

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Psalm 22:1-11

SERMON SERIES: Where Is God When It Hurts?

SERMON TITLE: How People Respond to Suffering

Today's message is the third in a series based on Phillip Yancey's book, *Where is God When It Hurts?*¹ On previous Sundays we've asked some hard questions: Why is there such a thing as pain? Is pain a message from God? Today we're looking at how we respond to suffering.

Our starting point this morning is a psalm of lament, Psalm 22:1-11. This Psalm is a response to suffering that holds great meaning for Jews and for Christians. For those of us who follow Jesus, the opening words of the Psalm bring to mind the anguished words of Jesus as he hangs from the cross in the crucifixion stories found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. So I invite you to listen for the word of God. **READ THE TEXT.**

Okay, so I want to know: What are we to do in our suffering when we cry out for relief day and night and God gives us no rest? What are we to do in our suffering when we feel abandoned and ignored by the holy God who made us—the God who has heard our cries and helped us in the past—the God we have trusted and worshipped? What are we to do in our suffering when others are mocking us and taunting us in our pain, when we feel—not like human beings—but like worms?

What are we to do? Hold fast to this God with a tenacious faith even as the suffering continues unrelieved? Or do we turn away from this God in utter disappointment and despair?

For the Nobel prize-winning author Elie Wiesel, the unimaginable suffering of the Holocaust caused him to abandon his faith. As a Jewish teenager, he and his family and the

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

other Jews of his village were forced to live in a ghetto. They were then stripped of their possessions and loaded into cattle cars. Almost a third of them died in transit to the death camps.

This is how Wiesel describes his first night at the Birkenau extermination camp with its black smoke billowing forth from the ovens: *Never shall I forget that night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children,...Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.*²

Elie Wiesel's response to the suffering he experienced in the concentration camp was to relinquish his faith in a God of love and comfort. The God of Psalm 22 was no longer adequate for him. And he was not alone. Phillip Yancey reports that *During the 1970s...[Rabbi] Reeve Robert Brenner surveyed one thousand survivors of the Holocaust, inquiring especially about their religious faith. Of the total number surveyed, eleven percent said they had rejected all belief in the existence of God as a direct result of their experience. After the war, they never regained faith. Analyzing their detailed responses, Brenner noted that their professed atheism seemed less a matter of theological belief and more an emotional reaction, an expression of deep hurt and anger against God for abandoning them.*³

But as Rabbi Brenner's research also showed, most Jewish survivors of the Holocaust did not respond to their suffering by giving up their faith.⁴ In fact, many responded by finding a deeper faith that held fast to God while, at the same time, hurling anguished questions of doubt and challenge at God just as the psalmist did.

² Ibid, 154.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

One Christian who managed to find a faith like this was Corrie Ten Boom. She was one of the survivors of the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbruck. Her story is told in the book, *The Hiding Place*. Corrie, her sister Betsy, and the rest of their family were arrested by the Gestapo in Holland for hiding Jews from the Nazis.

In Ravensbruck, Corrie felt the sting of the whip. She witnessed prisoners disappear into the ovens. She watched her sister die. She knew the unspeakable horrors of evil run amuck. She wrote of her experience: *It grew harder and harder...there was too much misery, too much seemingly pointless suffering. Every day something else failed to make sense, something else grew too heavy.*

But somehow or another, both Corrie and her sister found Christ within their suffering and their faith in God deepened. Corrie wrote: *But as the rest of the world grew stranger, one thing became increasingly clear. And that was the reason the two of us were here. Why others should suffer we were not shown. As for us, from morning until lights-out, whenever we were not in ranks for roll-call, our Bible was the center of an ever-widening circle of help and hope. Like waifs clustered around a blazing fire, we gathered about it, holding out our hearts to its warmth and light. The blacker the night around us grew, the brighter and truer and more beautiful burned the word of God. . . . I would look at Betsie read [the Bible], watching the light leap from face to face. . . . Life in Ravensbruck took place on two separate levels, mutually impossible. One, the observable, external life, grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived with God, grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory.*

And somehow or another, Corrie Ten Boom reached an astounding conclusion: *However deep the pit, God's love is deeper still.*⁵

⁵ Boom, Corrie Ten. *The Hiding Place* (Spire Books). Grand Rapids: Workman, 1974, 194-195.

So my brothers and sisters, in when suffering comes, how will we respond? Will we allow our suffering to drive us toward God in deeper faith—even as we cry out: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Or will our suffering turn us away from God in disappointment and despair?

The choice is ours. We're free to choose. Dr. Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who also survived the Holocaust, wrote this: *The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress...everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances...*

In the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually.⁶

In our suffering, how will we respond?

⁶ Quoted in Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, 156.

