

Don't Waste Your Sorrows

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As I look out on this sea of faces, I am aware that we may have deeply different religious traditions, or no religious affiliation at all. Since I have to speak to you, however, it will of necessity be out of my own tradition. I am a Christian, so there will be times I will draw on the resources of that tradition. But I will try as much as possible not to leave anyone out of the conversation.

Everyone here is no doubt keenly aware of the polarization of our country today. We are in a city gridlocked by partisan politics, but no matter where you go, to the smallest rural hamlet, there is a trend towards tribalization. Sociologists talk about the fragmentation of our culture, brought on by the lack of shared values or even shared experiences. I am old enough to remember when the entire country tuned in to watch Rhoda's wedding. Consider that 106 million people watched the last episode of MASH in the '80s, while only 13 million tuned in to see the ending of Lost. With cable, hulu, roku, and streaming, it's only the rarest coincidence that two people in the same zip code are watching the same thing simultaneously. Shared cultural experiences, even TV experiences, are a thing of the past.

However, there is one thing that is the great leveler, a common denominator that is universal among people all over the earth, regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, economic level, education or any other of the variables, and that is suffering, affliction, trouble, sorrow. A lot of ink has been spilled over the words "the one-percenters," but I can give you an even more rarified group: let's call them the "point zero zero zero one percenters." These are the people who go through their entire lives without ever encountering any kind of trouble. They are happy in their marriages, or without them. None of the kids have gone off the rails. There has been no train wreck with health, or employment, or relationships, or finances. And then they die, in full possession of their minds and bodies, at a ripe old age, in their sleep. I call them the .0001%, but actually I think they don't exist at all...I'm just allowing for the possibility.

Because suffering comes to us all, soon or late. Whether it is of the Mack truck running you over variety, or merely the slow depredations of age, it will come to you. My job this afternoon is to suggest some ways you can be prepared for its arrival, so that you don't waste its value in your own life, or in the lives of others.

First, I should give you a disclaimer: The subject of how a good God can allow evil and suffering to exist in the world is a very large one. I'm not going to attempt to cover that today, as it would

take all our time and still not be enough to work through all the issues. If one of you wants to ask about it in the Q&A I will try to give you a Cliff Notes answer, which I expect will satisfy no one.

But this morning I'm not going to go there, unless you ask me, at the end.

The title of this talk—"Don't Waste Your Sorrows"—is actually the title of a book by Paul Billheimer that I was told about years and years ago, but which I have never read.

I've never read it because I was so struck by the title that I've been meditating about it ever since. The thought that I could go through life with its inevitable pain, disappointment, even tragedy and have it yield nothing of value, alter nothing in my character, produce nothing with which to comfort other people, is insupportable. It's unacceptable. If I waste my encounters with suffering and pain by indulging in stoicism or despair, or depression or bitterness, then they will have no meaning for me and will be of no use to you. It would seem like a magnification of the tragedy if I went through terrible times and had nothing to show for it personally, and nothing to offer because of it relationally.

While I tremble to realize that many of you have a much deeper acquaintance with sorrow and suffering than I do, I've had my taste of it. Just so you don't spend the whole talk wondering what my brush with suffering has been, I'll give you the short version.

For nearly two decades, my life was dominated by one type of suffering or another, mostly medical issues related to the Crohn's disease I was diagnosed with at age 41, and the 25 or so surgeries that it resulted in, as well as infections, debility, isolation, etc, etc.

While presently I have in large measure regained my health, the memory of those years has not left me. Some of you may know the proverb, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." When you think you've reached the finish line, and the worst is over, and then it turns out that the finish line has been moved, that's crushing. Post operative, infections, medical mistakes, botched surgeries and reactions to medication all happened while my husband Tim was diagnosed with thyroid cancer, two adult sons moved in with us to save rent while going to grad school, my parents both died, and just the regular issues of life kept happening.

I am keenly aware that the small bits of suffering I've experienced are nothing compared to losing a 19-year-old son to brain cancer, or a beloved husband to ALS, or an entire van full of children burning to death in a car accident, and on, and on and on, including the recent horror at Newtown.

But the question we should all end up asking, the question that I finally asked, was ***“What am I supposed to do with this, God? How do I get through it? Is there any meaning in this at all?”***

In order to answer those questions, I had to wrestle my way to several conclusions.

The first one was: Expectation is everything. I will waste my sorrows, you will get no profit from your suffering, if we are not prepared for them to happen. If nothing the size of a mack truck hits you, then the slow depredations of age and infirmity surely will. No one gets off this planet except through a dark door.

In the 1800's, 25% of all children died before their first birthday. In the 1500's it was 50% before their 10th birthday. Life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,” in the words of Thomas Hobbes. We've come a long way since those days, with modern medicine, central heating, every day conveniences that would have beggared the imagination of all the kings and emperors of the world. We've pushed back the boundaries of suffering to the point that it is not longer a daily, familiar companion. Instead, we look upon it as an aberration, the result of someone's mistake (which may explain the astonishing growth in tort litigation in the last 50 years). In modern industrialized countries we can live for long stretches under the delusion that suffering will not happen to *us*. But it will. Recognizing that we *will* suffer is the foundation of our mental preparation.

But one has to also be spiritually prepared, if we accept the wisdom found in the book of Proverbs.

In the book of Proverbs is in the Old Testament, and in verses 1:27–28 we read (and this is the personification of wisdom speaking here):

When calamity overtakes you like a storm,
when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind,
when distress and trouble overwhelm you.
"Then they will call to me but I will not answer;

they will look for me but will not find me.

I used to think that meant that God was a meanie; just when I needed him most, he was going to hide from me. But I realize now that the Bible is talking about being prepared for calamity by having a prior working relationship with God already under your belt.

It's too late to start training for the marathon after the starting gun has gone off. It's too late to take a course on sailing when a storm has just swept over you. You already need to have a seaworthy boat and knowledge of sailing. And it's too late, once the inevitable sorrows of life come out of nowhere and knock you to your knees for you to say (as I did), "*Well, now I guess I'd better be close to God in order to get through this.*" One doesn't whip up a deep relationship with God out of thin air in a moment of crisis.

You have to already know God, and be in a relationship with him *before* the storm arrives, otherwise the crisis leaves no room to develop the kind of confidence in God and his character that will see you through. He's not a bellman who comes when you ring for him, but your loving creator, who wants you to make him the center of your life, so when the fringes start to crumble, the center will hold. If God isn't the thing you want most, if there is something else, when that thing is threatened, you will go to pieces.

So don't put off getting your relationship to God to be real, vibrant, and alive because you're not in any immediate need of comfort. This is the calm before the storm, so use it wisely.

Second, it is possible to waste the experience of suffering by indulging in one of the several forms of denial. I expect that some people listening to me have already encountered sorrows of one kind or another and come up with a common strategy—to ignore them. To put your head down, clench your teeth, and wait for it to be over.

This is a form of stoicism and if you are a brave and disciplined person it might work for you. Others of us, with less courage, may find our denial in drugs, alcohol, prescription drugs, or other deadening agents. But it's all a way of avoiding the pain by denying its existence.

This is a *bad idea*. When God allows troubles into your life, he has a purpose in mind. You may not know the reasons at the time, if ever, but he always intends that calamity, disaster, and even minor difficulties result in us turning to him.

It doesn't have to be a physical suffering, though most of us are guaranteed that in our future somewhere. Suffering comes in all sizes and colors. Jobs or lack of them. Money. Family. Lack of family. Insecurity. Anxiety. The list goes on. God expects us to turn to him in times of all sorts of trouble, and if we waste our troubles by just waiting them out, or dulling our senses, and denying the hurt instead of turning to him, then we have wasted a tremendously valuable opportunity to connect with God on a deeper level.

As C.S Lewis famously said "God whispers to us in our pleasures and shouts to us in our pains."

So point two is: Pay attention. Avoid the waste of denial and just waiting it out.

You may have trouble feeling close to him in the maelstrom if you have been unprepared, but if you call out to him, then you can repair and rebuild and renew your relationship to God in a way it may never have been before.

Recognize that you built your house on sand and not on the rock. While the storm still rages, cling to the knowledge of his love for you. When the storm finally abates, in the name of all that is sensible, don't go back to your former cozy cocoon, forgetting all the pain as much and as soon as possible.

Instead, try to hold onto the memory of how fragile and easily shattered life can be. Don't be deceived into looking for comfort and security here.

I've heard my husband use an illustration that I'm sure he read somewhere, but neither of us can find the source. I don't know if it is a true story or a fable. According to the story a lumberjack showed up one morning at a forested piece of land that it was his job to clear. Every tree had to come down. Just as he was readying his ax to begin on the first one, he noticed a bird that had begun a nest in the tree. Not wanting to see it come to harm, he took the side of his ax and whacked the tree a couple of times until the bird flew off. To the next tree. Well, that tree was coming down, too. So for the better part of half an hour the lumberjack followed the bird as it went from tree to

tree, making each tree where the bird settled shake with blows from his ax. Finally, discouraged, the bird flew off and began building her nest on the side of a cliff, among the rocks. Was that lumberjack doing the mama bird a favor, or a disservice? I'm sure at the time the bird was annoyed, even angry at that troublesome lumberjack, but his refusal to let her rest until she was genuinely safe was an act of compassion, not harassment.

Which brings me to a third consideration. **You can waste your sorrows and afflictions by being consumed with anger. Anger at God, anger at whatever forces you believe lie behind your suffering.**

Psalm 23 may be the most well known bit of Bible literature in the world. It is often quoted in times of trouble, and I think there are many people in this country who, if they know no other spiritual literature, know the Twenty-Third Psalm.

However, I think a few important things go unnoticed just because of that familiarity. Let me read it quickly:

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,

he leads me beside quiet waters,

he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The shepherd and his care for his sheep figure as the central metaphor in this Psalm. People are comforted by the fact “you are with me.” Great, but if so, how did we get into this terrible valley?” Clearly, the shepherd is the one who leads the sheep to green pastures and quiet waters, but then it *must also be the shepherd who chooses the path that goes through the valley of the shadow of death*. The sheep didn’t choose the route, it’s the shepherd who decided that was the best way to go.

There is an enormous resistance to this idea in our culture today. I was reading just the other day of some theologian who said that if we ever attribute the suffering in our lives to God, no matter what purpose he might have behind them, that’s nothing short of abuse. Really?

I think that must depend on what kind of confidence you have in God’s character. If he’s some kind of cruel, dispassionate being, like Mark Twain envisioned in his bleak story, *The Mysterious Stranger*, or perhaps more familiarly, the character Q in *Star Trek: Next Generation*, just toying with human creatures because he *can*, then anger is the right response.

But that’s not the God of the Bible. I could be angry at the abusive God, but not the God of the Bible who joins Shadrach, Meshach and Abendigo in the furnace, or the God who so identifies with the poor, the homeless, the prisoners, that when he visited this sad and broken planet, he came as one who was poor, homeless, and, finally, a condemned prisoner.

To quote Ann Voskamp’s modern little classic *One Thousand Gifts*, where she wrestles with this subject:

[God] gave us Jesus. *Jesus! Gave Him up for us all*. If we have only one memory, isn’t this one enough? Why is this the memory I most often take for granted?

...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, your name on the cracked lips? How will He

not also graciously give us all things He deems best and right? He's already given the incomprehensible.¹

I'm speaking out of my own tradition, now, as a Christian, believing that God has himself come as a human being to share in our suffering and our sorrows, and to redeem them by his own. This may not be your understanding of God, but it drains any anger I may have had regarding suffering away, because my God knows what suffering is.

Returning to Psalm 23, still on the subject of not allowing anger to rob you of the benefit of your suffering, notice that halfway through the valley, while still in the presence of enemies, God stops and wants to have a picnic. He prepares a table and anoints us with oil, which was a symbol of rejoicing. *God wants us to rejoice in our relationship with him in the midst of our valleys*, even if death is casting its shadow on the table.

God intends for our deep joy and intimacy to be in suffering; he sets the table in the valley, not by the still waters or the good grass.

If you are suffering, run towards God, instead of away from him. You may have lived under the mistaken notion that it was God's job to keep your life calm and happy, and if that isn't what's happening, then he's betrayed you and you're finished with him.

Consider what John Newton said in one of his letters: "If you think you're getting no help by being close to God, be sure you will get no help from being far away from him."

And before I leave this point, let me just say that it is perfectly all right to yell, and struggle, and scream when you are in the midst of suffering. Sometimes the way to joy and intimacy with God is to cry out in the words of Psalm 39 and 88—bitter, angry rants to God. God included those Psalms in the Bible because he wanted to show us that it's okay to be screaming in our pain, as long as we scream to *him*. We are allowed to wrestle with God like Jacob, we can argue with God like Job. As long as we stay engaged with God, rather than washing our hands of him once we decide he has failed to deliver the life we expected, we will not miss what God is trying to give us.

The final way to waste your sorrows is by isolation. It is easy to let suffering isolate you.

¹ Voskamp, Ann. *One Thousand Gifts*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2010, pp. 154-155.

By its very nature, suffering sets you apart from the people whose lives are, for the moment, going smoothly. And as much as they try to help, to understand, they can't, not really, not unless they've been through the valley of the shadow themselves. Rather than endure the clumsy and even painful attempts of others to offer comfort, it's much easier to isolate yourself. Don't. Find a support group of others who have been through what you're going through and learn.

When I was given my ileostomy nearly 10 years ago, there was a limit to how much I could freak out about it. Why? Because my sister Lynn had been living with an ostomy since she was 18 years old. (She turns 50 in 2 weeks.) I had seen her go to medical school, marry, parent, parasail, ride horses, surf, stuff I didn't even *want* to do. I had decades of watching her live a full life. I could talk to her about my fears.

As important as it is to have community in the midst of suffering, the final tragedy of wasting your suffering is if, at the end of it, you wall off your experience of suffering and isolate it, so that you never allow yourself to think about it, much less revisit it by courting the company of suffering people. Yet that is exactly the moment in which our suffering can pay its biggest dividends.

My question to God, "What am I to do with this?" is answered in being with you here today.

I am a serious introvert. I'm much more comfortable behind a keyboard than in front of live, actual people. But because I know that there are people who need to be comforted with the comfort that I received when I was suffering, I said yes when asked to be here today.

When Tim and I got married nearly 40 years ago, we had Psalm 34 verse 3 engraved inside our wedding bands.

Glorify the LORD with me;
let us exalt his name together.

It sounded good, but we took it out of context. Listen to the two verses that come before that:

I will extol the LORD at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.

My soul will boast in the LORD;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.

Although I didn't notice it at the time, apparently that's my assignment right now—to help those who are afflicted rejoice by telling of how he has helped me in the midst of my affliction.

It may be that some of you have been given the same assignment. If you have been granted the privilege of suffering, then part of the reason is so that you can encourage others who are going through their own seasons of sorrow. Otherwise, what a waste of time and tears your own sorrows have been, if they don't result in others who are afflicted hearing how God has helped you, and being glad.

How can my sorrows and your sorrows be part of the healing of the world? How can your pain launch you into the world, rather than into isolation and self-pity?

In the New Testament of the Christian Scriptures there are two commands that, if they were even practiced by the majority of the people professing Christianity, would change the face of our nation and our world.

One is “Weep with those who are weeping.”

In the English Standard Version of the Bible, the entire quote is this, from the Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 12, verses 15–16:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

The other is 2 Corinthians 1:3–4:

the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

This is advocating more than mere sympathy, but an empathy born out of knowing what it is like both to be happy and sad. And notice as a corollary the command to live harmoniously with people

unlike oneself, without thinking you are better than everyone else. What town, what community, what church or synagogue or mosque or PTA or Congress couldn't benefit from those words?

And only by putting your own suffering to work, letting it convince you that you are in fellowship with all the other human beings on this planet, can I even imagine this being accomplished, even to the smallest degree.

The philosopher Miroslav Wolff wrote a book called *Exclusion and Embrace*. In it he tells about his experience as a Croatian, witnessing the carnage, destruction and death all around him.

I hope none of you leave tonight with the impression that I'm making a case for some masochistic wallowing in one's troubles. Not in the least. But unless you are part of that point zero zero zero one percent, suffering, affliction, trouble of some kind has been, is, and will again be a part of your life.

Speaking for myself and out of my own Christian tradition, I am deeply comforted to know that I have a God who is no stranger to suffering. Christians believe that we have a God who knows what it's like to bear the worst affliction, and has done it on our behalf. Whatever troubles come to us, the worst trouble is over, because Jesus has reconciled us to God. There is now no condemnation for us, because Jesus took it all on the cross.

John Stott 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 a God who was immune to it?"² He went on to quote the last stanza of a poem by Edward Shillito, a minister who had lived through the horrors of the First World War, only to see fresh horrors in the Second World War. He is talking about his trust in God because he did not remain aloof and safe, but entered his broken world in order to redeem it:

"The other gods were strong;
but thou wast weak;
they rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but thou alone."

² Stott, John R. W. *The Cross of Christ*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1986, p. 326.