

The Purpose of Suffering

Romans 8:18

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

What's the most exciting thing you've ever done? What's the most exciting experience you've ever had? You know, as all our minds click over now some of us are thinking, "Yeah, the first time I rode a bicycle," or, "The first time I kissed my husband," or, "Getting married," or, "Not getting married." That would be exciting too. Or, "The first time I drove the family car, that was exciting," Or, "The first time I ever skied in Colorado. That was exciting." But I think all of us are thinking of all kinds of different experiences, things that were really exciting for us.

Now, have you ever thought that the One who made those exciting moments possible is even more exciting himself. Now, you need to kind of do a mental contortion there to really look at that honestly and not just think it's a commercial for God, you know. So, would you think of it for a moment. The one who made it possible to experience exciting things like, oh, leaning a Honda into a 60 mile an hour curve, or skiing down a slope, the one who made that exciting moment possible must himself, be actually more exciting than that, mustn't he? And he couldn't make something that was better than himself. So the one who lies behind those exciting moments must himself be a far more exciting person than those moments.

Now, I'd ask you, what's the most security you have ever experienced? What's the greatest sense of safety that you have ever felt in your life? And then, we'd all answer it differently, some of us would say, "When I was 6 year-old in my dad's arms being carried up to bed." Or, "When my mom put me into bed and kissed me good night. That - I never felt as safe as I did then." And some of us then would say, "Well, being in the arms of somebody that I really can trust. That's the safest moment I've ever experienced." And some of us would say when we found we could earn money ourselves and hadn't to depend on anybody else. And some of us would say, "When I last paid my house off." And some of us would say, "When I got my degree." But all of us here have answers to that, the greatest safety we've ever felt in our lives, the greatest sense of security.

Now loved ones, I'm going to ask you the same question. Don't you see that the person who made that feeling of security possible and made the people or the things that give you that security, that he himself gives an even greater sense of security if you know him. In other words, the giver is actually better than the gifts he gives. The feelings that the gifts bring about in us are only shadows of the real feelings that that giver brings about in us if we know him himself. Now, do you see that's why he gave us the gifts? He gave us those things to show us what he himself was like and to encourage us to go right through to the person who had given the gifts.

Now that's the meaning of that verse we've looked at it before, it's Romans 1. One of the verses that we use, you remember, in connection with the truth of general revelation, how anybody, whether they believe in the Bible or not, can believe there is a God. And it's Romans 1:19 and 20, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made." So the reason God made the world and gave us all these gifts and made all these experiences possible was so that we would see the kind of person he was behind all the gifts and so that we would start going to him.

So the reason he made a snowy slope for us to ski down was because he hoped that we would want to know who had made the snowy slope and who wanted us to enjoy ourselves skiing down it. The reason he made a smooth peaceful lake that we can sit beside in the summer was because he wanted us to see, "Look, the person who made this peaceful lake and this smooth surface must be far more peaceful himself. He must be able to give me even greater peace by a relationship with him than I can get from this lake that he's made." So the reason God made affection was so that we would glimpse in that affection a little shadow of the great affection that he had in his heart and we would go through to him and we would meet him himself. In other words, the reason God made all these things was so that we would go behind the gifts to the giver. We, of course, have not done that. We just have refused to do that.

Well, in Romans 1:21 it says it there, "For although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles." And verse 25, "Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever!" And that's what we do.

We took the gifts and we started to try to live on them themselves without the giver behind the gifts. So we get a headache and we feel we have to deal with the strain and the tension of the headache. And we go to the chemical gift that he has given and we pop the old aspirins until we get rid of the headache. Usually, never for a moment thinking, "I wonder, can the person who made this aspirin do something for my headache himself?" You must admit we never think of it. We really always think, "No, that's stupid." We have really been trained to be practical atheists, haven't we? We've been brought up always to use the gifts instead of the giver. We always do.

I mean, you must admit, if you had a headache the first thing that occurs to your mind is not, "Father, will you heal my headache?" With most of us, until we hear of the possibility that God can heal, with most of us we just grab the old aspirin and pop it. It's the same, you must admit, with the whole business of our value, our sense of self-esteem and self-respect. We automatically try to establish that by gaining a position of significance amongst our peers. That's normally how we establish our self-esteem and self-respect. We all talk that way, "Oh, don't say that to him, it'll spoil his self-respect." Because we all for our self-respect go to the creatures; we worship the creature rather than the Creator. We go to all the other little creatures in the world and we try to get them to admire us for our singing, or our ability, or our cleverness and we try to establish our self-esteem and our self-respect that way. We never for a moment think, "I wonder could the Person who made self-esteem and self-respect possible, could the Person who made all these other people who admire me, could he himself give me a sense of self-esteem and self-respect if I really knew him personally?"

And in fact, loved ones, you know that we have become so ingrained in this attitude that we are not only unable to perceive the stupidity of the attitude, but we're also unable to do anything about it. We have come into a deep perversion of our wills where we're not only blind and fail to see that this is what we're doing, but even when we do see it we're unable to do anything about it. So that we're like people who are holding on to our rope that somebody is holding on a mountainside and we're trying to climb up and the person who is holding the rope is reaching his hand to us, but we say, "No, no, the rope's safer, the rope's safer." And we're hanging onto the rope and we're hanging onto to all the aspirins we can get our hands on, and all the snowy slopes we can get our hands on, and all the dear dads who carry us up the stairs that can give us a security, but we will

not let go of that rope to hold onto the hand of the person who holds the rope.

And so we've become so used to this that we almost doubt that there is any source of security except stocks and shares, a good job, social security, a good health program and a career that looks as if it will open out more and more as the years pass. It's very difficult for us, isn't it, to conceive that there is any other answer for security except those things? It's very difficult for us to think that there is any possible escape from the pedestrian boredom that sets upon us at times in life except more concerts, more movies, better vacations and bigger cars. It's very difficult for us to think that there is any answer to self-esteem and self-respect except getting it from other people, getting it from the approval of others. So loved ones really, we are pretty sick people, because we fail to realize that we're doing this and then when we do realize we're doing it we somehow can't escape from it.

That whole attitude, of course, was contradicted by Jesus. For three days he was dead, just dead. And there were no gifts of the world he could get his hands on. There was no adulation of crowds or admiration of friends. There was no money available to give him security. There was not anything that we have to meet our personality needs for significance and security and approval and happiness. And during those three days he was separated from them all, from all the gifts that we think are essential to fulfill our personality needs. And he came back from life not a pale shadow of a man, not by any means a man who was filled with fear and a sense of rejection and a sense of loneliness, he came back from dead being so filled with life and vitality that Peter told the people that he was the author and Prince of Life.

And so when Jesus, a man that was separated from all the things that we depend on for the fulfillment of our needs, in Jesus during those three days there was obviously, a complete fulfillment of those needs. Obviously, he got into such close contact with the Creator who made him that he was filled with all the sense of significance he needed, all the sense of approval that he needed, all the sense of happiness that he needed.

And so, really loved ones, it's plain and obvious from even just his example that you don't need these gifts to give you these things. In fact, God wants you not to depend on the gifts. He wants you to separate yourselves from these gifts as a method of fulfilling your need for significance, approval and security and he wants you to go directly through to him. And loved ones that can only come about if you're willing to enter into the same relationship to those gifts as he had. Now let's show you what it is, it's Galatians 6:14. And I think you'll see the sense of in the light of what we've just shared. "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world."

Now that's what we mean, you see, when you say that during those three days Jesus was separated from the ski slopes, from the money, from the career, from the approval of other people that we depend on for the fulfillment of our personality needs. He was crucified to the world and the world was crucified to him. Now every one of us here who is willing to be crucified to the world and willing for the world to be crucified to us will experience the reception of the Spirit of Jesus into our own lives and such a closeness with the Creator who made us that all our personality needs will be fulfilled by that relationship alone.

Now that's true, loved ones. Once you become aware that you don't need all those things and you're willing to separate yourself from them and to be crucified to them as far as their fulfillment of your needs is concerned, obviously you'll still ski; obviously, you'll still sail boats; obviously,

you'll still eat, you'll still have friends, but the first moment you come to the place to where you're willing to have those crucified to you as far as depending on them for your own sense of significance, approval and security is concerned, that moment God sends the Spirit of his Son into your heart and you begin to experience the close relationship with the Creator of the world that fulfills all those needs without the gifts.

Now many of us, of course, have come to at least that place. And we've come into that crisis awareness. But God is so good you know, he will not let us bluff ourselves. And a lot of us will say, "Yeah, I can do without people, I don't need their approval. I don't need any more 'A's to sense that I'm worthwhile in life. No, I agree Lord Jesus, I'm willing to be crucified with you to the need for 'A's. I'm willing to be crucified with you for the need for the approval of my superiors. I'm willing to do that." But God is good, you know, he knows we talk big. And he then proceeds once you entered into that to prove that it is really so. And loved ones, that's the place of suffering.

That's why old Paul says that if you're a child of God you're going to experience some suffering because for years you've been depending on everybody but your Father. Now your Father is going to gradually take those things away from you that you've been depending on to show you and prove to you that he himself is adequate himself. And so that's where we came to you, remember in Romans 8:18. And verse 17 was the verse we dealt with in the previous few weeks. Paul says, "If children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." Now the suffering is God gradually taking away prop after prop that we say we have been crucified to. And he gradually takes them away so that he himself can be everything that he wants to be to us. And so verse 18, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time." "Kairos" is the Greek word, it means just the time that we have in these 70 years, this present lifetime, "Are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

So many of us who have been very close to a dear mom or dad have experienced a great new sense of the eternity of life and the stability of life in God when that mom or dad has died. Now it's not that God sends the death, -- God does not send the suffering it's Satan that is out to destroy all the gifts that God has given us -- but the Father uses Satan's work to test the work of crucifixion that has been done in us. So many of us who have been desperately dependent on the approval of our parents throughout our lives have had to suffer eventually the withdrawal of that approval at some point in our lives when we made some decision that they did not agree with so that we would begin to grow up and seek the approval of the only significant other that really counts.

Many of us have been too dependent on a dear husband or a wife and we've depended on them for the fulfillment of all our physical and our emotional needs and the only way the Father could get us to stop depending on the gifts and come through to the giver was by withdrawing that affection or that physical attention or that emotional stimulation that we depended on so that he could draw us to himself and show us that he was the source of all that original joy that we received through the secondary cause and that he is able to give that same joy and that same satisfaction to us through a thousand other secondary causes if he wishes because it comes from him himself.

Many of us have had the same experience with children or with brothers and sisters and we've depended on their closeness for our friendship and our company. Many of us have depended on the idea of marriage for the possibility of being delivered from loneliness in our old age or from being delivered from insecurity and the Father has had to withdraw marriage from us so that we would begin to lean on him alone for that friendship and that security. And so loved ones, it operates all

through our lives. Many of us who have depended on our sense of significance and our sense of value on the approval of our superiors have found that that approval has been withdrawn. And God has brought us into a place either through our own fault, or through a recession, or through a professional crisis in the organization that we belong to, he has brought us to a place where that approval was withdrawn. And the reason for the suffering is to bring us through to the approval of the only Person who really counts.

Many of us have depended on our jobs for our sense of significance. We've depended on our success at the job, our ability, our mental sharpness, our professional efficiency, our reputation in the career that we had. We've depended on all of that for our sense of value and God has had to allow that to be withdrawn from us because he knows that all those things will pass and those things will be finished after 70 years. And then we'll have absolutely no sense of value if that's where our sense of value has come from. Once we've got our gold watch for 25 or 30 years service, then we cease to have any sense of value and he knows that -- so he withdraws those lovingly from us so that we begin to depend for our sense of value on him alone.

And so loved ones, the Father lovingly allows Satan's work to continue in our lives at times so that we will begin to come to the only One who really counts. Many of us depend for our sense of value and significance and approval on our appearance, or our talents, or our gifts. And God lovingly allows those things to be withdrawn and we suffer their withdrawal so that we come into the place where he alone counts. Loved ones, when is God's love most precious to you? You know, all of us would answer this the same way: when things are roughest, when things are toughest, when things are hardest, when there seems nothing else. You know that; you know that most of our problem is to maintain the sense of consecration to him that we expressed in a time of crisis, and a time of defeat, and a time of depression and hardship. Most of us serve God best when life is at its worst. And loved ones, that's the purpose of suffering. It's not that the Father sends it, but he allows Satan to work that so that he actually uses Satan and uses his works to begin to withdraw us from the gifts.

And so it is in the whole sense of security. Many of us are really depending on our strong right arm for our sense of security. We're depending on our ability to earn the money we need, we're depending on our good job, we're depending on our academic qualifications, we're depending on some dear one who is close to us. And God allows that source of support to be withdrawn so that we will learn to depend on the One who provides daily bread. It's anathema you know, anathema to us proud human beings to depend on somebody who says he's going to give it to you tomorrow. How do you know he will? We hate that. We like to have the bread stuffed up in the bank so that we can pull it out when we need it. And it is anathema for us to depend on someone giving it day-by-day as we need it. But God's desire is for us to come into that because he knows he's the one who made the bread. He's the one who made the money. He's the one who made the wheat and the corn. He's the one on whom we finally depend. He knows if he moved his little finger the whole world would spin out of its orbit into chaos. And so he knows that as long as we depend on these gifts, we're depending on superficial things that are going to pass, and he himself is the real one that will never pass.

And so loved ones, bit-by-bit through suffering God is trying to wean us from those superficial substitutes for him that we have invented. And so what happens as you enter into real suffering is that miserable, poor, crippled invalid who for years depended on the approving nod of the superior at work, or who trembled when the stock market began to drop, or who collapsed in chaos when somebody failed to express a kind word to him, that poor, crippled invalid gradually is laid lovingly in the tomb by God. And up there rises a prince and princess of God who depends on their

Father for all their approval and significance and happiness and who walks strong and stands tall and cannot be conquered and is invincible.

And that's why you see, Paul says, "I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." And the Greek word is "eis", into or in us. And the beauty of it is that out of you and me, poor, crippled invalids that we are, depending on somebody giving us an A grade or depending on somebody else giving us a job, or depending on somebody else approving of the work that we've done, or depending on somebody else to give us a sense of love, we poor, crippled invalids eventually are laid in the tomb and we are revealed in Jesus as strong, invincible princes and princesses of God who depend on him alone. That's the purpose of the sufferings.

So it's not just a unpleasant experience that we're supposed to explain. Suffering originally became because we forgot God, turned against him and turned Satan loose and he's the one that brings the suffering. But the purpose of the suffering is that the Father is using it to wean us away from his gifts to him himself. I'd just ask you therefore to welcome the suffering. I know it sounds wild but that's what the Bible says, greet it as pure joy when you enter into various trials, and see what God is doing in them, and see what weakness in you has laid you open to the suffering. Because the reason you suffer, the reason it is suffering to you is there is still something more of you hanging off the cross. There is still something of you that is not depending on God alone. That's why you suffer.

If you're not absolutely dependent on your dear wife for her love, then if she withdraws the love then you don't suffer, you are sorry. You want the marriage to be what God wants it to be, but you yourself do not suffer. If you really know beyond all doubt that God has supplied in the past all the money you needed and will supply in the future, then you can lose your home, you can lose your shares and you do not suffer. You look upon it as something that is happening objectively to some other person. So while we're suffering there's something that God is trying to get at that is independent of himself.

So look at the suffering; if it comes to you in the old physical side, well God's trying to work there. If it comes to you with the money, then God's trying to work there. If it comes to you in the career, then you have a fair idea that there's somewhere that I'm living dependent on the gifts rather than the giver. And I don't think you have any question what kind of person you'd like to be, whether you'd like to be an invalid, crippled and lame or whether you'd like to be whole and well. And that's what the Father wants.

Let us pray. Father we thank you that you have not been like Napoleon who said, "Men love baubles and love badges, they love play things and trinkets." Father, you have not despised us like that. You have not thrown us oceans, and rivers, and trees, and cars, and clothes, and shoes, and other people and said, "They'll be satisfied with those." Father, thank you for that. Thank you that you have given us all those things simply to lead us to one who is better than all of those things, the one who alone supplies those and the one who can supply the feelings that those supply without the gifts themselves. Father, thank you. Thank you that you really want us to look upon you as our loving Father who will give us all the approval and security and significance we need. Thank you, Lord. I will trust you Father for my brothers and sisters -- that every piece of suffering that they entered into this coming week may be seen by them as a dear gift that you are able to use to make them more invincible, more dependent upon you, and more independent of the world. For your glory, Amen.

