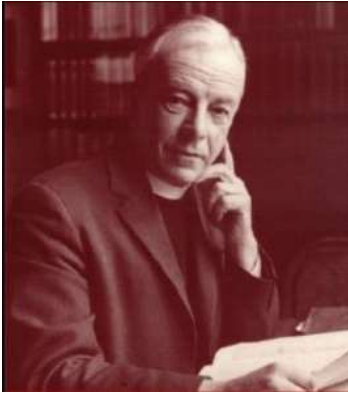


Sermons I Wish I Had Preached
God and the Fact of Suffering by James Stewart
Romans 8: 37

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Gerrit S Dawson**

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For the last few years, I've been enchanted by the writings of James Stewart. This Edinburgh pastor was named one of the top 10 preachers of the 20th century. So many times as I've read one sparkling insight after another I've thought, "I wish I had preached that sermon!" And then I thought, "Well, why don't I?"

I'm not the only pastor from our church who has admired Stewart. A few months ago, I found a volume of Stewart's sermons in our church library. We have a special section called "The John Melton Collection." Dr. Melton pastored our church from 1945 to 1970. Dr. Melton liked to underline with a pencil. One sermon was especially marked. It was the last of a four-part series on God and Suffering. This message seemed especially important to Dr. Melton. Then I remembered why. In 1959, the Melton's lost their son George in a tragic car accident. He was only 17, on the way back from a date. I don't know how Dr. Melton carried on after such a horrible event. But I realized that this sermon by James Stewart must have been a deep, real comfort to him. That's all the more reason to preach it to you. For the question of God and human suffering was real to James Stewart in 1941 when Britain was at war. It was real to Dr. Melton when he lost his son in 1959. It is real to us now. So here are excerpts from James Stewart's masterpiece:

Now you see the crucial point we have reached. Decisively this fact emerges – that man’s main concern with the dark fact of suffering is *not* to find an explanation: it is to find a victory. It is not to elaborate a theory: it is to lay hold upon a power. Even if you possessed the answer to the riddle, even if you had it written down to the last detail and could say, “There is the full and final explanation of the problem of pain,” that would not be enough, would it? For the pain itself would still have to be borne. That, in the last resort, is the real demand of the human spirit – not the explaining to this thing, but grace and help to bear it. *And that is why God gave us Christ.*

Open your New Testament. On every page of it you see the living God coming towards you, and holding out in His hands – not a ready-made answer to the vexed questions of the mind, but something better and diviner far – a liberating, reinforcing power for the soul! And this is why all the other beams of light converge at length upon a cross. Towering out of the dark it stands – God's everlasting answer to the quest of all the world.

See how the cross transforms the age-long mystery. What does it tell about the fact of suffering?

It tells you that *God is in it with you*. We are so apt to think of God as standing outside the sufferings of this world, apart and aloof in the untroubled serenity of heaven— a spectator God, dealing out pains and chastisements to His children, to see how they will react. But when I look with unveiled eyes upon the cross; when I grasp that the Sufferer hanging there is not just another martyr dying for his faith, but God incarnate, “love divine all loves excelling” ; when I set that cross against the background of Christ’s own tremendous word, “he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father” - then my heart makes answer to those who speak of a remote spectator God, “You are wrong! God is not outside the tears and tragedy of life. In every pang that rends the heart of man, woman, or little child, God has a share. In every dark valley of trouble and suffering, God is always present.”

One of the most moving scenes in English literature comes at the end of Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*. The carts were rumbling through the thronged streets of Paris to the guillotine. In one of them there were two prisoners: a brave man who had once lost his soul but had found it again, and was now giving his life for a friend, and beside him a girl – little more than a child. She had seen him in the prison, and had observed the

gentleness and courage of his face. "If I may ride with you," she had asked, thinking of that last dread journey, "will you let me hold your hand? I am not afraid, but I am little and weak, and it will give me more courage." So when they rode together now, her hand was in his; and even when they had reached the place of execution, there was no fear at all in her eyes. She looked at the quiet, composed face of the man beside her, and said, "I think you were sent to me by Heaven."

What is the Christian answer to the mystery of suffering? Not an explanation, but a reinforcing presence, Christ to stand beside you through the darkness, Christ's companionship to make the dark experience sacramental. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me" - and I think, Jesus, nay, I know, you must have been sent to me by Heaven.

"Look!" rang out the cry in the Book of Daniel, "Did we not cast three men into the furnace? But now there are four! Who is that other? How comes He there, in the midst of the fire? Is it a spirit, or an angel? What if it should be God? God walking there in the flame, to guard and save His own!"

How different suffering becomes to those who have seen that vision! It is not just that God knows, and sympathizes with you in your troubles, as any close friend might do. For He is so much closer than the closest friend. He is *in* you. And therefore your sufferings are His suffering, your sorrow His sorrow. Now that is true of all God's creatures. Just think what God's burden of suffering must be, when the pains of all the world are in His heart! No man who has once grasped this will ever again rail at Providence for being unkind. All our loud accusations and complainings are silenced and grow dumb before that vision of the immeasurable agony of God.

But remember this: if God is in it with you, sharing your suffering, it is also true that *you are in it with God, sharing His redemptive activity and His victory*. It is by the travail of the soul of Christ, by the age-long sufferings of God, that the world is moving on to its ultimate redemption. "With His stripes we are healed." Hence what suffering does, when it comes one day to you, is to give you a chance to co-operate with God. Every soul that takes its personal griefs and troubles, and offers these up on the altar alongside the sacrifice of Jesus, is sharing constructively in that eternal

passion of God by which all humanity shall at last find healing and peace. It is as though God said, in the day of darkness, “Here, my child, is something you can do for Me! Here is your little share in the burden which I have been carrying from the foundation of the world and must carry till the daybreak and the shadows flee. Here is your part with Me in the age-long cross I bear.” The man to whom that voice has spoken is trebly armed for the fight.

You must have noticed how often it happens that men and women who have met great tribulation in their own life come out of that experience with a wonderful new equipment for the service of God and their fellows. They reach the world’s heart irresistibly where others only grope and fumble. The real healers of the wounds of mankind are those whose own peace has been brought at a price, behind whose understanding and compassion and strong calm there lies some tale of Peniel, some deep, ineffaceable memory of a valley of shadow, and a lonely way, and a grim wrestling in the dark.

If from one soul’s hurt and conflict the balm of healing and of peace can thus be distilled out for others; if pain can be transmuted into power; if, under Christ, our sacrifices can be taken up into His eternal sacrifice, and can be made creative and redemptive – shall we still rail at life when it grows hard, and brood bitterly upon its cruelty and injustice? “Most gladly will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

God is in it with you, and you are in it with God – that is the message of the cross on the mystery of suffering. And that message means victory. There was victory at the cross for Christ: and God wants you to know that there can be victory at every cross for you. Will you try, for a moment ere we close, to focus the picture and get the crucified figure of the Christ right into the centre of your thoughts? What do you see? It looks, at first glance, pathetically like defeat.

It looks like the intolerable climax of all the pathos of the world. Here suffering and sorrow and the tragic element in life seem to blot out our fragile hopes for ever. “O Sacred Head, sore wounded, with grief and shame weighed down!” But you do not see the cross right at a first glance. You have to gaze and gaze again. And those who do that make a marvelous discovery. They see, not Christ the pain-drenched Sufferer, but Christ the

mighty Victor. They see the blackest tragedy of this earth becoming earth's most dazzling triumph. Their cry is no longer - "O broken, bleeding Victim, thou mournful sacrifice!" - not that, but this: "O Jesus, King most wonderful, Thou Conqueror renowned!"

You have never truly begun to see the cross till you have seen that. Is there not a wonderful sense of mastery, right through the Passion narrative? Listen to His own words: "No man taketh My life from Me. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." Is there not royalty in that? The irony of the situation was that Caiaphas, poor blinded self-deluded creature, thought that he held the reins and was the master-figure on the scene. "I have power to lay My life down," said Jesus. Is that defeat? See Him marching steadfastly to Jerusalem. Mark well His strong ineffable serenity through the last crowded, terrible days. Watch His bearing before Pilate. See Him on the cross refusing the drug they offered, that no atom of the anguish should be evaded. Hark to the ringing shout that broke upon the darkness: "It is finished!" Is that defeat? Yes, it is: but not Christ's defeat - certainly not that! But the defeat of suffering. The defeat of the mystery of evil, and of all the dark tragic powers of life - and Christ's victory! Thou art the King of glory, O Christ - thou Conqueror renowned!

"But what has all this to do with me?" you ask. "Christ may have conquered in the day of trouble, but my battle has still to be fought - and what help is there in Calvary for me?"

Surely the answer is clear. If evil at its overwhelming worst has already been met and mastered, as in Jesus Christ it has; if God has got His hands on this baffling mystery of suffering in its direst, most defiant form, and turned its most awful triumph into uttermost, irrevocable defeat - if that in fact has happened, and on that scale, are you to say it cannot happen on the infinitely lesser scale of your own life by union with Christ through faith? If you will but open the gateways of your nature to the invasion of Christ's Spirit, you will do as He did, and "lead captivity captive." "In all these things," wrote one who had tested the promise of God to the hilt in the worst tragedies of life, and there had a right to speak, "in all these things" - these desolating, heartbreaking things which happen to the sons of men, these physical pains, these mental agonies, these spiritual midnights of the soul - "we are more than conquerors," not through our own valour or stoic resolution, not through a creed or code or philosophy, but "through Him that

loved us” - through the thrust and pressure of the invading grace of Christ.

That is the only answer to the mystery of suffering: and the answer is a question – Will you let God in to reign? The answer is not a theory. It is a life. It is a dedicated spirit, a fully surrendered soul. That is the one finally valid answer. May God make that answer ours!

So that's quite a sermon. God's answer to suffering is not an explanation. But a person. Jesus Christ. Christ who took up flesh. Christ who died. Christ who is risen. Christ who will come again. To set all things right.