

Sermon for Sunday, May 6, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"HAS GOD GONE MAD?"
II Corinthians 12:1-10

Text: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." I Corinthians 12:9

The papers recently have carried the story of a little week-old baby drowned in a bathtub, apparently by its mother. How could God let this happen? Has God gone mad? Two trucks on the highway--one skids, hits the other and then its trailer jack-knifes across the highway to smash a car and fatally injure a mother and her little girl. Has God abdicated? How are we to understand it when sickness--tragedy--suffering--death strike at us or the ones we love the most? Recently I sat in a hospital room with dear friends and we talked about the tragic news they had just gotten of a malignancy. Why? They are good people. Kind people. Loving people. Christian people who love the Lord and are in church almost every Sunday. Has God gone mad?

Have you ever prayed about something that mattered very desperately to you and still nothing went right? Have you had your prayers bounce off the ceiling or seemingly fail to get the attention of a remote God who remains undisturbed by our pleas? And have you cried out in the darkness of hurt and pain because God didn't seem to be there or else he was a God gone mad who didn't care? I suspect most of us have had feelings like that.

St. Paul would be able to sympathize with us. He knew about hurt and pain. He knew what it was to toss sleeplessly at night, lifting up prayers that seemed to go unheeded, with the hurt so deep he longed for the dawn. He called his pain a thorn in the flesh. The English translation does not really capture the picture of pain that Paul really gives us. Literally the Greek means "I was given a stake in my body." Like the hands of Jesus, given up to the hammered spikes, it was as though a great nail had been driven into quivering human flesh.

The Bible says, "Three times I besought (notice the intensity of that word!) the Lord about this..." I don't think that means Paul just mentioned his problem to the Lord three times. I think it means there were three occasions, three big moments, when Paul stormed the gates of heaven in such a way that the memory of it stood out vividly in his mind, etched indelibly on his memory. He had pleaded with God. He had besought God with tears. He had begged God for mercy. He had cried out to God for compassion and healing. And God did not answer the pleas of Paul. Yes--Paul--the greatest missionary the world had ever seen. Had God gone mad?

Paul tells us in another place that because he preached about Jesus, he was stoned, whipped, scourged, persecuted, imprisoned, reviled, shipwrecked. Was this not enough to suffer? Was this not enough to bear? Must he also have the stake, this spike in the flesh, to torment and afflict him? And do you know what God said to him? God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Well, what would you have done if God said that to you? But do you know what Paul said? He said, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Yes, the weaker I am, the more I depend on Jesus; the less strength I have, the stronger he is in me.

Isn't that incredible? When you have a desperate need, when a loved one is dying, when pain sweeps your body, when a relationship needs desperately to be healed,

when your job is lost, when your dreams have collapsed, do you feel like boasting then? Do you feel like rejoicing then? Oh, you know you do not! Yet, here is St. Paul, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses..." Would you like to know Paul's secret? It would be worth a lot, wouldn't it, to know how Paul could handle his troubles that way? Let me suggest to you some clues to Paul's secret.

First, Paul knew God personally. For many years Paul had searched for God. He studied in the universities of his home city of Tarsus there in Asia Minor. But his search led him to Jerusalem where he studied under the leading Rabbis. Then, his search led him one day to Damascus. And on the road there his search ended. The Bible says, "Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him." (Acts 9:3) In that dramatic experience he came face to face with Jesus. "Lord", he said, "who are you?" Back came the reply, "I am Jesus..." (Acts 9:5) In the years to follow he was to come to know Jesus as his personal friend and God as his loving father. Again and again they were to come to him in his moment of crisis, in his moments of decision. There was the moment of decision when he stood on the shores of the Aegean Sea looking across to the mainland of Europe. The Bible says, "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night, a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" (Acts 16:9) The bringing of the gospel to the shores of Europe has proved to be one of the most decisive and formative events in the history of the world. Again, when Paul came to Corinth, he was rejected by the people and it seemed his message was doomed to fail. Yet, in his moment of discouragement, God came to him again and said, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent: for I am with you..." (Acts 18:9) Then, late in his ministry when he was being carried prisoner to Rome, that tiny ship of ancient days was caught helplessly in the mighty grasp of a great storm. Fear and terror gripped the hearts of all aboard, but in a time of crisis to Paul came a loving Father who said to him, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you. (Acts 27:24)

Yes, Paul knew God; knew him as a loving Father, a dependable friend. I want to say to you this morning that such an experience is a divine possibility for you and me. God can be as real to you and me as he was to St. Paul. This may come in a sudden experience as it did to Paul on the Damascus road. When Peter, led by the Holy Spirit, went to Caesarea to preach to the Roman, Cornelius, we are told that as he preached, "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word." Yes, a sudden conversion. Again, our experience of God may come quickly as it did to the Philippian jailer who, under sudden and deep conviction, cried out, "Men, what must I do to be saved." On the other hand, this experience may come slowly and gradually. Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, was not immediately converted. It is only much later, when he comes to help bury the body of Jesus, that we realize he has at last accepted Jesus as his Saviour. The full implications of our faith may come slowly as they did to young John Mark. On the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas, he turned back. Yet, in years to come he is Paul's closet companion, unafraid for Jesus' sake to face imprisonment and death. In between something had happened to his heart.

I believe that you and I can know God, too. I think God can be as real and vital to us as he was to Paul. It may be a sudden coming or a gradual realization, but God loves us this morning and he wants to come into our lives.

So, the first thing I want to suggest is that Paul knew God personally as a friend and loving companion. Secondly, I would like to suggest that because Paul knew God this way, he knew that pain did not come from God. He saw in his suffering an evil thing. It was not constructive, it was destructive. It was not good, it was bad; it was not wholesome, it was unwholesome. Out of the knowledge that such

things were not of the loving God he knew, St. Paul called his suffering a messenger of Satan. I think you and I need to remember this. When disaster comes, when pain descends in sickening waves, when suffering is an awful agony, to ascribe it to God is to commit a terrible sin. It is to blame God for what is basically evil and bad. It is to ascribe to God that which is against human welfare and human happiness. It is to make God out as a heartless tyrant to whom the title of "loving Father" is a hollow mockery. It is to make God less compassionate, less loving, less kind than is man himself. Pain, suffering, and all that goes with it is not God's design for human life.

So, because Paul knew God personally as a loving Father, he knew that pain was not of God. But I would like to suggest thirdly that Paul did not believe that God was helpless in the face of his suffering. No, God was not a helpless lackey in the hands of a ruthless power that drove spikes into Paul's flesh. Do you see? He understood that pain and suffering were not the creation of God maliciously poured out upon helpless men, but he also understood that it could not come without God's permission.

We need to remember that God does not create nor wish for us our hurts, our agonies, our sufferings, our broken hearts. These things are, to use the biblical term, "messengers of Satan." They are evil and bad. Yet, having said that, we must go on to say that God is not helpless in the face of them. God is not a powerless pawn in the face of such evils. Instead, God takes our agonies and pains and hurts--and within his divine providence, within his loving and holy purpose, he uses them for our ultimate good. Thus St. Paul could cry out, "All things work together for good." He could say "In all things give thanks."

See how it works! See Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Down on his knees he goes with his very heart breaking within him. Before him lies the rejection, the scourging, the mocking, the awful trial, the dreadful cross bearing to Golgotha, and finally the horror of the crucifixion itself. Has a God gone mad planned these terrible events? Has a beserk Deity gleefully stacked painful event upon painful event? Obviously not. The cup before Jesus was prepared by human hate. It was prepared by human fear, human greed, human selfishness, human loneliness. Yet, it was a wise and loving Father, a holy and knowing God, who placed that cup in the hands of Jesus. As he knelt in the Garden that night, he cried out, "Let this cup pass from me!" Yet, because that cup came to him through his father's hand, he reached out trustingly to take it and to drink deeply from it

There is no real answer, no ultimate and final solution to the problem of pain and suffering in your life and mine. Yet, when we know God as our kind and loving father, we can take the cup of pain from his hand in the confidence that it can be used for some good by him. No, we do not understand because we know pain is evil and bad. Still, because it comes through the hands of someone we know, someone we trust, someone who loves us, we can drink of that cup.

Not until each loom is silent And the shuttles cease to fly,
Will God unroll the pattern And explain the reason why
The dark threads are as needful In the Weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver For the pattern which he planned.

(Anon)

Yes, God wants into your life this morning. He wants to make himself known to you in love and mercy and forgiveness. Let him in! Let him into your life and then, whatever life brings, in trust and confidence you can take the cup from his hand--not because you understand--but because he loves you and you trust him.

George Matheson, who wrote the beloved hymn, "O Love that will not Let Me Go", was told at the age of 20 by his doctor that he was going blind. "Better see your friends quickly", he said, "for soon the darkness will settle and you will see them no more forever." In spite of his blindness, young George went on with his studies. Had he been able to read early church history, he would have been a great historian; had he been able to read the thinkers, he would have been a great philosopher. But because he could not see, he became instead a great man of faith. Because he knew God as a loving father, he took the cup of blindness from his hand. He did not understand, but he trusted. Once he wrote, "My God, I have never thanked thee for my thorn. I have thanked thee a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorn. Teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow." In his great hymn, in the third verse, he put it this way:

"O joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to Thee;
 I trace the rainbow through the rain, And feel the promise is not vain
 That morn shall tearless be."

Yes, I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Because he loves us and because we trust him, we take the cup from his wise and loving hand. We may walk for a little while in the darkness of tears, but we know the dawn is coming when tears shall be no more. No God hasn't gone mad. He is a rainbow-maker, even, when he has to use our tears.