

Advent 2022, Gift-Wrapped in Flesh, “The Gift of Suffering”, Hebrews 2:9-10, 12/11/22

We are going to stick with the nostalgia theme from last week, let me go back again to my childhood, I was obsessed with collecting baseball cards. From about 8-13, pretty much every time I got my allowance, I would ride my bike to the corner store and buy \$1 packs of baseball cards that had a stick of gum in them. I would trade with my friends, I spent Saturday mornings organize them in binders like this one and looking up their value in the Becket Pricing Guide...I loved baseball cards and spent hours and hours on them...but slowly my love for cards began drifting away, slowly I stopped buying them, trading them and these binders began to collect dust in the back of my closet. See my love for baseball cards began fading away when I found something else that got my attention and fascination: girls.

I have seen some Christians experience their faith in Jesus similarly to my baseball card collecting. Get excited in the beginning, dedicated, spend lots of time with Jesus and around him and the church...but then overtime something else gets their attention and fascination...and their faith begins to collect dust on the shelf. That’s your experience of the advent season, that once stirred your hearts with wonder, hope, love as you reflected on the incarnation of Jesus, is just a busy holiday season. This was the situation for the Hebrew Church at the end of the first century. We said last week that we might say they had lost the wonder of Christmas. Look at the beginning of chapter 2. *V.1 We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.* V.2 he warns us not to *ignore so great a salvation.* See it is possible to outwardly be going through the motions of Christmas-decorating, buying gifts, seeing carols, wearing your ugly Christmas sweaters...and yet inwardly be unmoved, and drifting from the wonder of it all.

This is what the writer of Hebrews is going after, and he tries to shake them, stir their affection in verse 5-18 by focusing on the amazing, beautiful, jaw-dropping reality of the incarnation of Jesus. And so I’m attempting to do the same, channeling the author, by the Spirit’s power. So we are unwrapping 5 gifts that Jesus gives us in his incarnation. Last week we unwrapped the *Gift of Seeing God* from verses 5-10. That while we can’t always see God at work in the midst of a broken world, while this world and our experience in it isn’t what it was meant to be, we do see Jesus!

This week we are going to unwrap the *Gift of Suffering*. You say, come again? You can keep that gift to yourself. But the gift we are talking about is Christ’s suffering. We are going to drill down on just one verse that we just barely touched on last week. A little context. *⁹ But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

The writer here in verse 10 says “For it is fitting”. What is fitting? That Jesus should suffer. In other words, he’s saying it makes sense and it fits the nature of God that Jesus would suffer. He

is doing what some of us have done, but what we all should do, he is pondering and meditating on “Why?” Why did Jesus suffer? Why did it have to be this way? Have you ever pondered why? You might say, “Well if God is God then he could have accomplished salvation any way he wanted. Why not through an arm-wrestling match with Satan...winner takes all?” The writer says, no there is something fitting: coherent, beautiful, symmetrical about this way. Now I want to show you three reasons, of many reasons, that I found in just this one little verse. I want to start with the most obvious and move to what is more obscure. **The path of suffering displays**

1. God’s Trustworthiness:

*¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, **should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.***

This word “founder” is the word pioneer or forerunner. A pioneer is someone who goes on ahead of others to prepare the way for the rest of them. On May 29, 1953, **Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay [Picture]**, a Sherpa of Nepal, become the first pioneers to reach the summit of Mount Everest, which at 29,035 feet above sea level is the highest point on earth. Until that point it was largely considered an impossible feat. Many had tried and failed, either were turned back or died trying. But once it was accomplished, others started following suit. In the thousands of years of human history no one did it, within the 10 years after Hillary and Norgay- 13 people did it. 70 years later over 6000 people have summited Mount Everest. It took a pioneer to make the way so others could follow.

[Hebrews 2:10 slide] Jesus is the pioneer not of mountains, but of salvation. Every attempt of mankind of self-salvation since the history of the humanity has failed, although we keep trying through religious zeal, through being a good person, through human achievement, through eastern meditation...all fail. But where man has failed, Jesus has succeeded.

Notice the writer shows us the means by which he became the pioneer being made perfect through suffering. Now Jesus is God. So perfect here doesn’t mean moral perfection, he already had that. It’s experiential. I can study Mt. Everest summits, I can watch Into the Void...but I can’t say I know what it’s like until I climb Mt. Everest. In the incarnation, the 2nd person of the Trinity, Jesus moved from untested obedience into suffering and then through suffering into tested and proven experience. And again, this is where we fail. Because all of us have been tested by suffering and have failed...failing miserably. We complain, we get angry, we self-destruct, we blame, we can lose our faith. But Jesus suffered miserably and did not sin. And so he is the pioneer not only of our salvation but also of suffering. And this is what makes him trustworthy. We can trust the pioneer to take us through our suffering. We can trust our pioneer for our salvation, not only because he’s God, but he’s been to the top of the mountain and back.

2. The path of suffering displays God’s Togetherness

*¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, **in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.***

One great aim of God in salvation is that He would create a loving and unified family of children (John 17- all be one) with Jesus Christ while being God himself, becoming like the “older

brother” in his incarnation, deeply united to us as brothers and sisters. But if all the brothers and sisters in a family have experienced suffering except one, that puts unity in jeopardy. I think that is what this verse is pointing to. Jesus entered into solidarity with his brothers and sisters in that he willingly, voluntarily suffered like us in every way. We’ve probably all seen pictures of tight knit team who shaves their head in solidarity when one of their own loses their hair through chemo treatments. It’s a way of saying, “I’m together with you in this suffering, in this battle.” That first Christmas, God took on flesh in solidarity with us, but he goes well beyond that... he willingly, out of love, takes on our sickness of sin. 1 Corinthians- the one who knew no sin became sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God. Be comforted friend, that when we suffer, we don’t suffer alone, Jesus is together, right there with us.

3. God’s Tangibility.

¹⁰ *For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.*

What I believe the writer of Hebrews is doing with this little comment is putting the almighty, invisible, transcendent Creator of all the universe right up alongside of Jesus’ vulnerable, visible, relatable suffering. Do you see that? This one verse gives us a glimpse of what it means to know God. If we really want to know the character and power of God: Look at the vast creation. Gaze at the Milky Way through a high-powered telescope like an astronomer. Take yourself 600 trillion miles to the edge of our galaxy and then realize it is just one of billions of galaxies in the universe. Then you will see something of him "for whom and by whom all things exist." But you also need to peer into the lens of the Bible, and see the poor teenager, Mary, holding her baby in an animal stable You need to read of lowly beginnings as a carpenter, of his rejection by the religious powers, and his agonizing suffering on the way to the cross to his death. Then and only then will you get a tangible glimpse of God.

[Slide] What we need to understand is just how utterly unique the Christian God is in the pantheon of religion. No God is like this. In the Greco-Roman world it would have been shocking to associate the transcendent, divinity of the gods with the weakness of the human condition and our suffering. This is also why the Jews in Jesus’ day and today, stumble over Jesus. They just can’t fathom that the transcendent would also be so tangible in the person of Jesus.

Tim Keller in his book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*: tells the story of Professor John Dickson of Wheaton College who he once heard speak on a university campus in Sydney Australia on the incarnation of Jesus. During the question time, a Muslim man rose to explain how preposterous was the claim that the creator of the universe should be subjected to the forces of his own creation, “that he would have to eat, sleep, and go to the toilet, let alone die on the cross.” The man went on to argue that it was illogical that God, the cause of all causes would have pain inflicted on him by any lesser beings. Dickson simply thanked the man for making the uniqueness of the Christian claim so clear. “What the Muslim denounces as blasphemy the Christian holds precious: God has wounds.”

The path of Jesus’ suffering displays God’s Trustworthiness, Togetherness, Tangibility.

Now you may say, that's great, I better understand the reasons Jesus suffered, but how does this make any difference in the midst of my experience of suffering? Oh friend it makes all the difference if you know Jesus! **Instead of experiencing your suffering as pointless or punishment we can now experience our suffering together with our trustworthy Savior.** Do you trust him with your suffering, in it, through it? That's the key. Let me illustrate why this is so critical.

As a father of two teenagers now, I'm just starting to be able to have rationale conversations about the reasons why we want them to develop certain good habits, or avoid certain bad habits. But when they were little, trying to explain why changing your underwear every day instead of wearing the same pair for 4 days was a good habit...sometimes was difficult. And those conversations would sometimes end with... "Because your 5 and I'm 35. I've been your age, I understand because I've been there, I made it through to an adult, and so you need to trust me that this is good for you...even if you really like your spiderman undies." How about when things get more serious, and your children experience the pain of rejection. When your teenager sees on social media that all their friends got together and had a great time and they were left out. It helps when you can say to your teen, I've been your age, and I know what that feeling is like to feel rejected. But trust me, you feel this way now but it will pass and you will make it through."

It's easy to see why kids need to trust their parents even when they do not understand them, or even when it's difficult or uncomfortable. How much more, then, should we trust God even though we do not understand him, when it's difficult or uncomfortable! Not just that he's infinitely wiser. It is not just that he is sovereign and all powerful and good. We can trust God because he walked where we walked. He suffered in all the ways that we suffered. You felt rejection? Me too! You were blamed for something you didn't do? Me too! You went through a physical suffering, me too! Jesus has earned our trust through his willing suffering. Ann Voskamp in her book *1000 Gifts*, **"If trust must be earned, hasn't God unequivocally earned our trust with the bark on the raw wounds, the thorns pressed into the brow."**

To this point in my life I have been spared from immense and sustained suffering, but it will eventually come as it does for all of us in a broken world. What I can tell you is the light and momentary suffering I have experienced, in the midst of it- all I can tell you is that this works and is incredibly comforting and powerful. **[Slide]**And the more intense the suffering, the more real and intimate my experience with Jesus has been...Scare, thought I had cancer, needed a surgery and it was a painful recovery...but those several months, and in the moment of panic and anxiety...I felt like Jesus was right there with me.

Keller's book, *Walking with God in Pain and Suffering*, he also shares the story of a woman named Gigi. Who, as a missionary in South Africa, endured a season of incredible suffering. She experienced racism, poverty, slander, physical violence, her health declined severely, two of her closest friends drowned. She was like a modern day Job. "This is merely a list of events that we've suffered, but the inner turmoil and suffering is incalculable; immeasurable; indescribable. In one of the darkest moments, the Lord drew near. After months of crying out to him and

wondering why he felt so far in the darkest moments, he drew near in a way that I could sense and feel. I was reading Isaiah 53: *He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and like one from whom men hide their face he was despised. He poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors.* For the first time in three years, I felt deeply his nearness. Though I am far too fallible to be compared with our glorious savior, I saw his story in mine. I somehow felt for the first time in so long a sense of redemptive purpose in the midst of unspeakable suffering.”

If you are going through suffering. You can trust Jesus. He gets it...and there is no other faith that can make that claim of their God. John Stott once said, “I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain how could one worship of God who was immune to it?” Some of you have rejected Christianity because you have an issue with a good God allowing suffering. But don’t you see? God enters suffering and redeems it and will ultimately erase and reverse it in the end.

Gospel invitation.