

“God’s Response to Suffering”  
By Rev. Susan Gritman

Mark 1:40-42 (New Living Translation)

A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. “If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean,” he said. Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed! Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed.”

Leprosy was a contagious disease of the skin that forced the afflicted to live apart from the town and their loved ones. Those who had the disease suffered physically, but they also suffered socially, and emotionally.

As I read this passage, I think of so many people among my churches, family and friends who I have called, prayed for or visited who are suffering.

- So many grieving the losses of loved ones.
- Some living with chronic conditions with a downward spiral that are slowly taking their physical health, and with it their social and emotional and spiritual health.
- Some living with the pain that comes from estranged relationships.
- Others suffering from addictions and vicious cycles they can’t seem to break.

In each case there are many prayers going up to God for his mercy and healing. In many cases these who pray can testify to how they see God at work. But in many cases they struggle with doubt and confusion of where God is in the midst of such suffering.

### **The Problem of Suffering**

I have preached a sermon series titled “When Bad Things Happen to God’s People.” I spoke in detail for several weeks about many reasons suffering exists and gave lots of examples of how God is at work, so in this shorter teaching I am just going to summarize some of the reasons suffering exists, and then the main focus will be on God’s response to the brokenness.

We can identify a variety of reasons that suffering exists. I’ll mention just some of them briefly:

- Consequences of our own sin or irresponsibility such as:

- Drinking and driving - kill someone – you end up suffering emotional pain and going to prison or you may end up in prison even if you have not killed someone
- You don't hold your tongue, go into a rage, lose your job or a relationship over it.
- Consequences of the sin or irresponsibility of others
  - Victim of a drunk driver or a drive-by shooting
  - Suffering because you are the spouse of someone in prison
  - A doctor made a mistake
- Deterioration of the body due to disease or birth defects or old age
- The laws of nature which usually work in our favor to sustain life on earth can sometimes lead to injury or death due to hurricanes, lightning strikes and earthquakes, etc.

Sometimes we can point to a probable cause for our suffering. Sometimes we can't. We don't know "why" the man in Mark chapter 1 had leprosy. Mark did not consider the question of why he was suffering. The more important question addressed in scripture is this: "Is there a powerful and good God, and if so, why doesn't he do something about all the suffering in the world?"

### **God's Power to Heal**

Yes, there is a God of power. Earlier in this first chapter of Mark we see that Jesus has the power to heal. He cast out evil spirits and healed a man with symptoms of epilepsy. Mark makes it clear that Jesus can heal because he has the authority and the power.

### **God's Compassion**

Does God care? In today's Scripture Jesus heals a man with leprosy. Again the authority and power of Jesus are demonstrated, but the story is there for another reason as well. This particular story gives us a look into the **heart** of Jesus. It was important to the gospel writer, Mark, to show the compassion of God through Jesus in the very beginning of the gospel. "Moved with compassion..." (verse 41), out of love, he healed the leper. Yes, God cares.

## God's Response to Suffering

The presence of suffering is not the denial of the existence of a loving and powerful God. And if you wonder why this loving and powerful God is not doing something about the suffering, let me assure you he is doing something about the suffering of this world. God's response to suffering was sending Jesus. In **John 16:33**, Jesus says, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world." Christ won the victory upon the cross, but the final victory will be at Christ's return in glory and power. But as we await the second coming of Christ, God is already at work:

- We already have the power over sin - with the help of Christ to resist temptation.
- We already have victory over death - the promise of eternal life.
- And Jesus has the power over disease and injuries sustained by our bodies.

"We are more than conquerors through Christ." (Rom. 8:37)

God is conquering sin, evil, disease, brokenness and death by bringing healing and wholeness through Christ. From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, in Chapter 1 of Mark's gospel, we see Jesus reaching out in compassion – speaking words of truth, love and compassion, touching, and healing.

Jesus told the man he was "willing" to heal him; healing is one of the purposes for which Jesus came. He reached out and touched the man with the leprosy – *touched* that skin with the *contagious* skin disease.

- He was not repelled.
- He was not too busy.
- Knowing that he would be considered ritually unclean and unable to enter the temple did not deter him.
- He gave no thought for himself.
- He touched him and made him whole.
- He had compassion for the leper.

## Our Response to the Suffering of Others

God's response to suffering is often to send Christians who have the heart of Christ to be his agents. Jesus is our model for compassion.

Henri J. M. Nouwen writes:

“Compassion means to become close to the one who suffers. But we can only come close to another person when we are willing to become vulnerable ourselves. A compassionate person says,

- ‘I am your brother; I am your sister;
- I am human, fragile, mortal, just like you.
- I am not scandalized by your tears, nor afraid of your pain. I too have wept. I too have felt pain.’

We can be with the other only when the other ceases to be ‘other’ and becomes like us. This, perhaps, is the main reason that we sometimes find it easier to show pity than compassion.”

The suffering person calls us to enter into their pain. Entering into someone else’s pain is hard. It is hard emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. And it takes time to be there with someone else. Many times, we are not willing to do that for someone else – especially for those who we have deemed unworthy of our self-giving. It’s easier to be there for our loved ones, to those who give back to us. But to reach out in compassion like Jesus did to strangers or to family members who have hurt us, or to those that society deems untouchable, takes the Holy Spirit working in us.

**Example:** A few years ago, God showed me how true it is that compassion means coming close to the one who suffers, being willing to be vulnerable enough to experience their pain.

God showed me that I have always put cocaine addicts in the same category that the town in our Bible story had put the leper in: unclean. So, like the leper’s community, I was willing to relegate all cocaine addicts to a place outside the city - where they were untouchable, unapproachable – where I wouldn’t have to be tainted by them, exposed to them – where I wouldn’t have to be confronted by them. You see, this way I could live in the comfort of my own world. I had judged addicts and put them all in the same category. This is called prejudice. I had no compassion – just prejudice – and perhaps some pity.

Until I met a woman I'll call Mary. My devotional reading that morning had challenged me to reach out to someone in a new way. So when I got a call from a friend saying that Mary, a cocaine addict, was falling apart, in tears, and needed help, I said I would go with him to see her.

Mary sobbed on my friend's shoulder. I have never been a cocaine addict, but as I watched her, I could feel her pain.

- I have cried like that before,
- I have felt that lonely before,
- I have felt hopeless before, and
- I have felt that far from God before.

As I listened to her, I was filled with compassion that wanted to see her made "clean," or transformed, like the leper. I wanted to see her whole, happy, embracing the life God gave her. I wanted to see her full of purpose and hope and self-esteem (seeing herself with potential and esteemed by God.) I wanted her to be healed the way Jesus had healed me. I listened, comforted, witnessed, hugged, and then took them both out to lunch... Since then I have called her several times to let her know I am still praying for her, still want to be her friend unconditionally.

As I listened to her, God was turning my heart into a heart of compassion like Jesus' heart. I no longer saw her as "a cocaine addict" but as "a hurting child of God, addicted to cocaine, who needs a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ." Mary's healing will be a long journey. But because God is working in her life, the journey can begin. God wants to work in her life, and he wants to use people like me and my friend to help her.

Some people ask, "Why hasn't God answered the prayers for her?"

Much of what is God's will he chooses to do through people and their prayers. We need to cooperate with God in our healing. We need to partner with God in someone else's healing. Suffering continues in part because people fail to pray and respond to God's leading. Notice I said 1) pray and 2) respond. Christian concern should first lead us to pray and then move us beyond realization of need to actual response. Our acts of caring can be the healing balm that becomes the answer to a suffering person's prayers. We are agents of God's healing. Jesus said to the man with leprosy that he was willing to make him clean. There's a lot more our merciful God could do for those who suffer if we

were willing for him to work through us. So before you go blaming God for not doing something about the suffering in the world, ask yourself if indeed he is trying to do something about the suffering in the world – through you!

### **God Sustains Us Through the Suffering**

God is compassionate. He wants to see us made whole. He hates to see us suffering the consequences of evil, sin, injury and disease. That's why he sent Jesus. Jesus responded to suffering. That's why he sent the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is with us in the midst of our suffering to sustain us.

I want to share with you a story of how God sustained a family in my neighborhood through the most difficult time of their lives.

Mark was twelve when he and his friends were playing very irresponsibly. They decided to set a tennis ball on fire and throw it into a puddle of gasoline on the driveway. Much to their dismay, the fire began to spread to the grass. Mark did not want to get in trouble so he tried to stomp it out. His nylon pants caught on fire, and the flames spread upward toward his face. Later, Mark told his father that even though he could see the yellow flames around his face, he knew he would not die because there were angels holding the flames away from his face. Mark received 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns over 40% of his body, but indeed his face was not burned at all. God in his compassion was there to protect his face when he was burning.

God in his compassion made it possible for Mark to be treated at the Shriners' Hospital in Galveston – at no charge.

The doctors removed all of Mark's remaining skin, except for his face, to use it to graft onto the most severely burned areas of his body, mostly hands and arms.

With thousands of staples holding his skin to his body, wrapped in gauze all over, arms strapped to the bed, Mark could barely sleep. Not only was he in great pain, but for several nights he had terrible nightmares. He dreamed that his face was burning and that everyone was just watching. Can you imagine dreaming that your face was burning? Steve, Mark's dad, told me that after three nights of this, he told Mark that he knew he would not have any more nightmares that night. The older son asked how he could be so bold, how he could know that. Steve said it was because he had prayed about the nightmares and told God that Mark had had enough. He claimed the promise in the Bible

that God will not give us more than we can bear. (1 Cor. 10:13) The outcome: Mark had no nightmares that night. God was compassionate in response to that dad's prayers.

Mark found comfort in singing songs about Jesus, and in fact, he would make up songs about Jesus there in the hospital. Some of his songs were about going home. Jesus was sustaining him.

Mark also found comfort in hearing the Bible read because he said it reminded him that Jesus was with him. On the fifth day since the fire, I was talking with Steve in their garage, asking how Mark was doing. He told me that in the middle of the night before, Mark asked him to read from the Bible because, he said, "It is the only thing that helps." Steve said he was reading from 1 Peter which offers encouragement for those who suffer. He read, "Cast your cares on the Lord because he cares for you." Mark asked, "Dad, how is it that you can hold my left hand?" You see, Steve was sitting on Mark's right side. Steve said, "I'm not holding your hand." Somebody is holding my left hand and breathing on my left cheek." There was no one else in the room. Mark said, "Read that again." Steve read, "Cast your cares on the Lord, because he cares for you." Steve had tears in his eyes and was fighting to maintain control as he said to me, "How many get the chance to hold the hand of Jesus?"

This is extraordinary response of our compassionate God. God knew Mark needed a strong sense of Jesus' presence and grace to sustain him and his family through the many hard days ahead.

I'll add that the doctors predicted that Mark would be in the hospital for at least six weeks, but he was released in three weeks, saying they had never seen such remarkable recovery! The suffering had been great... but so had the grace – the angels that held the flames and saved his life, the hospital that treated Mark for free, the end of the nightmares, the hand of Jesus holding Mark's hand, the rapid healing, the people who prayed, and those who brought gifts and cards by the bundles...

## **Conclusion**

People who are suffering greatly sometimes become angry with God and ask me, "Where is God when you need him?" My answer is, "He is IN YOU, the one who is hurting, not in IT, the thing that hurts." (*Dr. Paul Bland is quoted as saying this.*)

Just as surely as Easter follows Good Friday God will carry you through your suffering and he will deliver you from your suffering either in this life or in heaven.

Trust the living God. Trust his sovereignty... his wisdom... but mostly trust his heart. It's a heart of compassion and unconditional, sacrificial love.