

I've quoted the beautiful words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning so many times I've committed them to memory: "Earth's cramm'd with heaven; and ever flow'ring bush afire with God. Only those who see take off their shoes; all the rest just sit 'round and pluck blackberries."

God makes His presence known. He often shows up in the most unexpected places. He chose to dwell among a bunch of slaves in Egypt rather than the palace of Pharaoh. He chose to reign through a young shepherd boy rather than through the physically imposing, battle-tested warrior named Saul. He didn't speak to the prophet Elijah through an earthquake or a whirlwind but in a still, small voice. And when God touched down on the earth in the form of a man He slept on the straw of a feeding trough rather than the silk sheets of a gold-covered crib. God is present but His presence is often hidden in plain sight.

Of all the strange places God shows up perhaps the strangest is in that wasteland we call suffering. We don't seek suffering in order to find God but that is often where we encounter Him. Suffering gets our attention. "God whispers to us in our pleasures," said C. S. Lewis, "and shouts to us in our pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

As we have been following the blood tracks from the Garden of Eden all the way to the cross we have discovered that Redemption Road is marked with suffering. But even the closest followers of Jesus were not eager to travel that broken road. Matthew reports that immediately after Peter's glorious confession, "Thou art the Christ," Jesus threw the disciples a curve ball.

**Mark 8:31-33** says <sup>31</sup> He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> And He was stating the matter plainly. Don't you just love that statement? In other words, Jesus was saying, "Read my lips, there is no crown without a cross!" And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. <sup>33</sup> But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

Man's interest is to avoid suffering. God's interest is to redeem it. Suffering is never fun but it is functional. It serves God's eternal purpose. For us, the good news is that in the midst of suffering hope is hidden in plain sight. (Romans 8:16-25)

We cannot live without hope. Without hope we have nothing to look forward to. Hope is the posture of a person living between the reservation and the destination. Jana and I went to

Hawaii for our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We made all the arrangements; the air travel, the resort, and then we waited, for months we waited. We knew we had our reservation and we lived in constant anticipation of our destination. The excitement grew with every passing day until we stepped off that plane in the paradise we had dreamed about.

In two weeks I will give away my only remaining daughter. Needless to say the anticipation is growing as Jessica and Michael are living each day between the engagement and the wedding. The engagement ring my daughter wears is the pledge that on July 17 she will be Mrs. Michael Craycraft. God has given us His Spirit as a pledge of our inheritance. **Ephesians 1:13-14** says, "You were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, <sup>14</sup> who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory."

Hope fuels the anticipation of our glorious inheritance in a number of ways:

**I. Hope reminds us that the way of suffering is the path to glory...vv. 16-17.** Just as the Spirit of God revealed the identity of Jesus to Peter, the same Spirit is at work within all of God's children to assure us of our relationship with our loving Heavenly Father. As co-heirs with Christ we share His experience. We share in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering (Phil. 3:10). In the life of Christ glory and suffering were inseparable. Suffering is God's chosen means to show off His glory. The stars shine brightest when the sky is darkest. We would have little appreciation for the light if we had never been lost in the dark. The Gospel is only Good News to those who fully appreciate the bad news. I'll never forget my son being disciplined by the principal of his elementary school. He was in first grade and was at recess when he had to use the rest room. To a first grade boy the world is his rest room. The teacher sent him to the office to help drive home the point that he was not authorized to water the bushes in that manner. That night he announced proudly, "I ate lunch in the principal's office today." As he related the story it dawned on us that no one had ever clued him in to the fact that lunch with the principal was PUNISHMENT not reward! He didn't know good news from bad. Suffering is the result of sin but God is greater than our sin. Jesus endured the cross to receive the crown. He blazed the trail and showed us the way so we could follow His bloody footprints. No student is above His teacher. As heirs with Christ we inherit the glory but we get there the same way He did.

"There are no shortcuts to heaven. No resurrection without a crucifixion. You have to take Calvary Road that passes through Golgotha to get to the empty tomb. There is no Easter without the cross. Littered along the Calvary road will lay the skeletons of our egos, the corpses of our fantasies of control, and the shards of self-righteousness...." Brennan Manning

**II. Hope reminds us that our suffering is no match for the glory to come...vv. 18-22.**

Suffering is the universal experience of all creation. All creation groans under the weight of sin. Every day as oil gushes into the gulf we see images of dead fish or dying sea birds. In our arrogance we have lived under the illusion that we are in control. We wonder why they can't just "turn it off." But they can't. Now hurricanes threaten to distribute the black crud even further inland like the black stain of sin creeping deeper and deeper into the fabric of our society. And we groan.

We groan under the weight of this fallen world...v. 23. Some of our suffering is self-inflicted. Sin carries consequences. God has written His laws in the universe and those who rebel get hurt. Law of gravity for example...

But some suffering is just inexplicable. I don't know why Alice Osuztowicz was hit by a bus and Jane Spikes was hit by a car in the same week. I don't know why Susan Rothrock has pancreatic cancer or Richard Ford MS. I don't know why pastors Matt Chandler and Andy McQuitty have cancer and not me. When people ask these brothers if they wonder, "Why me?" they both respond, "Why not me?" A theology that denies suffering is one that is not suited for reality.

As painful as suffering can be, the hope we have is that one day our suffering will pale in comparison to the sights and sounds of our eternal home. That's why Paul uses the illustration of child birth. Delivering a baby is not a pleasant experience but for some reason women just keep doing it. Why subject yourself to such pain? Because once that child comes into the world

the pain suddenly fades into the background compared to the glory of that precious gift of life. "All the loneliness, angers, hatreds, envies and itchings that this world contains, if rolled into one single experience and put into the scale against the least moment of the joy that is felt in Heaven, would have no weight that could be registered at all." C. S. Lewis

**III. Hope reminds us that we can exult in our suffering.** The word "exult" means, to rejoice, to glory in, even to boast about. Paul's theology was so developed on this subject that he even rejoiced in his suffering. **Romans 5:1-5**, "Therefore, having been justified by **faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in **hope** of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; <sup>4</sup> and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; <sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint, because the **love** of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

I want you to notice three words in these five verses. Faith, hope, love. Sound familiar? In 1 Cor. 13, the love chapter, Paul says that one day this world will pass away with all of its charms and all of its illusions and when it does the only things that will remain are these three, faith, hope and love. So how do we respond to our trials and tribulations? With faith, hope and love.

**1. Have faith.** God will have the last word. "A little faith will see you through. What else will do except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word." Garrison Keillor

**2. Dispense hope.** Be a hope distributor. This world needs hope. On July 4, 1776, our forefathers declared that this nation would be free. They were full of hope as they declared their independence from tyrannical rulers who believed they had a divine right to rule as they pleased. Listen to the words of Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams on the eve of the ratification of the Declaration of Independence.

"The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more." Abigail Adams

The signers declared their freedom but freedom from what? They were free from the King of England but we are not free from greed and corruption, environmental disasters, selfish ambition, hatred, racism, bigotry, poverty and disease. Only those who have the hope of the Gospel will ever truly be free of those things. Because of what Jesus did on the cross we know that one day, "the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." **Romans 8:21**

**3. Pursue love.** Love suffers because love is setting aside my own interests in the best interests of another. The perfect definition of love is found in Romans 5:8, "God demonstrated His love

for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” He was willing to die so we might live.

A couple of weeks ago I read the obituary of a man whose name I recognized from his years in the NBA, Manute Bol. This immigrant from Sudan was not a great athlete but at 7’7” he could block the shots of shorter players - and everyone was shorter than Manute. He was often ridiculed because at 225 pounds he was the thinnest player in the league. But that is not the only difference between him and most other NBA players. Manute was a dedicated follower of Christ and he gave most of his money away to help Sudanese refugees. While most NBA players go broke on fast cars and fast women Manute went broke building hospitals. When his fortune was almost gone he made a spectacle of himself doing appearances as a jockey, a hockey player, and even a celebrity boxer. Reality-TV personalities allow themselves to be ridiculed for their own personal gain but Manute did it on behalf of those who suffer. Manute Bol was a fool for Christ.

While doing relief work in Sudan Manute Bol contracted a painful skin disease that caused great suffering and ultimately hastened his death at age 47. Of course the media referred to him as a “humanitarian” as opposed to a Christian. He was simply a good guy. But to those who have their eyes on the prize Manute Bol was a living example of the hope of glory. I look forward to meeting him – I don’t think he’ll be too hard to spot!

“For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.”

**Romans 8:24-25**