

WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS? FAITHFULNESS IN SUFFERING 2 Corinthians 4: 1-6

Did you meet anyone new after last Sunday's worship service?

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever ended a relationship because the relationship was too painful or difficult? Have you ever felt like ending a relationship because there was little or no joy in it, only anguish?

Why do you think it is that relationships that start so full of love, eagerness and joy end in pain that leads to separation? To ask it another way, why is it so difficult to persist in loving others?

Let the group brainstorm this question. Attempt to get a consensus that reflects this basic idea: The reason "love hurts" is because we expect that when we love someone we are going to receive love in return. It is this expectation and the resultant disappointment when our love is not reciprocated or appreciated as we believe we deserve, that is the cause of our abandoning relationships. It is fear that we will not be loved in return or that the benefits will not repay the costs that keeps us from loving others. In other words, it is suffering and the fear of suffering that short circuits love.

According to 1 John 4: 7-8, what is the relationship between being a Christian and persevering in love for others?

If you do not persevere in loving others, according to the apostle John, you have not been born of God, you do not know God; in other words, you will not go to heaven.

How important is it to figure out how to love others even when they do not appreciate or reciprocate your love?

STUDY

A literal translation of v. 1 goes like this (See NASB): "For this reason, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart."

1. What is it that Paul does not lose heart in doing? (Compare "since we have this ministry" with 1:23-2:4 & 3:1-6)

God appointed him to spend his time telling everyone who would listen to him about the gospel of Christ. He was to express his love for God and for people like a good doctor. He was to persuade people that they had a terminal disease called sin that was going to result in suffering in an eternal hell. Then he was to persuade people that Jesus Christ was the solution to their illness. Paul says that he never lost heart in this work of loving people by telling them the truth of the gospel, no matter what it cost him and no matter how little response he received for his efforts.

2. What is the "reason" Paul did not stop loving others? (Compare "as we received mercy" with 3:18. Please note the margin of the NIV. "Reflect" should read "contemplate" or "behold" or "gaze upon".)

Verse 18 is a summary of the mercy that God gives in and through Christ. He takes away the veil from our hearts so that we see Christ in his glory and so love him and yearn to be like him. The Spirit then transforms us into his image, which is our greatest passion in life. Paul says that he doesn't get discouraged in this life of loving others because he is so amazed at Christ and at his mercy in opening his eyes and enabling him to love him and become like him. He can think of nothing he would rather be or do, than to be like Jesus and to act like Jesus. So when he suffers, like Jesus, for the sake of loving others he rejoices that he is sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Christians do not stop loving when their love is rejected because we have been transformed by mercy.

3. What does Paul say he does and he does not do in v. 2?

He has renounced secret and shameful ways. He does not use deception. He does not change the message. He sets forth the truth

plainly in order to commend himself to men's conscience. He does all this "in the sight of God".

4. Why would Paul say this is how he behaves in contrast to losing heart? CLUE: When all your attempts at loving another person are rejected and yet you want the love of the other, what are you tempted to do? 2nd CLUE: What usually happened to Paul when he loved people by telling them the truth of the gospel?

What you will do is act like you love the person, so that they will love you. You adjust your behavior to appease them or convince them you love them, so that they will give you what you want. You will attempt to manipulate the other person to get them to give you what you want from them. If your goal is to gain their respect, you might try the old bait and switch. In Paul's case, as he loves people by telling them the gospel, many are indifferent to his message. Many are hostile to his message to the point of beating him up and having him thrown in prison. Even those whom he thought were responding to his message positively prove to be fickle as in the case of these Corinthians.

Paul says he doesn't have ulterior motives that prompt him to use to deception to get their respect. He doesn't seek to avoid their hostility and gain their respect by changing the message so it's not quite so hard-nosed and confrontational. He doesn't leave out some of those lines about Jesus being the only way to God or about God's hatred of people who worship idols or of God's hostility to racists and the self-righteous. Paul says that he has rejected both of these methods. He doesn't have false motives that he attempts to hide through deception or changing the message. He continues to love people by telling them the truth even though many of those he loves in this way hate him and reject him.

5. If Paul is seeking their eternal happiness by bringing them to faith in Christ and yet he and his message are often rejected, how does he not quit? What is it that keeps him going? (CLUE: See the last phrase of v.2 and compare with 1 Thess. 2: 4-6)

Paul's ultimate motive isn't his joy in the joy of others but his joy in God. What Paul values more than anything else is that God is pleased with him. He is really only living for an audience of one. This is the

only way you will ever persist in loving your enemies or those who behave like your enemies. When your goal is to please God and enjoy God, then you will persist in loving others, no matter how they respond to you.

6. Why is it that the only way you will ever persist in loving others is if you only care if God is pleased?

You will only persevere in love if your motive is to please God because any other motive will be thwarted. People will always disappoint you but God will never fail to reward you. There is no suffering you will encounter as a result of loving others that will not be more than made up for in heaven. See Luke 6:35. So if heaven is what you want, what you love, and not the gratitude or love of men, then you cannot be stopped in loving others.

Christians do not stop loving when their love is rejected because we only care about pleasing God.

7. According to vv. 3-4, why is it that even though Paul always tells the truth out of a sincere desire to increase the happiness of those he is talking to those to whom he speaks reject him and his message about Christ? (CLUE: There are three reasons.)

1. *The gospel "is having been veiled" (literal translation) to all those who are perishing (all who end up in hell). Jesus uses a synonym of this verb in Matthew 11:25. In other words, Paul is saying that God has hidden the glory of Christ revealed in the gospel to all those who go to hell.*
2. *Satan ("the god of this world", see Eph. 2:2-3, John 8:43-45, 14:30, 1 John 4:1-4) blinds the minds of unbelievers through deception. He blinds people to the glory of Christ by persuading people that the pleasures of sin are greater than the pleasures of knowing and loving God.*
3. *Those who are perishing are unbelieving. That is, they choose to believe the lie of Satan that sin is better than Christ. "Unbelievers" delight to trust anything and everything rather than Christ. They cannot see what is blazing in front of their face, the glory of Christ held out in the gospel because they do not want to see it. What unbelievers want are secure jobs, full bank accounts,*

loving spouses, and obedient children and freedom to pursue the pleasures of this world as they see fit.

8. Is it surprising to Paul that he and his message are rejected?

Not at all, he expects to be rejected because the world is under God's curse, Satan is blinding people by deception and people love to believe lies and not the truth.

9. How does knowing this keep Paul or any Christian loving others (See Matt 5:44, Luke 23:34, Acts 7:59-60)?

We know that the reason people reject us is not us but who we represent and what we are saying. We have pity on the lost because they are blind, just as we have pity on physically blind people. We persist in loving our enemies or those who act like our enemies because we know it's not about us. Our enemies are not people but the "spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly realms".

Christians do not stop loving when their love is rejected because we expect to be rejected.

10. According to the last phrase in v. 4, "...the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God", what does Paul think the gospel is about and what does it mean to have faith in the gospel?

The gospel is about Jesus. It is the revelation of his glory and the glory he has is the glory of God. The gospel is the supreme evidence of the greatness, the awesomeness, the majesty of God in Christ. Having faith is then seeing the glory of Christ and being impressed with him. Faith is delighting in, loving, depending upon, desiring, being in awe of and rejoicing in Jesus.

11. In v. 5 Paul is reemphasizing that the blindness of people to the gospel is not due to how he (and all true Christians are living). What does Paul say he does and does not do? What do each of these phrases mean?

He does not preach himself and he does preach Christ, who is the Lord. He preaches himself as the slaves of the believing Corinthians.

- "We do not preach ourselves": *What he means by this is simply that he is not doing what he is doing because he is looking for them to meet his needs. "This isn't about me", is Paul's attitude. I am not doing this so that you will meet my needs, so that you will love and respect me and take care of me.*
- "...but we preach Jesus, who is the Lord": *Paul is impressed with Jesus and he wants them to be impressed with Jesus. He has only one ambition that Christ will be shown to be great in their happiness in him. He is after the glory of Christ in the joy of his people.*
- "...we preach ourselves as your slaves": *They are the masters. He is their slave. Slaves don't expect masters to meet their needs; they exist to meet the needs of their masters. He will give up every comfort, every right, every demand for pleasure in this world so that they will discover in his slavery to them, that Jesus is better than life.*

12. What is Paul's motive for living like this according to the last three words of v. 5?

He is their slave "for the sake of Jesus." He serves them so that they will discover that Jesus is better than sex, better than money, better than video games, better than vacations, better than alcohol, better than health, better than a good marriage, better than healthy and happy children, better than grandchildren, better than being admired by others, better than a beautiful garden, better than everything in the universe. His goal is that "Christ will be exalted in his body whether by life or by death" (Phil 1:19). His motive is that he "wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death in order that he might attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10-11).

13. Verse 6 begins with "because". What does that tell us about the relationship between v. 5 and v. 6?

Verse 6 gives us the reason that Paul preaches Jesus and lives like a slave for the sake of Jesus.

14. How does Paul identify God in the first clause? What is he referring to?

Paul identifies God as the one who made darkness become light by merely speaking a word of command. He is referring to Genesis 1:3 when God spoke into the void of nothingness (Gen 1: 1-2) and by the word of his command made darkness turn into light.

15. Can darkness ever become light by itself?

No.

16. Next, Paul says that this same God “spoke into his heart to give light”. What is Paul implying about his heart (and every human heart) by saying this? (CLUE: consider vv. 3-4)

Every human heart, by nature is in darkness, empty, void of the knowledge of Christ. Due to God’s curse, Satan’s deception and our own rebelliousness, our hearts are dark, without the light of Christ. Paul views himself as having been among those who are perishing at one time.

17. What happened when God spoke into Paul’s heart (What happens whenever God speaks into the heart of any human being?)

He shone into my heart and when he did I saw Christ in all his beauty as the divine Son of God who is my Savior. I see and love God in seeing and loving Jesus the image of God, the glory of God. When God shown into my heart he overcame all the darkness that was there and turned it into light, the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ. When we ask the question, how is it that I, who was once blind, now see the glory of Christ in the gospel? The answer is that God had mercy on me and just as he spoke light into existence at the beginning of creation, so he spoke light into existence in my heart.

18. How amazing does Paul believe it is that he sees and loves Christ as the supreme revelation of the glory of God?

It is an absolute miracle on the same level as the miracle of creation.

19. So how does this give the reason he is a slave of others?

I keep loving by being a slave to others because I know that God does miracles. I know that he does miracles because he did a miracle in my life. I hated Christ and I hated every follower of Christ. I was determined to wipe out Christ’s church because I hated him and them. The story of Paul’s conversion in Acts 8 confirms that God never saves anyone because of anything they have ever done. God did not choose Paul because he saw something in Paul. Paul, by his own admission, was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man. God took the initiative to confront and save Paul. Paul says that God shone into my heart when he confronted me on the road to Damascus. He shone into my heart through sending to me a simple Christian man, named Ananias. He came to me in spite of his fear of me. He knew that I hated Christ and Christians and yet, for the sake of Christ and out of his love for me, he made himself my slave by coming to me and telling me of the gospel of Christ, healing me of my blindness and baptizing me. He exposed himself to danger and at the risk of his own life he told me of Christ. God, in his great mercy, through this humble Christian revealed Christ to me so that I cannot love anything or anyone without reference to Jesus. He is my life and I want him to be your life. It is through my being your slave and telling you about the love of Jesus that God may “shine into your heart and give you the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Christians do not stop loving when their love is rejected because we expect miracles.

20. In what ways are you being the slave of others so that they will see, in your slavery, the glory of Christ?

21. What are some ways you are tempted to stop loving others because the “cost” is too high? How might meditating upon the miracle of your own conversion help you?