

When Disaster Strikes  
Lamentations 3:19-32

So, what do you do when disaster strikes? How do you make sense out of tragedies that impact you or your loved ones? Well, I suppose it depends on what kind of trouble comes your way, right? When hurricanes destroy homes or businesses along the Gulf Coast, or when our loved ones die after a long life, we know that's just part of the universal misery that happens in a sin-sick, broken world.

And we know exactly what to do in such overwhelming times. We pray to God, our refuge and our strength, our very present help in the midst of trouble. We weep with those who weep. And we roll up our sleeves and get busy helping folks put their lives back together. We don't tend to blame anyone and our faith is not shaken, because even if we don't like what's going on, we basically understand it.

And it's a similar situation when a long-term smoker succumbs to lung cancer, or when we see the drug addicts passed out on the streets of neighborhoods like Kensington in Philadelphia, PA. Again, we may be genuinely sorry for them and even sympathize with them, but we aren't really shocked when people bring such pain and suffering on themselves. We may try to help them in any way that we can, but their sorrows don't really shake our faith. We all know that certain actions tend to lead to terrible consequences.

But lest we be tempted to look down on such unfortunate souls, we need to be honest about the suffering that has come into our lives because of our own sinful choices. We're all too familiar with friendships strained or even broken because of our unkind words. We've all felt the regrets that linger long after opportunities have been missed. After all, even the prophet Jeremiah didn't claim to be perfect: in 3:39 he rightly says that no living mortal can claim complete innocence.

As a result, no matter how difficult the circumstances of life may become, there is a very real sense in which none of us can say, "I didn't deserve that." No, because we have all sinned, we have all earned the wages of sin. In fact, we all deserve nothing less than the pain and the shame and the death that Jesus endured on the cross.

And so, whenever we experience the suffering and sorrow that flow from our own rebellious choices, we know exactly what to do. As Jeremiah tells us in 3:40, we should examine and probe our ways, testing our actions, thoughts and feelings, and seeing how closely they line up with God's Word. And we know that, if we are suffering the consequences of our own sin, we need to repent, to return to the Lord. And we know we need to urge others in the same situation to do the same thing.

But we also know that Jesus took the penalty of all our sins upon Himself on the cross. Yes, we know He died so that all who trust in Him might be forgiven of our sins. In fact, we see clear foreshadowings of His suffering in today's passage, don't we? Look at verse 14: "I was a derision to all my people; and their song all the day." Wasn't that true of Jesus as he faced the jeering crowds on His way to Calvary? And look at verse 30: "He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach." Didn't that happen to Jesus as the Roman soldiers mocked Him and beat Him and spat upon Him?

And because Jesus lived a sinless life, we know that all who are joined to Him by faith become part of Him, sharing not only in His death to sin, but in His perfect holiness. We know that, even though we don't deserve it, when the Father looks at all those who belong to Christ, He doesn't see our sin – instead, He sees the spotless righteousness of His precious Son.

Yes, we know all this. We know that many kinds of suffering are inevitable in a sin-sick world. And we know that sinners often receive the consequences for their sins, but we also know that the Lord extends grace to all those who belong to Christ because of His Person and Work.

But here's where it gets tricky: how do we deal with the suffering that comes into the lives of Christians precisely because of the sin of other people? How, for example, do we make sense of the folks who get lung cancer not because they smoke, but because they have to breathe second-hand smoke? Sure, we know the addicts shooting up on Philadelphia's Kensington Avenue suffer ill health because of their bad choices, but how do we explain the merchants along the same street, the retailers and restaurateurs whose businesses are suffering because their former customers don't want to step in feces or on needles, and whose suppliers have stopped making deliveries because they don't feel safe?

For that, you see, was the sort of situation in which Jeremiah found himself. Remember, he had been faithful to the Lord, proclaiming God's Word to His people even though none of them wanted to hear such warnings and accusations. Yes, Jeremiah had remained faithful to God, even after he had been threatened by the religious and political leaders of his day, even after he had been thrown into a waterless cistern to die from hunger and thirst. No, if any living human being ever suffered because of the sins of others, it was Jeremiah.

But the hits kept on coming. For no matter how hard he preached, the people kept on clinging to their false gods. And so, Jeremiah had to go through all the suffering that the sins of the unfaithful people of Judah and Jerusalem brought down on them. Jeremiah had to endure the hunger and thirst of the Babylonian siege. He had to see so many of his friends and loved ones killed or carried off into captivity. And as we saw last week, even after so many of his prophecies had come true, the people to whom he preached never did believe him. They never did respect him. Instead, they carried him off into Egypt, even though he had told them that in that place only starvation and conquest and disease awaited them – all of them, even Jeremiah.

And maybe that's how you feel today. Maybe you really have been trying to do the right thing, trying to be faithful to God, denying yourself so that you can care for and provide for others. And maybe you're tired of the ingratitude or even the hostility of those you've been trying to help. Maybe you're tired of having to clean up the messes that others have made. And maybe you just don't understand why, if you really are trusting in Christ, and if the Father therefore sees you as holy and righteous, why you and your loved ones are having to go through so much pain and sorrow that's not of your own making.

But if the suffering of the righteous at the hands of the wicked is one of the hardest puzzles we find in the Scriptures, there is an even greater mystery here, one from which Jeremiah doesn't shy away: how God can be absolutely sovereign, absolutely in control of everything that happens, and yet at the same time allow His faithful people to endure terrible suffering, suffering that they did not bring on themselves.

For look again at verses 2 through 16: God is the subject of all of these sentences. No, make no mistake: Jeremiah is clearly saying that God is the One Who turned His hand against him, the One Who caused his skin to waste away, the One Who made Jeremiah dwell in darkness, walling him in and putting chains on him. Jeremiah says that God is the One Who broke his bones, who tore him to pieces, who shot him with arrows, who broke his teeth with gravel. Worst of all, in verse 8, Jeremiah says that God shut out his prayers. Simply put, Jeremiah did not shrink back from the reality that if an Almighty God allows something terrible to happen when He obviously had the power put a stop to it, well, we know that terrible thing had to be a part of God's plan.

And again, we know all this was true for Jesus. For in order for the Father to place all the sin of all His people on Christ, the Father had to turn His face away from His only begotten Son, refusing to

hear His pleas for deliverance in the Garden of Gethsemane. That's why Jesus was able to quote Psalm 22 on the cross just before He died: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" And Isaiah confirms that the religious and political leaders who crucified Christ were in fact only the agents of God's sovereign plan: for in chapter 53, Isaiah clearly says that was the Lord's will to crush Jesus, to put Him to grief (Isaiah 53:10).

In the same way, we can't deny that Jeremiah's suffering was, in one way or another, part of God's plan for him. And if we really believe in the sovereignty of God, if we really believe that God is really in control of everything that happens, we can't deny the same thing is true for us and for our loved ones too.

But how can that be? For if Jesus went through all the pain and the shame of the cross for us, if Jesus died so that we might live, why do we have to go through such similar suffering? Yes, why did Jeremiah, why do we have to share in the pain, sorrow, and grief that flows from the sins of others, that we ourselves did nothing to cause?

Well, Peter deals with the same question in our responsive reading, doesn't he? For remember, he was writing to first-century Christians, many of whom had been cast out of the Jewish synagogues because of their belief that Jesus was, in fact, the promised Messiah. And that was a very big deal. For you see, the members of the synagogues had been given an exemption from the Romans' requirement that all citizens bow down before statues of emperors and make offerings to them. So when the Christians were no longer considered Jews, they opened themselves up to imperial persecution because they refused to engage in such worship of the state. Yes, many of Peter's readers were suffering, not only while they were being faithful Christians as we so often do, but precisely because they were faithful Christians.

And how did Peter explain this mystery to them? He told them not to be surprised at their trials and ordeals. In fact, he said such suffering shouldn't be considered a strange thing for any believer: it just goes along with faith in Christ. And that's because all who are joined to Christ by faith not only partake of His death to sin and His life of perfect righteousness. No, because we are part of His body, we necessarily partake of the same sufferings that He experienced in this world, even as we will partake of His glory on the Day that He is revealed to the whole world. Yes, suffering because of the sins of others isn't a bug in the Christian life: it's a feature. It's part of a package deal.

And wasn't Peter just echoing what Jesus said to Him at the Last Supper? "A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). In fact, on the very first day that Peter had confessed Jesus to be God's Messiah, Jesus had told him in no uncertain terms, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark 8:34).

In short, Jesus doesn't just urge us to accept the sacrifice He made for us on the cross. No, He also urges us to take up the same sort of cross, the cross of suffering with and for others. He calls us to demonstrate our union with Him by going through the same thing Jeremiah went through, the same thing Jesus went through.

So, why do Christians have to suffer in this world? Why do we so often share in the pain and the shame that flow from other people's sins? Because that's exactly what Jesus did for us. And that's what He calls us to do for others.

So, as Peter urges us, let us go on doing what is right, no matter how much it may hurt. Let us trust our souls to our faithful Creator, even when suffering the consequences of other people's sins ends up being part of His plan for us. Let us remember the truth on which Jeremiah stood, even in the midst

of his own overwhelming sorrow and grief: No matter how great our sadness and confusion may be, when we look at the cross of Christ we know the Lord's compassions never fail, but are new every morning. No matter how great our losses may be in this world, when we look at the cross of Christ, we know the Lord Himself is our portion. So let us hope in Jesus, whose self-sacrificial, unconditional, covenant-keeping love for us never ends. Yes, even in the midst of our worst and most inexplicable sufferings, great is His faithfulness.