

Rising Above Our Personal Pain

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me.”(Jonah 2:2)
These words of Jonah summed up much of my life. Like a hot iron my heart has not only been scorched but attempts have been made to have torn from me. “From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.”(Jonah 2:2)
When I didn’t see an immediate answer I must confess I wondered if God was really listening. After all He “hurled me into the very heart of the sea, and the currents swirled around me. I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight;’” (Jonah 2:3,4).

At times it would have been so easy to give up. We are tempted to get down on ourselves, to believe God doesn’t love us anymore and that no one else cares yet Jonah said, “I will look again toward your holy temple.”(verse 4) Jonah chose in spite of the circumstances to look to God even as he declared, “the engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head” (verse 5). In my case it is often the seaweed of fear, worry, doubt and even unbelief. But that wasn’t all. “To the roots of the mountain I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever”(verse 6).

“Dear God” I find myself crying out, “please hear my prayer I am feeling so low and trapped in what appears to be a hopeless situation.” But one thing about being at rock bottom the only place you can go is up. “But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple”(remainder of verse 6 and verse 7). As I remembered Jonah spoke these words while he was still in the whale’s belly, I am also encouraged to remember the Lord in spite of the circumstances.

From the bottom of the whale’s belly, I am reminded that, “those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs” (verse 8). I frequently find myself saying Lord; I want that grace so I hereby turn lose of those worthless idols. “But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good, salvation comes from the Lord”(verse 9). With that declaration, “the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land (verse 10). In the midst of what can seem overwhelming circumstances I must continue to believe God for the dry land for I know that God is faithful and true to His Word. This wonderful Word got Jonah back on track so that God could use him to call the

people of Ninevah to repentance. Now as we trust God from the bottom of whatever “whale’s belly” we might find ourselves in, we can rest assured He will deliver us, as we believe that “salvation comes from the Lord.”

This salvation that comes from the Lord gives us the strength through the power of the Holy Spirit to plead the cause of the poor and homeless to our churches, corporate leaders, and government officials. We are told in Proverbs 31:8 “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Then in Psalms 82:3, 4 it says “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

As we try to obey the mandates of Scripture we will often encounter opposition. But why the trials? James 1:2-4, says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, (and that includes you sisters) whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” Oh Lord it is hard in the midst of the trials, the tribulations, and the uncertainty of the future to continue. As it seems that our world is crumbling around us we must remember that, “no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” I Cor.3:11 Our faith is tested to determine if it is based on the foundation of Jesus Christ or are we clinging to those worthless idols that Jonah was referring to and as a result forfeiting this grace that can be ours. How hard it is persevering in the midst of trials. The pain is unbelievable but here James says “consider it pure joy.” This perseverance that these trials produce must finish its work so we “may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” What we are told to do in the middle of these times of trials and uncertainties is to ask God for wisdom. He will give it if our goals are God centered and not self-centered. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”(Ps 51:17).

In the midst of a hurting world of homelessness, environmental destruction and hopelessness, a theology of inter-relationship resulting from a broken and contrite heart is urgently needed. Such an inter-relational theology is reflected in the covenant God made with Noah following the flood. He declared, “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you--every living creature on earth.”(Gen. 9:9,10) A Biblical inter-relational theology caused the Psalmist to declare, “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord”(Psalm 150:6).

Developing a relationship with the rest of creation including the poor, the fatherless and the homeless involves the realization that all of life has value because of its relationship to God rather than its usefulness to the rest of humanity. After all as Psalm 24:1 declares, the earth including all life on it is the Lord's. He created it (Genesis 1 and 2, Job 38:4, Psalm 19:1), sustains it (Matt 6:26) and redeemed it (Col.1:15-30). When relationship is broken as a result of greed and sin the result is pain. St. Basil who lived from 329-380 declared, "We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of human kind with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the Earth, which should have gone up to thee in song has been a groan of pain." Adlai Stevenson said in his final speech, "We travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and the love we give our fragile craft, and, I may say, each other." In Job 29:12—17 "Because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing. But on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe any my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was father to the needy; I took up the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth."

As one works to preserve creation and rescue the needy "he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."(James 1:6-8) We must continue to trust God in the midst of these trials for as James 1:12 says, "blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because when he/she has stood the test, he/she will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him." In the midst of the pain and uncertainty we must remember that, "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). When our world seems to have been turned upside down and circumstances lead us to believe that we are wasting our time fighting for justice we must remember that God does not change, He is the source of all that is good and, "He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He created"(James 1:18).

This word of truth I have learned doesn't mean just crying about our personal problems. We must take those to the Lord God in our time of need through prayer. Then we need to arise and hear the cries of those in need and the groaning of creation.

When we are hurting our first reaction is to get angry. What does James 1:19-21 has to say about anger and the need to humbly accept the word planted in you? “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”(James 1:22) What does verses 26,27 say about our tongue and helping those in need? How does James 2:1-13 stress that it is wrong to show favoritism? “Mercy triumphs over judgment. What good is it if one claims to have faith but has no deeds?”(James 2:13,14) It is one thing to talk about faith it is another thing to actually live it in the midst of trials, tribulations and uncertainties. Faith involves believing God when the circumstances dictate otherwise. Faith involves action. “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”(James 2:17) It involves surrendering that which is closest to us totally unto God. How did Abraham’s and Rahab’s actions described in James 2:21-26 result in righteousness? It is by faith that we are saved (Romans 3:28) but true faith results in actions.

One of the hardest places to express faith is in the controlling of our tongue. So many words are spoken that should have remain unsaid. What does James 3:1-12 say about the need to control the tongue? How we must daily surrender our tongues unto the Lord. Tongues reflecting the wisdom of God will be “first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3:17,18) As we read these words and then examine our personal lives we are driven to our knees crying, “Lord have mercy upon us.” How we need to submit to God.

It’s easy to get so caught in our needs we cannot hear the groaning of creation or the cries of those in need. How can we begin to hear those cries and be transformed by the renewing of our minds? This transformation that is spoken of in Romans 12:2 takes place when we are shocked by hearing the cries of the suffering. Hearing the groaning of creation as described in Romans 8:22 can awaken us to the injustices of that which is considered normal.

Such an awakening is necessary if we are going to be delivered from that form of religion that denies the real power of a living relationship with Christ. This type of religion that removes all the groaning of creation and the cries of the poor is a religion that is so personalized, it builds walls of indifference around the individual. Only when the Holy Spirit breaks cracks in these walls of isolation and indifference can true conversion take place. Then the cries of those the world considers disposable can truly enter in. This conversion awakens us to another

possible world where we hear the same cries of the suffering that God hears, so that we will seek Him for solutions (Matt. 11:15).

The Scriptures are filled with the cries of the suffering and the groaning of creation. It is the voices of the hurting which the Holy Spirit often uses to awaken us to the just and creative solutions provided by God Himself. These sounds of suffering can break through our walls of indifference so that we become the salt and light that Scripture speaks of.

When the poor and elderly cry out, and the special interests of those profiting from the existing system are disturbed, the police are called out to arrest the ones who are disturbing the peace. If the cries are too loud, the one who is crying out could even be put in a psych ward, in jail or locked up in some nursing home. The goal for many is to keep the cries of the hurting out of sight and out of mind. Even in the church many desiring to be blessed don't want someone to stand up in the middle of the worship and cry out, "I am worn out crying for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for God. Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal"(Psalm 69:3,4) see also Psalm 102:19, 20).

We feel uncomfortable when we must face the fact that things are not right and injustice is taking place. We don't like to think that the things we refer to as blessings often come at the expense of great suffering to others. The lack of lament in the worship in church eliminates the questions of justice. As a result issues of structural violence get accepted and legitimized. God's response is, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from your; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong, learn to do right, seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow"(Is. 1:15-18).

When we respond to the cries of the suffering and the groaning of creation we open ourselves up so the Holy Spirit can bring forth transformation, renewal and restoration. The cries of human and ecological suffering are both a sign of judgment and hope. They call the Body of Christ to question the structures of power until they seek God for answers and then by His grace step out in faith to bring about these solutions.

All of creation along with those in need is groaning for us to get beyond our own needs in order that we can be the redeemed instruments of healing that is

needed at this time. As a part of the redeemed we need to get quiet before God until we not only recognize the needs around us but also seek Him for creative solutions in response to their cries that are going forth. As we open our hearts and minds to the leading of the Holy Spirit in this culture of death and the cries coming forth from it, we will indeed see the Lord do a mighty work through us.

Yours in Christ,

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