

The Reality of Sin and Suffering

This past XL Conference I had prepared to share on the topic of suffering. Shortly before I was to speak, I learned that my wife, Sue, was experiencing some very serious medical complications. My boys and I left immediately to be with her. We are grateful that we have seen some improvements over the last month, although there have been some challenging days.

As I contemplate the subject of suffering, I realize that I still have a great deal to learn. Unfortunately, we often spend far too much time trying to "understand" our circumstances rather than seeking God's perspective of this life in relation to the life to come. Satan is very adept at blurring our spiritual eyesight by distracting us with life's uncertainties. Additionally, in the flesh, we often deceive ourselves by thinking we understand our trials and tribulations better than the One who created us. How tempting it is to question God's judgment!

I was planning on using Romans 8:18-39 as one of the main texts for my presentation. There is not nearly enough room to reasonably present the truths in this passage as they relate to suffering, but I would like to touch on a few important principles.

1. For the believer, we are never to look at this life as though it stands by itself. In the absolute worst of life's circumstances we have hope!

Romans 8:18-21

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
(NASB)

2. While we anticipate this wonderful deliverance from God, the world suffers greatly. The whole creation "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together..." Rather than making us bitter, questioning, angry, frustrated people, we should long all the more for the day when we receive the redemption of our bodies.

Romans 8:22-25

For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. (NASB)

3. God understands that we don't understand. As I consider my wife's health, on one hand I desire her to be completely healed. On the other hand, I realize that there cannot be heaven on earth. What is most important is that God's purposes are fulfilled in the midst of our trials and tribulations. In view of this, I often do not know how to pray.

Romans 8:26-27

And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (NASB)

4. These next verses are familiar to many. Keep in mind that the text does not say that God causes all things to work together for good to those who "know" God. It is for those who love God. There is often a big difference.

Romans 8:28-30

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (NASB)

5. God is trustworthy. There is never a time when we can justify questioning God's judgement.

Romans 8:31-34

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. (NASB)

6. Keep in mind that there is victory for believers. As bad as it can get in this life, nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. Aren't you glad that God did not

allow Adam and Ever to eat of the tree of life? One day this will all end and we will be in the glorious presence of our loving God. For now, there is a great deal of work to do in the name of our Lord and Savior. Don't get distracted!

Romans 8:35-39

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

News from the World of XL

Our annual XL Conference was held on September 24-28 of this year at the beautiful Golden Bell Retreat Center just above Colorado Springs. The fall is an absolutely gorgeous time to be in the Rockies with the Aspens changing from green to golden brown. What a creative and awesome God we have.

Our theme this year was "An Excursion About the Rock." No we weren't talking about our President Rock(y) Wyatt all week, although many conversations were no doubt spurred by his presence with us again this year. "You da' man, Rock." In all seriousness, we did have a great time in God's Word focusing on our real foundation, the true Rock, Jesus Christ our Savior.

Each day we enjoyed three or four teaching sessions. These ranged from a morning book study of 2 Timothy, to such practical topics as "Counseling Teenagers" and "How to Communicate with Clarity." The sessions usually began with singing as we prepared our hearts for worship and taught some new songs for each ministry to add to their repertoire. Chris had some great games to teach us again this year and showed several really neat video clips on how to spice up the dreaded "announcement time."

In between the general sessions we did make some time to relax a little. Besides the volleyball, ping-pong and basketball, Chris took some of us thrill- seekers to the Garden of the Gods for some serious Rock Climbing. Actually, Chris and the other sandstone-huggers did the serious climbing and the rest of us did some serious sweating as we watched. Mucho thanks to Chris for letting us tear up his equipment and for his eternal patience.

Lastly, if you have never come to an XL Conference, we encourage you to prayerfully consider joining us next year. We will be getting all of the details out to you real soon. Look forward to seeing you in Colorado!

Editor's Note

This week as I was studying for a Wednesday Night series on the book of Romans, a peculiar phrase caught my eye, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the the foolish" (Romans 1:15, NASB). The Apostle Paul wrote these words as he informed the Romans of his desire to come and preach the gospel to their great city. The word "obligation" actually means "debtor." The commentary I was reading (by Donald Grey Barnhouse) traced the use of the word "debtor" in the Old and New Testament and drew some interesting conclusions.

In Bible times a debtor literally became the slave of the lender and was completely at his mercy. If a debt was not repaid, the lender had the right to throw the debtor in prison and sell all his possessions, including wife and family. Even up to the turn of the century many men and women languished in debtor's prison, victims of their own inability to pay back what they had borrowed.

The fact that Paul would use this word to describe his relationship to the unsaved world is nothing short of extraordinary. I can understand Paul's indebtedness to Christ, which he states in 1 Corinthians, but did he really consider himself a slave to heathen and barbaric people? The answer, I believe, is yes. Paul lived his entire life for the purpose of fulfilling his obligation.

Although I know I am called to take the gospel to this dying world, too often I am content to witness at my convenience. My lackadaisical attitude almost makes it seem as though I am doing the unsaved a favor in taking my valuable time to witness to them. This could not be farther from the truth. I have a great obligation, a debt to those who are lost, which I must continually seek to repay. In a society which has gotten completely comfortable with debt, I must be willing to repay what I owe at all costs. Repaying this debt will mean that I am unable to achieve the status and security the world sets as its standard. It will mean that there are many other desires for entertainment, possessions and "personal space" which I will have to deny. If I take my debt seriously, however, these are things which I will gladly give up in order to speak forth the good news of Jesus. No seminar or class on evangelism can impart the consuming passion to reach souls. When I realize my indebtedness and am driven to repay what I owe, then I will share Christ with an urgency which will overcome my complacency. I pray that each of you will gain a greater understanding of your debt and echo the words of Paul in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Youth Ministry Bummer A Little Cash Now and Then

Everybody needs a little cash now and then, right? Nowhere is this more true than on a trip to central Florida with 100 leaders and teens. All kinds of unexpected expenses arise - from emergency room admission fees (a regular occurrence on my trips) to a round of Surge for bleary-eyed drivers at 3 am. Usually I am short on cash and end up scraping the bottom of the barrel to pay for the 7 zillionth bag of ice, without which Joe Macho's ankle will swell to Hindenburg proportions just as he steps off

the bus to be picked up by his over-protective grandmother... but, I digress.

On this particular trip I had outdone myself. Not only had I obtained \$400 in cash from the church treasurer, I had, on a last moment whim, brought along the envelope containing the kids' final payment as they boarded the bus. How was I to know that it contained about \$700 additional dollars in small unmarked bills (since when did people stop paying by check anyway!)? Early into the trip I discovered this windfall of dough and made a commitment to keep it in a safe place (may I just note that the term "safe place" is extremely relative when tent camping by night and tramping around a place upon which over 2/3 of the world's known population has decided to converge during the three days in all of history which we had also chosen!). Anyway, I have a somewhat checkered past when it comes to large amounts of cash (see earlier editions of XL'ent News for verification) and was determined not to blow it this time.

As I prepared to drive the bus, early in the morning on our final trip to Disney World, I carefully placed the money envelope in the safest place I could think of - right next to the window by the driver's chair (this is a literary device known as foreshadowing). After all, this was the perfect place to keep an eye on it, plus have the convenience of easy access to cash for the payment of the parking fees.

At the last moment, I decided to switch busses with the other driver (for some unknown reason), and the rest is history.

As this poor unsuspecting driver was decelerating onto the off-ramp for MGM Studios the envelope was caught by a gust of air and swept out the window. Unaware of this tragedy in the making, the driver continued on until a frantic squawk from the CB informed him that he was making an illegal donation of camp funds to people of at least 20 different nationalities. The last driver in the caravan, an astute highway patrolman from Cape Girardeau, had become suspicious at the sight of little bits of green paper blowing wildly about. Being highly trained, and somewhat short on cash himself, he immediately identified the green bits as our youth budget for the next millenium going up in smoke - and radioed ahead. With a little quick action, and a lot of anxiety, the majority of the cash was recovered and a major disaster averted.

When I was later informed of this brush with bankruptcy, my first response was unbelief, then chagrin at my stupidity, and finally thankfulness to my Savior for his undeserved provision. I have of course learned my lesson about money and have appointments with several churches around the country to speak on handling camp finances. Now if I could just find my plane tickets.....

Hitting the XL'erator

I pray that this edition of XL'ent News has been an encouragement to you in the midst of busy schedules and stressful circumstances. I would like to leave you with a verse which has been a great encouragement to me when I feel overwhelmed:

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it, unless the Lord guards the city the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain to rise early, to retire

late, to eat the bread of painful labors, for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.
Psalm 127:1-2

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