

## Serious Answers to Hard Questions

### Why God's Love Prevails Frankton – 8/24/14

Scripture: Joshua 1.6-9 Be courageous, for God is always with us

Proposition: The worst thing (death) is never the last thing.

This is the finale of a short series of four sermons that I have titled [SLIDE] “Serious Answers to Hard Questions”. And the series is really what the title suggests: well thought answers to important questions people have asked me at sometimes difficult times in their lives. The first week, we talked about why innocent people suffer. We came to the conclusion that God did not cause the suffering, that the natural laws that God set up to sustain this world and also the God-given freedoms that people have in it sometimes cause us harm, even though we are the innocent bystanders. We talked about “unanswered prayer” and that really means it is a prayer answered with a “no.” We also talked about God typically answering prayer through natural laws and through people. We talked about God’s will for your life is not necessarily the “what” you decide but the “how” you decide. God’s will is prescriptive: a basis for making our lives better and it’s found in scripture.

Now it’s entirely possible that some of you have felt like this series of sermons is messing with your faith. You may have believed that everything that happens – good or bad – happens for a reason and that reason is: God willed it to happen. But maybe now you are beginning to see that it is hard to reconcile the evil things that happen in our world with the justice and love of God. Maybe your prayer life had been built around asking God to do certain things and so many of your prayers went “unanswered”. Maybe now you are beginning to see that the primary purpose of prayer may not be to advise God on how to run the universe, but rather to give ourselves to him. Maybe you had always believed that God had a perfect detailed plan for your life. Maybe now you have begun to see that your life is more like a novel on which you and God are collaborating.

I think one of two things has happened over the last few weeks, if you have taken seriously what I have said. The first is that you have begun to feel a little freedom in your faith. These things we have talked about should have lifted some burdens from your shoulders. I think also another thing has probably happened. Here it is: your fear and anxiety level may have increased as well. Your faith may be changing. What you believed, even though it was uncomfortable at times, was at least familiar. What we’ve talked about these last three weeks may not be as familiar to you – yet – it will come with time. I think these things may be leaving you a bit less certain, less safe and with the associated increase in angst and fear. This is pretty normal when we begin to question what we think we know about how God works in our world.

I think fear and angst are fundamental parts of our human condition. We face dangers; and much to our chagrin, our bodies are not invincible. We hurt, we become sick; we grow old and die. The knowledge of these things, especially that whole death thing, produces angst, a deep apprehension, anxiety, or feeling of dread. Other fears define our lives in so many ways: fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of the future, fear for our children, and fear of being alone. [SLIDE] Faith and trust in God is the Christian response to the problem of fear. Among the primary affirmations of scripture is simply that God is with us. God promises to never leave us or abandon us. God is as

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near as the air we breathe. As we trust this truth and experience God's presence, we find that the peace of God begins to replace the angst of human existence.

Among the most frequent refrains in the Bible is, "Do not be afraid." Those words are almost always the first words out of an angel's mouth as they appear before humans to speak for God. We also hear it in the words to Joshua as he prepares to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land: **[SLIDE]** *Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord is with you wherever you go.* [Josh 1.9] We hear it in the words to the exiled Israelites living in captivity in Babylon: **[SLIDE]** *Don't be afraid, for I am with you...I will strengthen you and help you.* [IS 41.10] King David wrote those famous words: **[SLIDE]** *Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.* [PS 23.4] And he also wrote: **[SLIDE]** *I praise God for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid?* [PS 56.4]

My mother was extremely afraid of thunderstorms. I know some of you are too. My guess is that as a storm approached, mom would pray to God to stop the storm from coming. You know God didn't stop the storm, don't you? When we look at that on a more metaphoric scale, we see that it is not that God stops the "storms" or eliminates the scary things in our lives, it is that God will give us peace in the midst of the storms. Once again, David wrote: **[SLIDE]** *Give your burdens to the Lord, and he will sustain you.* [PS 55.22] David did not write that God would immediately fix everything that troubles you. He wrote that God will sustain you. I pray for my children and grandchildren. I worry about them from time to time, but when I pray for them, I find peace. My peace comes from knowing that God is with them, and that even if something terrible happens, God will be by their side, holding them and sustaining them, and should the worst thing happen, God will still hold them in the arms of love.

It's not just that God will be there for us, God instructs his people to care for one another throughout the Bible. The Law of Moses commanded the farmers to leave the edges of their crops unharvested so the poor would have something to eat. God didn't drop food from heaven down for the poor, but he instructed others to provide for them. Proverbs calls people to speak out for those who cannot speak. [PR 31.8] It wasn't heavenly angels that were supposed to speak out, it was other people. Think of a few of Jesus words. He told the parable of the Good Samaritan, where one man took care of another man's wounds. He told the parable of the Sheep and Goats where he told us that those who have given drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry are doing the right thing. Jesus taught that the essence of love and authentic discipleship is to help those who are in need. By doing this we become the hands, feet and voice of God for others.

As I have said before, God gave humans the freedom to do God's will or reject it. When we reject it, we hurt others or ourselves and, conversely, when others reject God's will, they hurt us. I also have said that there is some suffering that is inherent in life: living things die, the forces that sustain earth occasionally bring suffering to us. Our bodies are not indestructible; they wear out. Evil and suffering are a part of life. We have just talked about God walking with us through the suffering. God also uses us to care for one another in the midst of suffering. But there's something more that God does: **[SLIDE]** *God forces evil and suffering to serve God. God brings good from evil. God takes sorrow, suffering and sin and bends it, redeems it, and sanctifies us through it.*

This is the rhythm of the universe God designed. Over the past fourteen billion years, galaxies have been born and then died. Stars have a life cycle that ends in the formation of other stars. Our

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own planet has a history of geophysical events that were both traumatic and life giving. Look at the mountains and imagine the destructive powers that created the. Look at the Grand Canyon and imagine the forces of water and wind that created it. All creation seems to follow the rhythm in which new life and beauty are born out of destruction and pain. Even in our personal lives, when we place our sorrows and suffering in God's hands, we find God redeems the suffering and uses it for our good. Think about it for a minute: the events that shaped our lives most profoundly, are often things that we did not want to walk through at the time: death of a loved one, forced separation from a loved one, divorce, financial losses, health challenges, and spiritual lapses. All have helped make us the person we are today.

Some human-caused evil has helped entire populations of the human race to be what they are today. The death of [SLIDE] Emmett Till had a profound impact on the civil rights movement in this country. Till was a 14-year-old African American boy from Chicago who was visiting family in Mississippi back in 1955. In what appears to have been an act aimed at impressing his young friends in Mississippi, he whistled at a white woman. Three days later, several white men showed up at his great-uncle's house in the middle of the night. They took Till, beat him until he was no longer recognizable, shot him, and dumped his body in the river. His mother insisted on an open-casket funeral so that the world might see what racism looked like in Mississippi in 1955. The haunting photograph of Till's badly beaten body lying in his casket was printed in newspapers and magazines across the country and the world. As a result, millions of people who had quietly accepted the status quo were moved to support the civil rights movement. And it was just nine years later that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, with memories of Till's pictures still in people's minds.

This is what God does. He takes the pain and grief and fear and the wounds of our past, and uses them to make positive impacts on us. He takes the ugly in our lives and makes things of beauty. The greatest example of God's work through suffering is, of course, the life and death of Jesus. Jesus' death was the act of men who felt threatened, just like Emmett Till's death was. Jesus' killers saw his popularity as a challenge to Rome and a blasphemy to the true God. Jesus faced his own death with both angst and determination. God would use his suffering and death for the redemption of the world. Through that evil act, God would bring about good. Through Jesus' death, humanity would see the reality of human sin and God's willingness to die for it. Through the death on the cross, we would see the depth of God's love and the costliness of his grace.

Ultimately, [SLIDE] hardship and suffering, evil and sin, will not have the final word. That is the overwhelming message in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus was put to death by men whose hearts were fearful and full of hate. God, in Jesus, is subject to the forces of darkness. Yet we cannot forget that the cross is not the end of the story. With great triumph Christianity affirms that though Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, on the third day, God raised him from the dead! The resurrection is itself a shout from God that good triumphs over evil, that the forces of light will defeat the forces of darkness, and that life will vanquish death. Eventually, a lot of us come to recognize this. We most certainly see our deaths as a victory over this world of evil as we transition to our real home. And ultimately, everyone will see it at the last day.

The Bible proclaims hope in the face of the darkest of circumstances. It does not promise that we won't go through difficulties or that we won't experience pain. But these are not the final word. The psalmist wrote: [SLIDE] *Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.*

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[30.5] The writer of Lamentations wrote: **[SLIDE]** *Great is [God's] faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.* [3.23]

Caution! Caution! We may not always live to see this hope fulfilled. The Jews were in exile fifty years in Babylon, but many died with the hope that their descendants would return to Jerusalem – and they did. Another example: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., concluded his final sermon, preached on the night before he was shot in Memphis, TN, by drawing upon the Biblical picture of Moses, standing on the mountaintop looking over the promised land just before his own death. Rev. King told his audience that he had been to the mountaintop. He, like Moses, had seen the Promised Land – for King that was a land of freedom and equality for all people. But then King, in a prophetic moment, told his audience that he might not enter the Promised Land with them. But he was not afraid. In fact, he was happy because, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!” That’s what faith in the God whose will ultimately prevails looks like. Such faith leads us to live boldly and without fear.

In each of our lives, our final victory comes at our human death. Death is not defeat for us; it is triumph. I know that because the Bible ends with words of triumph from Revelation. John saw a new heaven and a new earth. The new city of Jerusalem was coming down from heaven. And a voice was saying that God would live with his people and that God would love his people. He would wipe every tear from their eye and that there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. [21.4] That passage gives us Christians hope. Theologian Frederick Buechner summed it up like this, **[SLIDE]** “Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing.” So the question begs us, “Do you really believe this story about the resurrection? Do you really believe that Easter means that the worst thing is never the last thing? Do you really believe that ultimately good will triumph over evil and God will ultimately prevail? Do you really trust God?” My answer is this, “I not only trust God, I’m counting on him.” And I’ll end this sermon inviting you to count on him too.

### **Second Service only**

We’re going to pass out sheets of paper for you to use for the next minute. I want you to write down a situation you are having some difficulty entrusting to God’s care. You want God to help, but you won’t let go of control to allow him to work in the situation. Write your prayer down on the sheet of paper. And then when you leave, there will be a fire burning outside. Drop your piece of paper in the fire as a way of symbolically giving the situation to God.