

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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SUFFERING AND THE WILL OF GOD

2 Peter 4:12-19

Nicholas Sparks is one of the most popular authors in America today. Several of his books, including *The Notebook*, *A Walk to Remember*, *Message in a Bottle*, and now *Nights in Rodanthe*, have been made into movies. I'm not a Nicholas Sparks aficionado. I think *The Notebook* is the only one of these movies I've seen. And I confess that I have not read any of his novels. But I did listen to one of his books on CD earlier this year. During some of our summer travels, Mary Sue and I listened to his book, *Three Weeks with My Brother*, on CD, which had been loaned to us by a friend (Alex Osborne).

The book really tells two stories. And, unlike all his other books, this one isn't fiction. Sparks writes about a remarkable, real-life, three-week trip around the world he took with his brother Micah, and, in alternating chapters, tells the story of his life and the family relationships which have been important in his life. The story of the brothers' trip around the world and the unusual places they visited was interesting. But it was his telling of the story of his life, and the life of his family, that we found so riveting.

We tend, many of us, at least, to look at the lives of famous people in a romantic sort of way. Because of their success and fame, we naively think their lives must be free of the kinds of daily challenges, and the ordinary (or not so ordinary) difficulties we encounter in our lives. Without knowing what their lives are really like, we may think they are exempt from the kinds of suffering we experience. But that, of course, is not the case. While our personal experiences may be different, no one is exempt from suffering in this life. As we said a few weeks ago, it is a fact of life.

Listening to the book gave us an added appreciation of the experience of suffering and pain and loss that is common to all of us, regardless of our fame or fortune or status in society. Nicholas Sparks was only 23 when his mother died suddenly at the age of 47. His father died just seven years later at the age of 54. His younger sister, Dana, lost her life in 2000 at the age of 33, after a lengthy battle with brain cancer. All of these losses affected him deeply. Sparks and his wife Cat have five children, one of whom has special needs. Some of you know what that is like. I tell you all this to point out the obvious, which is that Nicholas Sparks, for all his fame and success as an author, as blessed as his life is, cannot escape pain and loss. Like the rest of us, he is not exempt from the heartaches and hardships of life. As different as our stories and experiences may be, no one is. It is a good reminder not to envy the lives of others who seem to have it made in life when we don't know the suffering and pain and challenges they face.

Reflecting on the crucifixion of our Savior between two convicted thieves, Oswald Chambers, author of the classic devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest*, made this comment: "Suffering is the heritage of the bad, the penitent, and the Son of God. Each

one ends in the cross. The bad thief is crucified, the penitent thief is crucified, and the Son of God is crucified. By these signs we know the widespread heritage of suffering.”

This “widespread heritage” includes each of us. And, as we acknowledged a few weeks ago, suffering may come to us in a seemingly endless variety of packages. Yours may be different from mine, but at one time or another, in one way or another, it comes to each of us. George Whitefield, the great evangelist of the First Great Awakening in the 18th century, said: “We must be made perfect by sufferings. If we do not meet them in our younger days, we shall certainly have them in the decline of life.” If you have not yet met suffering in your life, you will. Sooner or later, we all share in the heritage of suffering.

But, you may ask, how does the suffering I experience fit into God’s will for my life? What is the relation between suffering and the will of God?

MYTHS ABOUT SUFFERING

Before answering this question directly, I want to try to debunk two myths, two misunderstandings, about suffering.

The first myth is this: If only you were more spiritual, if only you had more faith, you wouldn’t have any trouble or adversity in your life. If there is suffering in your life, the problem is that you don’t have enough faith.

Dear friends, don’t you believe it! It is a lie! It is so obviously false on the face of it that it is incredible that any reasonable person could believe it or teach it. But some people do. They say, in effect: “If you have trouble or pain in your life, it’s *your* fault! It is a sign that you have a spiritual problem. You just need more faith.” So they lay a huge guilt trip on misguided followers. It is a terrible heresy.

After the first service this morning, someone reminded me that there were people who told Joni Eareckson Tada, after she was paralyzed in a diving accident, that she could walk again if only she had more faith.

Nowhere does the Bible say that suffering automatically signifies a lack of faith, or that it is caused by it. And the Bible doesn’t teach that godly people are immune from trouble. In fact, it teaches just the opposite. In John 16:33, Jesus told His disciples: “In this world you will have trouble.” Count on it.

There is no indication in the New Testament that Christians should expect to be healthy, wealthy and successful in the here and now. As Billy Graham has pointed out, Jesus never told His disciples they would get an Academy Award for their performances. He didn’t tell them they were in line for a Nobel prize or a special Congressional medal. But He did tell them to expect troubles. People today are interested in success, not suffering. We want to be comfortable. We want our piece of the pie. We can identify with James

and John, who wanted choice seats in the kingdom of God. We might even ask for Lazy-Boys and a big-screen, HD TV.

But listen to what Peter said in 1 Peter 2:21: “To this (to a life of patient endurance in times of suffering) you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.”

To this *we* were called. Sorry to be the one to break it to you, but you and I were not called to an easy or trouble-free life. Our calling as Christians is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who suffered for us.

So let’s dig a hole and bury forever the myth that suffering is the result of a lack of faith.

The second myth is that there is always a direct correlation between a person’s suffering and that person’s sin. You may recall that this is what the friends of Job thought, the men who came to comfort him and to reason with him, and it is how they treated Job when this righteous man encountered incredible calamity and endured extreme misery – misery to the max – in his life. If you suffer, the friends of Job believed, it is because of some sin in your life. It is because you have done something to deserve it.

The interesting thing about this is that they were not completely wrong. They were wrong, as their accusations applied to Job. But they were not completely wrong. They were actually partly right. In some cases, it may be that we suffer precisely because of something we have done to bring the suffering on ourselves. Sometimes we do suffer as a direct result or consequence of our sin. You know the saying: “If you do the crime, you’re going to do the time.” That is how it works sometimes. If you break the law, you should be prepared to pay the price for it. The same thing is true if you break God’s law.

Let me give you an example. What I’m about to say is not “politically correct,” and even some Christians are skittish about saying it, for fear of appearing to be intolerant or bigoted or judgmental. But it is true, so I will say it. But I say it in love, because I know the love of Jesus extends to people with AIDS, the love of Jesus extends to people who are HIV-positive, regardless of their lifestyle and regardless of how they got it. Jesus loves homosexual sinners, and He loves drug addicts just as much as He loves you and me, whatever our besetting sins may be.

So, here is the point: The truth is that very often – not always but very often – people who contract the AIDS virus (at least here in America and throughout western culture) do so as a direct result of their own sinful choices and actions. That is indisputable. In this sense it could be said that AIDS – the disease itself – is a punishment from God for the behavior that causes or spreads it.

Of course, I’m not talking about people who contract it from tainted blood transfusions. It would be a horrible thing if we were to blame the victims.

But the truth remains. Sometimes suffering is a direct result or consequence of our own sinful actions. Get behind the wheel of your car after you've had too much to drink and get into an accident which causes damage to your vehicle and an array of bruises and broken bones, or worse, and the suffering you experience is directly related to your sinful action. Just hope your sin doesn't cause anyone else to suffer. Too often, in cases like this, it does.

Sometimes, as Job's friends believed, there is a direct correlation between suffering and personal sin. But not always. Sometimes the innocent suffer. Sometimes suffering is a mystery. Sometimes it just intrudes. Sometimes trouble comes, and there is no connection between our suffering and any sin in our lives. In thinking there was always a connection, Job's friends were wrong. But they weren't alone.

Even the disciples of Jesus believed it. Do you know the story in John 9 about a man who had been blind from birth? This man had never seen the sun rising in the east or setting in the western sky. He had never seen the faces of his parents or his friends. He had never beheld the beauty of a newborn baby with his own eyes. He could only imagine so many of the things you and I may take for granted and fail to appreciate, until our eyes begin to dim. Born blind. His condition prompted the disciples of Jesus to ask a theological question they were curious about. They said to Jesus: "Rabbi (Teacher), who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).

Do you see where they were coming from? Behind their question lay a view of life, a way of seeing and understanding the world, which held that suffering or affliction was directly caused by someone's sin or wrongdoing. Where there is smoke, it is assumed, there must be fire. Where there is suffering, there must be sin. They assumed this man's blindness was a punishment for sin. A punishment from God. They were convinced, like the friends of Job, that there was a direct link, a causal connection between a person's suffering and a person's sin.

As the disciples saw it, there were only two possibilities. Either this man's blindness had been caused by some sin in his own life, or by some sin(s) committed by his parents. In their world view, these were the only two options.

And theirs was a popular viewpoint. They were in the mainstream of 1st century Jewish theology. Some rabbis actually taught that it was possible for an unborn child to commit a sin in utero – while still in the womb of his/her mother – which led to some form of affliction or suffering. Such as blindness. Call it pre-natal sin.

So the disciples' question seemed logical (at least to them). They wanted to know:

Who sinned?

Whodunit?

Who was responsible for this man's condition?

Whose sin caused it?

At whose feet (or in whose lap) should we lay the blame?

Do you know how Jesus answered them? His answer is in John 9:3: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”

Then Jesus proceeded to do a miracle – something He had the power to do because He was (and is) the Son of God. He healed this man born blind. He gave him the gift of sight, so that, for the first time in his life, he could see.

The disciples, you see, were asking the wrong question. They had put their eggs in the wrong basket of belief. This man’s blindness was not a punishment for sin, either his own or that of his parents. No. It was, rather, an occasion for God to reveal His power and glory. It was meant for the glory of God, which, of course, is the chief end, the primary purpose, of your life and mine.

Sometimes there is a direct link between sin and suffering in our lives. Certain choices, certain behaviors, lead to certain consequences. Smoking leads to cancer – sometimes. A lifestyle of drinking too much leads to liver disease – sometimes. Crime leads to prison – sometimes. Sexual intimacy outside of marriage can lead to unintended pregnancy and STDs. Fail to study, and you shouldn’t be surprised if you fail a test.

So sometimes there *is* a direct link between what we choose and what we suffer. And the buck, in those cases, stops with us.

But it is not always the case. Our suffering in life, whatever form it may take, whatever package it may come in, is not always the direct result of our sin. In a fallen world tainted by sin, bad things sometimes happen to good people, and good things sometimes happen to bad people. That is just the way it is. Grief and loss, heartache and failure, tragedy and trouble, brain tumors and cancer, financial pressures and family problems afflict both the righteous and the unrighteous. God does not promise to spare any of us from suffering.

So don’t believe the myths.

SUFFERING IN THE WILL OF GOD

The teaching of God’s Word is that sometimes suffering is God’s will for our lives. “To this you (we) were called,” it says in 1 Peter 2:21. Sometimes it is the will of God for us to undergo suffering, just as it was God’s will for Jesus to suffer on the cross and die for us there. The will of God took the Son of God from the throne of God to the cross, in order to accomplish the plan of God for our salvation. Sometimes, as Peter says in 1 Peter 4:19, our suffering is “according to God’s will.”

In this passage in 1 Peter 4, Peter gives a mini-theology of suffering. Peter wrote this letter to Jewish Christians scattered throughout several provinces who were experiencing persecution because of their commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. So the kind of suffering Peter has most immediately in mind is the pain of persecution for the faith. For

us here in Virginia in 2008, persecution is only a theoretical possibility, or something we hear about taking place in other parts of the world. We really don't have any experience of suffering for our faith.

But Peter's message on suffering still relates to our lives, because all of us encounter and experience some form of suffering, and what Peter says about the suffering of persecution applies to the suffering you and I experience. He says in verse 12 that we shouldn't be surprised by suffering. We shouldn't be surprised when trouble comes, when sickness or injuries hold us down, when financial markets go south and threaten our economic well-being, when opposition and criticism arise. We shouldn't be surprised. Why? It is just a fact of life. It is a fact of living in a fallen world tainted in every way by sin.

John echoes Peter in 1 John 3:13: "Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you." If you or I should become the target of someone's hate or opposition because we belong to Christ and are seeking to live for Him, it should not surprise us or knock us off balance. Instead of surprise, we ought to expect it and be ready for it, ready to respond in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Suffering for Christ, says Peter (4:13), is actually a reason to rejoice. To suffer for the Savior, as painful as it may be, is actually a blessing (4:14). As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, in the Beatitudes (in Matthew 5:10-12): "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." No doubt Peter remembered those words of Jesus when he wrote this letter. Suffering for the sake of Christ and the gospel is a reason to rejoice, for in it God Himself is glorified – just as God was glorified in the suffering and death of His Son on the cross for us.

In verse 19, Peter tells us how to handle the adversity which God allows or sends into our lives, whatever form our suffering may take: "So then," he says, "those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."

What should we do when suffering comes? We should trust God. We should trust Him with all our heart, and lean not on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). And we should continue to trust Him. Moment by moment. Day by day. We should commit ourselves to Him. We should willingly submit to His gracious and sovereign rule in our lives and continue to walk with Him by faith, knowing that even if we cannot see the way, He knows where He is leading us.

And we should keep on doing good. Good works will never save us. Good works cannot save us. But saving faith leads to good works. Saving faith produces good works, which bring glory to our Father in heaven. So we should not become weary in doing good, even in the face of suffering or the unexpected troubles of life, but make the most of the opportunities God gives us.

Knowing that no one can escape suffering in life, not even someone like Nicholas Sparks, we should keep on following God one step at a time and one day at a time, knowing that nothing irredeemable can ever happen to us, and God's will for our lives will never take us where His grace cannot keep us.

In that assurance, may you know the blessing of His peace.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.