

No series, Grant Dean on FPU mish moment, Bazaar unload
September 14, 2014, Boone UMC, Gen 50:15-21
Jason Byassee

Hard Question: – God’s Tears

John Irving was one of America’s greatest novelists until his death recently. A great Christian writer named Frederick Buechner was Irving’s neighbor. Irving wrote *The World According to Garp*, *The Cider House Rules*, many other fine books. But like any artist he also had some clunkers. When one of the clunkers came out Buechner couldn’t take it. He went over to his neighbor’s house and said this, “When you wrote *A Prayer for Owen Meany* the world got a little bit better.” The implication, of course, was that this last book made the world a little bit worse. Everything we do makes the world either a little bit better, or a little bit worse.

The story I’m about to read to you sums up the great biblical book of Genesis. Our origins as a people are that God makes us good, we decide evil is more interesting, and God has spent every second since trying to win us back. Once in a while, in this dark world, we get a glimpse of redemption. Once in a while. But often it’s just really dark. In this story Joseph, who has been sold into slavery by his brothers, has a chance to get revenge. Instead he *gives* his forgiveness. Now there’s a glimpse of redemption. God will one day make the whole universe right. In the meantime we get to help God repair the world. Hear this story about the world God intends coming just a little bit closer.

Genesis 50:15-21

15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” 16 So they approached Joseph saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17 ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” 19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

That’s the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

We had planned today a light-hearted sermon based on questions some of you asked on Facebook. Lots of the questions you asked included ones about how we pray, and we’ll pray during this sermon. But it’s not a day for a light-hearted sermon. It’s hard for all of us to believe that we lost a student at App. We had hoped Anna Smith would be found safely and returned home. I spent the day yesterday with my stomach in knots as I’m sure you did. How much worse must our own dean of students have felt, JJ Brown, who has been working with that family? How much more our law enforcement personnel, Bobby Creed and his colleagues? . . . How much more her parents?

This town wouldn't exist as it does without the university. All of our lives are touched by it. Many work there, spending our lives investing in students who will, in turn, invest in others over the course of *their* lives. Others work to keep those students fed, linked to the internet, behaving, entertained, and *safe*. The worst any of us can imagine is losing one, even just one. And yet we lose several every year. This one was in the media. But we lose students every year to cancer, car wrecks, accidents, suicide. One of our nurses was in the cancer ward this week. When I asked how it went, you said, "they're all so young." We all know vaguely we'll die one day. But it shouldn't be at 18.

Here's the question. What does God do with our prayers when they're not answered the way we want? Where do they go? Do they count for nothing? I was moved in the last two weeks to hear 300 students at Cru, campus ministry we support, praying for Anna. I texted JJ who said he'd tell her parents. I was moved to learn Anna was a Methodist confirmand. Our congregation in Archdale confirmed her as a Christian when she was 12. She was one of ours in several senses. I was moved to about Dana McKim, our campus minister at Pfeiffer who confirmed Anna, offering comfort and support. I was moved to see our community mobilize to help, and to pray. This community is so good at that. And then it all turns up empty. Again, the question. Where do all those prayers go?

The truth is I don't know. And be nervous if anybody has too quick an answer to that question. There are Christian traditions that say everything that happens is God's will. We Methodists do not. Because God does not will sin. God does not do evil. God does not decide which freshman lives and which dies, which plane falls from the sky and which lands safely, which of us gets cancer and which does not. God wants good for all of us. But God *is* all-powerful. We are right to trust God to protect us, to ask God's help. We are right to say thank you when something good happens. So why doesn't God *always* intervene, protect, make right? We don't know. And beware anyone who claims to. This is a deep mystery in the heart of things, and we blaspheme if we claim to understand it.

We can say some things. And I want to say them in a trinitarian way. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. That's who God is. And we'd better cling to God the Holy Trinity above all on a day like today.

¹God the Father, first. We think of the Father with reference to creation especially. Every time we see a beautiful thing in creation, we are right to give thanks to God. I love the Jewish blessing over a natural wonder, you say it when you see a sunset or a shooting star, ²"blessed art thou, oh Lord God, king of the universe, for thou hast done great things on earth and in heaven." What about terrible things in creation? Cancer is in creation. So are parasites. Malaria may have killed more people in human history than any dictator and that's a lot. Creation is beautiful and it's also flawed. It wasn't supposed to be this way. God created all things good. Then we creatures went our own way. Sinned. Rebelled. And all creation, all of it, has been fallen ever since. This beautiful

¹ I. God the Father

² On screen plz

world that God made is shot through with evil now. CS Lewis describes it this way, echoing his own experience in World War II ³

Enemy-occupied territory--that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage

This isn't the world God wants. It's flawed, and horror results. And here's the thing--do you think God didn't know it would fall? When God created everything was he surprised? Oh, dang, look, it went wrong? No. God knew the price of creation was pain. Because God makes us free. Free to love, or free to hurt. And we choose the freedom to hurt a lot. Someone chose freedom to hurt this week, and not just in the case in the media, but in each of our lives too. But God knew there could be no love without loss. *And* God wanted to love us. And to have us love God back. Without the freedom to say no, it wouldn't be real love. We'd just be robots. Puppets. *With* freedom we could be godlike. We could either love and serve God and others, or snub and hurt God and others. And God knew that risk and took it.

There's a story on prayer and love and loss I love from the rabbis. The archangel Michael has tried to insist that God should stop some horror. Something like the destruction of the temple or the holocaust. And God refuses. And Michael is furious. David Weiss Halivni's words⁴

Michael went back to his place, ashen and dejected, but could not resist looking back sheepishly at God and saw a huge tear rolling down his face, destined for the legendary cup which collects tears and which, when full, will bring the redemption of the world.

Maybe that's where all those prayers go. Into that cup. God will not forget. God will act. I just wish he would hurry up. So does the church.⁵ That's why we pray this way, **how long oh Lord?** Say that with me, **how long oh Lord?** Haven't you cried enough? Haven't all of us?

Here's the thing. God could have wiped us out and started all over. To read the bible God has tried that before. God used a flood, and *immediately* regretted it. Because the people saved from the flood were just as wicked as the ones lost. God swore he wouldn't repeat that. *Or* God could look away. Ignore all the suffering we inflict on one another. Say it's all good, who cares? A tragedy like this week shows us God has to care. For God to be a God of justice, he has to care that we do unspeakable things to one another. God has to judge. And he will. God will make the world right one day. I just wish he would hurry.

⁶ So God could wipe everything out, God could ignore our suffering. Some philosophical notions of suffering say God should do *something*. You've heard it put this way, some of you put it this way on Facebook-if God is all good, and God is all powerful, why do evil things happen? If God is able and willing then evil *shouldn't* happen. But it does, *as if anyone needed reminding of that*. Here's what's missing in that little conundrum: a certain Jew from Nazareth. God doesn't ignore our

³ On screen plz

⁴ On screen plz

⁵ Prayer on screen

⁶ II. God the Son

suffering and God doesn't stop all bad things. God takes flesh. God's answer to the problem of evil is a pregnant teenager from the sticks named Mary.⁷ God dives into our flesh, enters into our suffering, and takes the worst of it. This image of Jesus was in a hospital in the middle ages where people suffered from a horrible skin disease. And how is Jesus shown? With that disease. He has born our sorrows. When we shake our heads over the loss of someone like Anna, Jesus on his cross understands. When we ask why bad things happen to good people God points to the best person, his Son, to whom the worst thing happened. And this is precisely where Christianity shows its beauty. God isn't in heaven deciding who gets cancer and who gets found, who gets a lightning bolt and who gets home safely, like some sort of horrifying bureaucrat. God is in our flesh suffering alongside us, worse than us. Jesus' most important prayer is this,⁸ "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

And that's not the end. If it was the end, Christianity would have a taste for the tragic but little more. Christianity is not a tragedy. It's a fairy tale. A true fantasy. It's too good not to be true.

I love the way historians think Israel's belief in resurrection came about. Early in the OT you don't see much mention of heaven or hell or resurrection. But God had promised he would deliver his people Israel. Then too many Israelites die, unredeemed. What then? *God must be planning a resurrection.* God *has* to raise Israel in order to make good on his promises to them. That's what's begun in Jesus. *His* resurrection is the beginning of God's resurrection of all Israel, all humanity, all of us. The word of hope to Anna's family, to all those who suffer is not just "God knows how you feel." It's that God will bring about resurrection. You will see her again. Restored. As she was meant to be. Shining and in her right mind, radiant with God's beauty, resplendent as Jesus on the day of his resurrection. When? Who can know? We can pray this way though.⁹ **Come Lord Jesus.** Say that with me, **come Lord Jesus.** I sure wish he'd hurry. So did the early church. One prayer we recorded in Jesus' own language is this, one word,¹⁰ maranatha. It was so precious to the ancient church we refused to translate it. It didn't take long for folks to suffer more than they could handle, and to pray it with their hearts, pray it with me now, **maranatha.** Amen.

¹¹And a third word for today is about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the one who reigns in our hearts and makes us love like God loves. If you can look at any suffering in the world and not feel your heart move, we need to do a heart check to see if the Spirit is ruling there. The Spirit is God with us now. Anytime any of us says, "man, that's not right," that's the Holy Spirit in us, stirring up a longing for justice.

Paul in Romans 8 describes the Spirit groaning within us.¹² "The Spirit also intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." That's the best we can do for a translation. Sighs too deep for words. We don't really know what the Greek word means. We just know that when we feel our stomach in knots that's how God feels all the time. And that's God inside us, making us hurt for what hurts

⁷ <http://classconnection.s3.amazonaws.com/455/flashcards/1110455/png/picture101329989488109.png>

⁸ On screen plz

⁹ Bold on screen plz

¹⁰ Maranatha (1 Cor 16:22)

¹¹ III. The Holy Spirit

¹² On screen please, note it's from Romans 8:26

God's heart. Mother Teresa prayed this dangerous prayer,¹³ pray this with me, **God, let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.** But not only that. If that was all, God would hurt like we do, but not be able to do anything about it. The Spirit right now is pushing redemption out into all the world. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the kingdom, but not the end. The kingdom is in our midst and growing and God will one day make the whole world right the way God intends. The Spirit blew on the waters at creation, the Spirit raised Jesus, and the Spirit groans within us while we groan. Awaiting redemption. *Is redemption too much to hope for?*

You knew there'd be a prayer to the Holy Spirit don't you? Lots of you asked, how do we pray when the world is so wrong? The thing is, when has the world ever *not* been wrong? Ever? It always is. And God will not rest until its right. The Jews call this¹⁴ *Tikkun olam*, the repair of the world. That's what the Spirit is doing now, quietly, slowly repairing the world. I wish it were less slow, don't you? In the meantime we pray¹⁵ **Come Holy Spirit.** Pray that with me. **Come Holy Spirit.** We often pray that in Latin, it's funny how we leave our biggest prayers in languages we don't understand, *pax* in Latin, *gloria in excelsis deo* Latin again. These letters on the paraments in Greek, the name for Jesus.¹⁶ **Veni Sancte Spiritus** is how we pray this, pray it with me, **veni sancte spiritus.** God make this world the one you so want. And yes we now have had Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek in this sermon . . .

We're not the only ones praying. What's happening right now is the Lord Jesus is at the right hand of the Father praying for all of us. There is no one in the world, who has no one to pray for them. Jesus doesn't forget a one of us. Right now the Holy Spirit is groaning not just in heaven but in each one of us. When we don't pray, or forget to pray. God always *is* prayer. And Jesus' prayers, the Holy Spirit's prayers, are powerful. God will get the kingdom he wants and we can't do a thing to stop it. We can pray it'd hurry. And we do. But *we* can't hurry it. Only God can bring it. And God will. The line I gave you before from CS Lewis keeps on going.¹⁷

the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage. When you go to church you are really listening-in to the secret wireless from our friends. That is why the enemy is so anxious to prevent us from going.

And not only when we go to church. When we love instead of hate. When we do kindness to a stranger or even love someone who hates us. When we help God repair the world in any way. When we pray. The kingdom comes a little bit closer.

The story I read earlier from Genesis ends this way. Joseph's brothers figure they're going to get theirs now. They sold their brother into slavery, left him for dead. Now he's in charge. They try to manipulate him into being nice to them. Doesn't work. He weeps. Throws his arms around them. Loves them. He didn't have to. We'd have all understood if he threw them in prison. *But that's not*

¹³ Emboldened prayer on screen plz

¹⁴ Tikkun olam on screen please

¹⁵ Emboldened prayer on screen plz

¹⁶ Emboldened prayer on screen plz

¹⁷ On screen plz

the gospel. The gospel is we are like Joseph's brothers and deserve the worst. And we are like Joseph's brothers and get the best. And Joseph says these words thick with mystery,¹⁸ "What you intended for evil, God intended for good." Sure, they were wrong, horribly wrong, irreparably wrong. But God used their wrong to make right. We often say in the church that "God writes straight with crooked lines." God took the worst thing we ever did, crucifying his son, and by some divine jujitsu worked salvation for the world from it. So we don't say God causes evil. Never say that. We don't say God ignores evil. Never say that. God is so creative God can take the evil we do, and use it for good. Now careful with this. To say God will use this for good would be a blasphemy right now to Anna Smith's parents. But if even death can't keep us from God, what can evil really do?¹⁹ "Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies," Jesus says, "it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Then he showed us what he meant by dying and bearing the fruit of salvation. I wonder what fruit God can bring from the worst evil, even this?

This week in prayer we remembered that Jesus knows what to do with lost children. He finds them. He seeks for us until he finds us and never lets us go. Not even the grave can keep us from him.

This week another tear fell in the cup that God keeps. The Spirit groaned a special groan. And Jesus noticed the old scars in his hands hurt. He still has them you know. The scars. They're transfigured. Made beautiful. And they're still there in his hands. Never forgotten. Just life-giving. Jesus, give us all more of your costly life now. Amen.

¹⁸ Gen 50:20

¹⁹ On screen, attribute to John 12:24