whether in the divine or the human sphere... This truth is wonderfully expressed in Horatio Spafford's classic hymn, "It is Well With My Soul": 'My sin — oh the bliss of this glorious thought! — my sin not in part but the whole; Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, Oh my soul!'"*

Spafford is right: It is a blissful thought! Our sin NOT in PART but the WHOLE, was nailed to the cross and we bear it no more! That is, we bear its punishment no more!

***Christ was punished for it, and therefore, because HE was, if we have trusted in Christ, WE never will be! Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, Oh my soul!***

We may bear the consequences of our sin, just as a friend of mine did, who contracted AIDS from using dirty needles when shooting up. He came to Christ a few years later, and all his sin was forgiven. But he still died years later of the AIDS he contracted — the CONSEQUENCES of his sin, and NOT a PUNISHMENT from God for his sin!

In light of the Gospel, which declares that Christ took upon Himself the punishment for EVERY SIN, that EVERY ONE of His people would ever commit, it couldn't have been punishment for his sin! God would NEVER punish in US, a sin He ALREADY punished in Jesus, who died in our place, for our sins, as our substitute.

Thus I say to you: Contrary to JOB, and contrary to my mother's best friend, and that missionary who suggested that the drowning of that man was punishment by God for a rape he had committed before he ever came to Christ — ***GOD DOES NOT, IN SOME ANGRY AND VINDICTIVE WAY, PUNISH HIS PEOPLE IN THE PRESENT, FOR THE SINS THEY COMMITTED IN THE PAST — HE DOES NOT DO IT! NOT IF THE GOSPEL IS TRUE!***

You see, the answer to my sermon title is a resounding NO! In certain cases we may bear the inevitable CONSEQUENCES of past sin, but NOT as a PUNISHMENT FROM GOD! Christ already bore that punishment on the cross for us, He bore it for every one of the sins, of every single person who would ever come to trust in Him.

Thus, contrary to Job, you need never ask, no matter what befalls you — “Is this suffering You God, punishing me for the sins of my youth, or something I did long ago?” Not if you’re a believer!

If you’re a believer that is NEVER, EVER, EVER the case! Satan WILL try to persuade you otherwise. He’ll try to get you to believe it is, knowing that if he can, he has succeeded in getting you to question, doubt, or disbelieve the Gospel.

And in doing so, will eat away at your assurance of forgiveness / rob you of your joy in God / diminish your sense of gratitude, and the praise you offer to God / distort your view of Christ’s work on the cross / and maybe even get you to question your salvation.

---

**LISTEN, BELIEVE and CLING TENACIOUSLY TO THIS TRUTH:** *“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive in Christ, and forgave ALL your sins...”* *Not some of them (in which case you would not be saved), and not even many, or most, or all but one of them, in which case you would STILL not be saved! But ALL of them! EVERY SINGLE ONE — NOT IN PART, BUT THE WHOLE!*

They were nailed to the cross, thus guaranteeing you will NEVER bear the punishment for a single one, either in this life or the next!

“Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, Oh my soul!”