

Trusting God even when it hurts (Part 1)

Jeremiah 29:11-14a Romans 8:28-39

Portions adapted from "He's Got The Whole World In His Hands," by Jeff Strite @ SermonCentral.Com

(Hum and sing first line from: *He's got the whole world in His hands .*)

That's a great little children's song. It was originally written by a full-blooded Cherokee Indian named Obie Philpot while he was in military training during WWII. When he was deployed, he'd left the lyrics to the song in his locker. Someone found the song and managed to have it put on the radio while he was at war.

Since that day, it has been sung by a number of individuals as diverse as Mahalia Jackson and Perry Como. And it's been sung for decades by numberless children in Sunday Schools and church camps

It's a great little song.

And it's a great song, because it is a comforting song.

- He's got the whole world in His hands
- He's got you and me brother in His hands
- He's got itty bitty babies in His hands.
- He's got EVERYTHING in His hands.

He's a majestic and caring God who can protect us from all kinds of difficulties and hardships. And the song echoes a powerful promise from Romans 8:31 "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose ... If God is for us, who can be against us?*"

Likewise in the Jeremiah portion, God assures Israel *For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

He's got the whole world in His hands.

Do you believe that was true for the nation of Israel?

Do you believe that is still true for you today.... individually?

If you were to do a phrase search on the concept, "the hand of the Lord," you will find that it appears a multitude of times throughout our Bible.

For example:

- It was the hand of the Lord that brought the plagues upon Egypt, that hardened Pharaoh's heart, and that guided the Israelites through the Red Sea and the wilderness.
- It was the hand of the Lord that parted the Jordan River so Israel could enter the Promised Land on dry ground.

- And in the days of Joshua , it was the hand of the Lord that gave Israel victory over their enemies *so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever* (Josh 4:24)
- But now consider this caution that was also given to Israel (1 Samuel 12.15) - *but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king*
- And add this thought from Proverbs 21:1 *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will.*

As we move ever closer to the first Tuesday of November, ponder what God has said about countries and politicians (Election day). There are a number of people running for state offices as well as Congress, and we've already endured the Presidential race for more than a year. Now, as you listen to people talking about their concerns, their fears of what would happen if one or the other of these men became our President and these parties took power.

Do you think that God has this election in his hands? Or should we be afraid of one party or the other?

Now, as an American citizen I do have my political preferences. And both as Christians and American citizens we should vote and make our voices heard. But - as Christians – we should never be afraid. Why?

Because "The king's heart (and the heart of every politician) is in THE HAND OF the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases." Proverbs 21:1

Whoever gets elected – whether I like them or not – whether I agree with their politics or not, when you and I pray, God holds their heart in His hand, and He will direct them according to His desires.

He's got the whole world in His hands. – do you believe that.
(pause...)

BUT, does He?
Does God really have the "whole world" in His hands?

There's an old adage "God is in His heavens and all is right with the world"
But that's not true.

God IS in His heavens... but not all is right with the world.

- There are thieves and rapists, and murderers
- There are terrorists, and tyrants and drug lords
- Despot presidents murdering their citizens – just to stay in power
- There's hunger and poverty and all kinds of pain and sorrow in this world

WE believe God IS in His heavens... but not EVERYTHING is "right in the world."

This brings up the question of Pain and Suffering, and it causes many theologians a great deal of pain and suffering because: **If God is both Good and all powerful, then why can't God stop all this human suffering?**

Religions of the East (like Hinduism), have a solution to the dilemma of human suffering.

They teach that human suffering is the result of the sins of the person who is suffering. They suffer because they're getting what they deserve. They have offended one of their gods in a past life, or done some wickedness in a previous life, and so they need to come back again and again (called reincarnation) and hopefully work off their guilt.

For the Muslim the solution is even simpler.

They deal with human suffering by saying:

"Allah has willed it, and you must learn to accept his will without question."

In other words: you can't know... so don't ask..

Religion struggles with this concept because so many people have endured such tragedies in their lives that their faith has been shaken. Regardless of all those t.v. commercials, for most people, life is difficult. Some have been so overwhelmed by the unfairness of what they've seen that they turn against God. **They say that if it is true that God is all powerful and that He is sovereign over all the affairs of humanity, then God must not be Good.** Indeed in the face of all the evil they see in the world – they conclude that if there is a God – then he is a Devil. *That is one human answer to the problem of evil.*

Several years ago, a Rabbi named Harold Kushner's, after watching his son die from a wasting disease, wrote the book, "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" It became a best-seller.

In that book Kushner gives a different kind of answer.

He says that "God is limited in His power, and therefore He is not a participant in our lives. Instead, He is a spectator watching us with interest." He says, "God wants to see good things happen to His people but He is not always able to arrange it."

His conclusion is that God is good but not all-powerful and we ought to understand that and love God anyway and forgive Him for His shortcomings. *That is another human answer to the problem of evil*

But this isn't the picture we get out of Scripture.

According to the Bible God is completely good, God is all-powerful, and God is sovereign over all the affairs of humanity: From the President of the United States, to the King of Syria, to you and me.

He has NO shortcomings. God is God. So the Bible insists that we trust God in both the good times as well as the bad. But the Bible ALSO deals with the Problem of Pain. Some of the great men and women of Scripture faced terrible hardship and pain in their lives.

- All you have to do is read the story about Job
- or read about a young man named Joseph whose own brothers sold him into slavery, and imprisonment.
- Or read in the book of Ruth about a woman named Naomi whose husband and sons died leaving her and one daughter-in-law destitute in a foreign land.

These were real people who faced real tragedies and suffering. The Bible is full of such stories.

The 11th chapter of Hebrews tells us about the faith of some of the great saints of God. It talks about Noah, and Moses and David but then it says this:

"... Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Hebrews 11:35-38

Jesus warned us "... In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33

So, the Bible doesn't ignore pain.

But if it doesn't ignore it - how to it explain it???

Well, first of all, it doesn't trivialize it.

The Bible never gives a simplified answer to all suffering.

There's no "one size fits all" to explain why people experience tragedy and loss.

Sometimes, as in the case of Job, suffering is a tool God uses to shape our character.

Sometimes in the case of Joseph, suffering is a byproduct of God's maneuverings to get us to the place where His will needs us to be.

At the age of 17 Joseph was sold away by his brothers. Only through the events of the next 13 years of enslavement and imprisonment was Joseph finally prepared and in the position to speak of God's sovereignty to Pharaoh; following which to be put in charge of the feeding program that not only saved all of Egypt, but his family as well. At the end of it all, Joseph told his brothers

'Do not be afraid! Am I not where God has placed me? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. Genesis 50:19-20

Joseph had to endure 13 years of desertion and suffering to be in the place where he could not only save two nations – but also bring God's promised Messiah one step closer to reality.

Sometimes suffering, it is the result of persecution and opposition by others as was experienced by Jesus himself and his followers thereafter.

Sometimes, suffering is the result of sin (singular or corporate). Notice what Isaiah tells Israel *"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."* Isaiah 40:2

Sometimes suffering is in some mysterious way to show the glory of God ... as Jesus taught his disciples while healing the man born blind.

Sin is the core of all suffering.

Sin is the rebellion of men and women who have sought to do life THEIR WAY,

God created the world. It's His possession

He has the whole world in his hands but human sin and rebellion has, from our point of view, complicated how God runs the world. God must now work through those who love Him as well as those who deny Him, and God must also work through the complications of the curse to bring to pass his will on Earth.

But the Bible assures us, as was explained to Job, that God has infinite capabilities to do so in ways that are incomprehensible to us finite humans. Many people fail to understand this, and because they don't understand it, they can slip away from God into unbelief.

Yes there is evil and suffering in this world, but this does not prove that God is evil or powerless.

The story is told of a philosophy professor who had always challenged his students with this question: "Did God create everything that exists?"

- A student would usually bravely reply: "Yes, he did!"
- "God created everything?" the professor asked.
- "Yes sir, he certainly did," the student replied.
- The professor answered, "If God created everything, then God created evil. And since evil exists, and according the principal that our works define who we are, then we can assume that God is evil."

He'd used this argument for years to undermine the Christian teachings some of his students had. But this time, one of his students challenged him.

The student stood and asked: "Professor, does cold exist?"

"What kind of question is this? Of course it exists. Have you never been cold?"

The young man replied "In fact sir, cold does not exist. According to the laws of physics what we consider cold is in reality the absence of heat. Heat can be measured and tested. Absolute zero (-460 F) is the total absence of heat. Cold does not exist. We have created this word to describe how we feel if we have less heat."

The student continued, "Professor, does darkness exist?"

The professor laughed, "Of course it does." "Once again you are wrong sir, darkness does not exist either. Darkness is in reality the absence of light. Light we can study, but not darkness. How can you know how dark a certain space is? You measure the amount of light present. Darkness is a term used to describe what happens when there is no light present."

Finally, the young man asked the professor: "Sir, does evil exist?"

Now uncertain, the professor responded, "Of course, as I have already said. We see it every day. It is in the daily examples of man's inhumanity to man. It is in the multitude of crime and violence everywhere in the world. These manifestations are nothing else but evil."

To this the student replied "Evil does not exist either sir, or at least it does not exist unto itself. Evil is simply the absence of God. Evil is the result of what happens when humans do not have God's love in their heart. It's like the cold that comes when there is no heat, or the darkness that comes when there is no light."

Evil is what happens when so much of the world refuses to be in God's hands. But in some mysterious way, God continues to work sovereignty through both the freely made good and evil choices of all humanity to bring about his will for our lives.

That is the assurance of Romans 8:28 -31 *"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose ... If God is for us, who can be against us?"*

But now wait a minute! If God is so all-powerful why doesn't He just sweep down and remove all the taints of sin from our world?

If the sinfulness of mankind lies at the heart of our suffering and pain in this world why not – with one powerful stroke - annihilate every sinful person on the face of the earth.

Why doesn't God do that ??? (pause...)

Well... if He did that, there wouldn't be any of us left!

WE have all in one way or another participated in, endorsed Adam's rebellion. As the Bible phrases it: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23). None of us could survive if God simply decided to wipe the world clean of every impurity.

Yet God in his infinite goodness knew all this as well. And from what God knew from eternity past to who God has known from eternity past – including you and me, living this day and the life we are living. God has worked through the free choices of all peoples good and bad (including you and me) to bring to pass his sovereign will for our lives.

God is good, God is in control of our lives, God proves his Love for us by sending Jesus into our world to save us. – even in those times when we don't think that he is. As Jesus told his disciples.

'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ... Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10: 26-31). Amen.

Next week: *If God is in so much control of our lives – then why pray (will not God do what God is going to do?).*