

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Job 38:1-7; 43:1-6

SERMON SERIES: Where is God When It Hurts?

SERMON TITLE: Is Pain a Message from God?

Today's message is the second in a series based on Phillip Yancey's book, *Where is God When It Hurts?*¹ This morning we confront a question that I suspect most of us have struggled with from time to time: Is pain a message from God?

Phillip Yancey tells the story of two friends of his named John and Claudia Claxton. The two had been married for about a year when Yancey received a letter from John. The letter was clearly written in distress. And the letter's message was a hard blow: Claudia had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, a cancer of the lymph glands. She had been given a fifty percent chance to live.

Yancey writes: *Though both John and Claudia were strong Christians, an unexpected anger against God surged up: "God, why us?" they cried.*

Claudia underwent extensive surgery followed by cobalt treatments that took a toll on her body. She wrestled with God and she was desperate for someone to help her understand what was happening to her.

Well, one day, a deacon from her church came by to visit her. This is what he told her: *"Surely something in your life must displease God. Somewhere, you must have stepped out of his will. These things don't just happen. God uses circumstances to warn us, and to punish us. What is he telling you?"*²

Now I said last week that pain is an obvious part of God's creation and that it serves a useful purpose—it serves as a warning bell that let's us know when something is not right

¹ Yancey, Philip. *Where Is God When It Hurts? A Comforting, Healing Guide for Coping with Hard Times*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, MI, 1990.

² *Ibid*, 3-8.

physically, emotionally, or spiritually. But does this mean that God directly causes our pain as a punishment for wrongdoing as Claudia's deacon suggests?

Well, frankly, there are biblical texts that point in this direction. Genesis 38:7, for example, says this about Er, the son of Judah: *he was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.* Texts like this follow a simple formula: if you're righteous God will bless you with well-being, but if you're wicked, God will hurt you and perhaps even kill you.

So does this settle the matter? Well, not quite because there is another biblical word on the subject. The Bible also tells us about a man named Job. Job was a righteous man. He was prosperous and faithful. He loved God with all his heart and indeed God picked Job to demonstrate to Satan just how faithful human beings could be. If there was ever a person who did not deserve suffering, it was Job.

But then the test came. Afflictions were poured out upon Job—one after another. He lost his wealth and property. Boils appeared on his body that tormented him. Every member of his large family was destroyed, except for his wife.

As painful as these afflictions were, what bothered Job most was a sense of betrayal. He had believed in a loving, fair God. But the facts weren't adding up so Job raised anguished questions: *Why me? What did I do wrong? What is God trying to tell me?*

Well, Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, tried to help him understand. They took the orthodox position: *Job, God is trying to tell you something. No one suffers without cause. Common sense and all reason tell us that a just God will treat people fairly. Those who obey and remain faithful, [God] rewards. Those who sin, [God] punishes. Therefore, confess your sin, and God will relieve your misery.*

Well, Job went back and forth with his friends until he finally concluded that they were wrong. In fact, at the end of the book of Job, even God declares that Job's friends were wrong.

And then, by the time we get to Jesus, the old tried-and true-formula is once again turned on its head. Why? Because Jesus was the righteous one who suffered.

So from this perspective, pain is not a message from God sent to punish sinners. The fact is, all of us are subject to pain and suffering whether we're "good" or "bad."

Now, granted, sometimes when we make bad decisions, painful consequences follow, but that's not the same thing as seeing those consequences as the direct result of God's action to punish us. So I think Claudia's deacon got it wrong.

But that still leaves us with the unanswered question: "Why?" And just like Job, God leaves us with a mystery while calling us to trust: *Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.* God then recounts the mighty acts of creation all to make the point that the answer to the "why" question is not for Job to know. What God requires is trust and a renewed relationship.

Job gets the point: *I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted....Surely I spoke of things I did not understand things too wonderful for me to know.*

And Job repents: *therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*

Isn't that interesting? Job repented. To repent means to turn. And I submit that on this matter of pain as a message from God, perhaps we should repent and turn away from fixating on the "why" questions and instead, turn more toward the "how" questions: How will I be faithful in the midst of my suffering? How will I seek God through my suffering and in the pain? How can God use my suffering?

Let me tell you about Mary Verghese. She was a committed Christian and a medical resident who worked with Dr. Paul Brand in a leprosy hospital in India. Early in her career, she was involved in tragic accident that disfigured her face and left her unable to walk.

This reality threw her into a downward spiral of despair. The only question she could ask was: *God, why?*

But one day, Dr. Brand stopped by her room for a visit. He said to her, *Mary, I think it's time to begin thinking of your professional future as a doctor.* At first she thought he was joking, but he went on to suggest that she might bring to other patients unique qualities of sympathy and understanding.

Even through her doubt, Mary began to work with the leprosy patients from her wheelchair. And she was able to connect with them in their suffering in ways that she had not done before.

On another occasion, Dr. Brand met Mary rolling her wheelchair between buildings of the hospital and he asked how she was doing. *At first the threads seemed so tangled and broken,* she replied, *but I'm beginning to think life may have a pattern after all.* Mary had begun to understand that her disability was not a punishment sent by God to entrap her in a life of misery. Rather, it had become one of her greatest assets as a doctor.³

By repenting of the “why” questions and turning toward to “how” questions, Mary was able to trust God once again with her life. So when it comes to our own suffering and pain, what's the message? Is it God's punishment for our sin or is it a condition life that invites us to seek God and even to repent?

³ Ibid, 106.