

## The God of Love and Lament

April 10, 2020

### A Good Friday Reflection

So glad you could join us for this special service. At this time, I'd like to share some Good Friday reflections. Let me begin by saying:

These are unprecedented times.

How often have you either heard or said that phrase in recent weeks?

Really, there's a whole list of phrases that have now become part of our daily vocabulary that we rarely if ever used before COVID-19 changed the world. Phrases like:

- Social distancing
- Self-isolation
- Flattening the curve

But what I find especially interesting is that in unprecedented times, secular leaders, and even the mainstream media, will, on occasion, turn to the church and its leaders for perspective, for answers.

Last week during a [live interview](#) with the famous preacher T.D. Jakes, MSNBC host Craig Melvin declared, "I've never actually done this on air" and then proceeded ask his guest, "Can you lead us in prayer for 30 seconds?" And Bishop Jakes did just that.

If a pastor is asked to lead a nation in prayer on a mainstream news program, you know that we must be living in extraordinary times.

Along the same lines, last week's edition of *Time* magazine featured an [article](#) by world renowned New Testament scholar N.T. Wright (who, by the way, has had incredible influence on my own life and ministry through his writings).

Why would *Time* magazine feature an article by a Bible scholar and pastor at a time like this? I think it's because *Time* magazine realizes that people are longing for *spiritual* perspective, for some answers, if possible—*God's answers*— to the "why" questions concerning this pandemic.

But Wright argues in his article that Christianity offers no easy answers to these "why" questions. It's not supposed to, he says.

Christianity does offer what I believe to be the very best explanations for the problem of suffering—while also leaving plenty of room for mystery— but authentic biblical faith always resists the kind of simplistic answers that allow us to push our confusion and negative emotions aside too readily, too conveniently.

So instead of addressing the *why* question, Professor Wright points us to the rich biblical tradition of *lament*. He explains that:

**Lament is what happens when people ask, “Why?” and don’t get an answer.**

Our souls need permission to continue to express our faith while we, at the very same time, wrestle honestly with our doubts and fears, with our pain and grief.

Again and again throughout scripture, we find that God gives us this very permission.

Indeed, God invites and even encourages us to lament authentically in his presence. As we do, lament can actually become a pathway to hope, as well as to a heart of greater compassion for others who suffer.

As Wright goes on to say:

[Lament is] where we get to when we move beyond our self-centered worry... and look more broadly at the suffering of the world. It’s bad enough facing a pandemic in New York City or London [or Toronto]. What about a crowded refugee camp on a Greek island? What about Gaza? Or South Sudan?

Even closer to home, we begin to wonder, what it must be like to face this pandemic as a homeless person. Or as an elderly person, perhaps living alone, like my 93 year-old dad, or as a resident of a senior’s home. As someone who works in health care. As a single parent or a parent of a child with special needs. As someone who has lost their job.

As suburban North Americans, many of us have known little of what it means to really suffer. Times of crisis like this can help wake us up to the suffering that millions around the world have been all too familiar with every single day of their lives.

But the heart of biblical lament—the *very* heart of it— is that **God himself laments**. As Wright says:

The mystery of the biblical story is that God also laments. Some Christians like to think of God as above all that, knowing everything, in charge of everything, calm and unaffected by the troubles in his world. That's not the picture we get in the Bible.

Indeed, Good Friday is a profound reminder that God also laments. That God is *with* the world—with *us*—in our trials, pain, and suffering.

Good Friday is a profound reminder that God's ultimate response to the question of suffering is not a rational explanation. It's not a philosophical argument. It's not a therapeutic technique.

**God's ultimate response to the problem of suffering is a *person*.**

The wondrous mystery of the Christian gospel is that in Jesus, the sovereign God himself has come into this world as a human being. The Creator of all things became as one created, and has experienced this world's darkness firsthand, as one of us.

In Jesus, God has willingly and personally drunk the cup of suffering down to its very dregs. He did so to rescue us by bearing in his own body the full extent of suffering, death, and the curse not for his sins, but for ours.

In Jesus, God has taken the sin and suffering of the whole world upon himself so that someday he can return and put an end to all evil and suffering once and for all, without having to put an end to you and me.

In the process of doing so, he promises to one day restore all creation, forever.

God's own suffering in Jesus, then, becomes the very heart of the biblical story. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of a Suffering Servant:

- <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected—  
a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.  
We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.  
He was despised, and we did not care.
- <sup>4</sup> Yet it was our weaknesses he carried;  
it was our sorrows that weighed him down...
- <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our rebellion,  
crushed for our sins.  
He was beaten so we could be whole.  
He was whipped so we could be healed.

<sup>6</sup>All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.  
We have left God's paths to follow our own.  
Yet the LORD laid on him  
the sins of us all...  
<sup>11</sup>When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish,  
he will be satisfied.  
And because of his experience,  
my righteous servant will make it possible  
for many to be counted righteous,  
for he will bear all their sins.<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament goes on to reveal that this Suffering Servant was Jesus Christ, God come in the flesh. In Christ, says Colossians, "all the fullness of God lives in a human body."<sup>2</sup>

And the book of Hebrews tells us that he experienced weakness—a life filled with "fervent cries and tears."<sup>3</sup>

As a human being, Jesus knew firsthand what rejection felt like, and betrayal, and poverty, and disappointment, and grief; abuse, torture— even death itself.

Therefore, in Jesus, says the Bible in Hebrews, God, "understands our weakness, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

In his book on suffering, Tim Keller says that on the cross, Jesus:

experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceed ours.

There is no greater inner agony than the loss of a love relationship. We cannot imagine, however, what it would be like not to lose a human relationship that had lasted for some years but the infinite love of [God] the Father that Jesus had from all eternity. The separation would have been infinitely unbearable. And so [because he was bearing our sin] Jesus experienced Godforsakenness on the cross when he cried out, "My God, my God! Why [why, why] have you forsaken me?"<sup>4</sup>

The heart of the Christian story is that in Jesus, God himself laments.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53:3-4a, 5-6, 11 (NLT)

<sup>2</sup> See Colossians 2:9

<sup>3</sup> See Hebrews 5:7 (NIV)

<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*.

In Jesus, we see that God—who is ultimate strength—is in fact so strong that he is willing to become weak, willing to become vulnerable enough to personally absorb the full extent of this world's sin, suffering, and darkness into himself out of his love for us.

God's greatest glory is his willingness to lay aside all his glory out of love for you and me.

No other religion even conceives of such a thing.

A Christian leader named John Dickson tells of how he once spoke on the theme of the wounds of God at a university campus in Sydney, Australia.<sup>5</sup>

There was a time for questions after the talk, and a Muslim man stood up to explain, in a very logical and civil manner, "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 a cross."

As this Muslim man's words hung in the silent lecture hall, Dickson offered no counter argument. He simply thanked the man for making the uniqueness of the Christian claim so clear. "What the Muslim denounces as blasphemy" said Dickson, "the Christian holds as precious."

"I could never myself believe in God," writes John Stott, "if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"

Stott says, "I have entered many Buddhist temples... and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through the hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. *That is the God for me...* in a world such as ours."

Of all the world religions, only the Christian faith teaches that when we turned from God, God did not abandon us, but came to earth in Jesus Christ and himself became subject to suffering and death.

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<sup>5</sup> As told by Keller in *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*.

While there are no easy answers for why God allows suffering, or why it seems so random, at least we know what the reason for this world's suffering is *not*. It cannot be that he doesn't love us.

As Tim Keller puts it:

Jesus is so committed to our ultimate happiness that he was willing to plunge into the greatest depths of suffering himself. He understands us, he's been there, and he assures us that he has a plan to eventually wipe away every tear. Someone might say that's only half an answer to the question *why?* But it's the half we most need.<sup>6</sup>

Especially at a time like this.

So in the face of this pandemic, God laments, and we know this has to be true because of the cross of Jesus Christ—because of Good Friday.

And if God laments, it means that it's alright for us to lament, too. We must, because otherwise, it means we don't take God's suffering, and the world's suffering, and our own suffering seriously enough.

In the face of this pandemic, God invites you to bring your honest laments to him. The cross of Christ shows us that God does not shrink back from the world's pain, and he doesn't shrink back from yours.

In fact, if you're hurting, it's important to **pray your pain**. Indeed, let your pain cause you to run toward God, not away from him. Pray your pain, like the biblical writers did—especially the writers of the psalms. Pray your pain like Jesus himself did.

And if you need prayer and practical support from other believers, do ask for it. God's best help in our pain often comes through the care of others, so do open yourself to such help by sharing your prayer requests and practical needs. [cornerstonechurch.ca/Prayer-Request](https://cornerstonechurch.ca/Prayer-Request).

Be encouraged this morning with the promise that:

God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:28 (NLT)

To say this is not to say that God is the cause of our sufferings, but it is to say that he can and does use our sufferings to help us depend on him more fully.

Indeed, God often uses suffering to refine our character, to make us more like Jesus. This is why Paul writes in Romans:

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

We can't know the whys. But we can be sure that God will not let these hard times go to waste when it comes to moving his good purposes forward in the world, in you, and in me.

It's Friday, and Jesus is crucified, dead, and laid in a tomb. But as you know, the story doesn't end there. It's Friday, but Sunday is coming. It's the dark of night, but a glorious dawn of resurrection—of creation's ultimate renewal— is on the horizon.

In the meantime, we wait. And we pray. And we hope. And we help. And we love.

And we *lament*— knowing that God himself laments, and is right here with us, and with the whole world, in our pain.

At this time, we're going to celebrate communion together—the Lord's Supper. And I have to say, this is a first. I've never led communion virtually before. But with God's grace, blessings, and his understanding of our limitations, we adapt.

In one Spirit and as one body, we now remember our Lord's suffering together, even though we're physically apart.

Over the past couple of weeks we've sent out different messages to encourage all of you to prepare to celebrate Good Friday communion at home.

I hope you've been able to gather the items you need— some bread or cracker pieces, and individual cups of grape juice or wine— one for each person who's participating in your household. Substitutions are fine if you don't have grape juice or wine.

Jesus came to seek the lost,  
heal the sick, free the captive and restore the broken.  
And ultimately to set the whole of creation right, once and for all.  
We give thanks for his unfailing love.  
Lord God, who makes all things new, thank you for coming to us,

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 5:3-4 (NLT)

becoming one of us, carrying our shame and our pain,  
and opening the way to life.

We lift up our hearts to honor you and give you thanks.

As part of his work of healing, Jesus gave us this meal  
to remind us of his love, invite us into his grace, and extend to us his renewal.

So we remember at his last meal with his friends before he died  
Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and then shared it, saying:

This is my body, broken for you. Eat it and remember me.

After they had eaten, he took wine, blessed it and shared it, saying:

This is my blood, shed for you. Drink it and remember me.

And so we eat and drink, and we remember:  
the sacrifice of Jesus which makes us whole. Amen.

Let's take a moment now to eat and drink together...

### **Benediction**

Jesus, we wait by your tomb  
carrying our grief;

Upon you was laid the grief of us all.  
It is finished.

O God of love and lament  
be with us now as we wait with Jesus.

Amen.