

MAN'S DESPERATION and GOD'S COMPASSION

LUKE 8:40-56

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November 4, 2001

Rather early in my ministry experience, a tragedy occurred in the church where I was serving. A young boy came down with a life-threatening illness, and nothing the doctors did could improve his situation. The mother of the boy had to quit her job so that she could spend her full time caring for her sick child. It was a very stressful situation. During that period of time, the faith of both the mother and the boy remained strong. However, another young mother in that church struggled with the situation. I cannot forget the day when she asked me how a God of love and mercy could possibly allow such a thing to happen. I won't forget, because as hard as I tried to answer her question, my answer did not satisfy her.

Today, we are going to allow ourselves to grapple with this same question. It is a question that many are asking today, especially in light of all the recent tragedies taking place in our world.

Our scripture reading today emphasizes the compassion and mercy of God, but it also emphasizes the desperation of innocent people when they meet with up tragedies in their lives. In the minds of many people, these two things contradict one another. A compassionate God who is in control of all things allowing innocent people to suffer just doesn't seem to make sense to a lot of people.

My goal today is not to give you a pat answer to a difficult question. I don't believe there is just one simple answer to the question of why a compassionate God allows suffering, and sometimes we will help people who are struggling with that question more by just listening to them than we will by trying to give them a simple answer.

But, even though there is not a simple answer, there are some truths that can help us in our struggle to understand why God allows those who seem to be innocent to suffer so much.

I want to simply take the story recorded in today's scripture reading and walk through it with you, and as we do, let's try to pick out some truths that will help us as we struggle to understand how God can allow suffering to take place. Then, after we have looked at the truths, we will come back and try to apply them to the question.

First of all, let us look at the desperate people as they are pictured in our scripture reading. The first two desperate people we will look at are a father and mother of a little girl. LUKE 8:41 says that the father's name was Jairus. Verse 51 mentions the mother, but does not tell us her name. Although the father is the one who comes to ask Jesus to heal his daughter, there is no doubt in my mind that the mother was just as anxious about the fact that her daughter was dying. LUKE 8:42 says that this daughter was their only child and she was about twelve years old.

The picture is a very graphic one. We see a father falling at the feet of Jesus, pleading earnestly for help, and we see a mother whose heart is breaking probably kneeling by the bedside of her twelve-year-old child. Matthew and Mark also record the story, and in MARK 5:23, we hear the words of the father as he cries out, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her that she may be healed and live." And, even though the mother is not recorded as saying anything, we can almost hear her sobbing by the bedside when her little girl, her only child, takes her last breath. No one in the crowd saw it, but our Lord knew it, and it touched His heart. The Bible portrays Jesus as knowing all things during His earthly ministry. When God became a man, He did not give up being omniscient. Without being told, Jesus knew that the daughter had already died, and He knew that messengers were on their way with the sad news. Nevertheless, Jesus agreed to go with Jairus. What He was about to do was not for the girl's sake as much as it was for the sake of the girl's parents.

From the parent's perspective, the girl's death was a tragedy. She was deprived of her life right at the age when she was about to become a young woman. But, from God's perspective and the perspective of eternity, the little girl had left a world of pain and suffering and what she had entered into was probably a whole lot better. I say "probably" because there is no way I can judge the spiritual condition of the girl when she died. All I know is that she was a young girl, and that she had parents who feared God. Let God be the judge of the final condition of anyone who dies.

But, at the same time, it must be pointed out that physical death is not necessarily the tragedy that we make it to be. In LUKE 8:52, Jesus said, "the child is not dead but asleep." He said the same thing after Lazarus had died. And, when people did not understand Him, He had to say plainly, "Lazarus is dead." In both cases, Jesus was looking at death from God's perspective.

Jesus saw the little girl at peace and said that she was asleep. I don't think that Jesus would have said this about the girl if she had passed on to eternal judgment. But, the main point is that Jesus did not look at the girl's death as a tragedy, because He could see from an eternal perspective.

So, the compassion that Jesus had was not for the little girl. Jesus is not touched with pity for those who die. It is for those who live that He is concerned. It was the agony of the father and mother that touched the heart of our Lord. They must have had some faith; otherwise, they would not have asked Jesus to come in the first place. But, their faith needed to grow, and Jesus was going to help their faith grow.

Notice how He helped Jairus's faith to grow. While Jesus was on His way to Jairus's house, a woman touched Him and He felt power go out from Himself. At that point, He could have continued to walk on. He knew what had happened, so He did not have to stop. But, He did stop. Jesus stopped to talk to the woman, but He also stopped to help Jairus grow in his faith. Jairus must have been feeling very impatient when Jesus stopped to talk to the woman. In his mind, there was no time for delays. His situation was desperate. But, there is always meaning in our Lord's delays. Out of the delays will come help. It is usually during the time that we are desperate and have to wait that our faith begins to grow and the darkness turns to light. Such was the case with Jairus.

During that delay, and while Jesus was still talking to the woman, the messengers came with the sad news. The order of events recorded in this passage of scripture is very interesting. Jairus first witnessed the healing of the woman. After that came the message of his daughter's death. Then immediately following that came the words of comfort and challenge from the One who had just healed the woman.

Think again about the order in which things happened. Jairus saw Jesus stop and heard Him declare that power had gone out of Him. LUKE 8:46 records Jesus as saying, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from Me." Then, Jairus heard a woman confess that she had been the one to touch Jesus and the power that had gone out from Jesus had healed her. At that point, Jairus must have been wondering about this power. Who was this man, Jesus? And, then came the sad message that would have crushed this father's heart; but before it could, Jesus spoke words of comfort and challenge. "Don't be afraid," Jesus said, "Just believe." In other words, trust Me!

In the Bible, we see that Jesus often performs one miracle in order to prepare people for another. Jairus's faith might have been strong enough to trust Jesus to heal his daughter, but was it strong enough to trust Him to raise her from the dead? The delay was to help the woman, but it also helped Jairus. If Jairus had not just witnessed this strange demonstration of power which healed the woman, perhaps he would not have believed when Jesus said, "Don't be afraid, just believe." Jesus was leading this man step by step.

And then, what happened in the girl's room needs no word's of explanation. Jesus leaves the laughing and mocking crowd outside and takes the father and mother, along with Peter, James, and John, into the girl's room. And then, He took the girl by the hand and said, "Little girl, I say to you, 'get up.'" Directly translated from the original language, verse 54 should read, "Little lamb, arise."

What I want you to notice through this whole story is how tender and loving our Lord is to this father and mother in their desperation. He treated them as a parent would treat his own children that he loved. Children do not understand everything their parents do for them at the time; but for the most part, parents do what they think is best for their children because they love them. Such is the love of God toward those who cry out in desperation for help. Everything that Jesus did and everything that He said was meant to help these parents grow in their faith. Even the delay, which must have been very hard to accept at the time, was meant to help. PSALM 103:13 says, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him." The truth of these words comes to life in the story of Jesus raising the little girl from the dead.

And, the truth also comes to life as we observe how Jesus healed the woman in the same story. Please look again at the story, but now focus your attention on the woman. Just like the parents of the little girl, this woman was also very desperate.

LUKE 8:43 says that she had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. The severe bleeding that this woman was experiencing was enough to cause her to feel desperate. It weakened her body, and eventually could kill her. But, the physical suffering was not the only kind of suffering this woman experienced. Women with the kind of bleeding she was experiencing were considered unclean in the Jewish society. And, by being unclean, she was cut off from the things that meant the most to her. One commentator writes that she "could not live in her home; she was cut off from all society, and must not come into contact with her old friends; she was excommunicated from the services of the synagogue, and thus shut out from the women's courts in the temple."

We need to understand this in order to get a clear picture of her desperation. Because of her physical problem, she was unable to experience the things that were most precious to women in those days. Her situation was so different from Jairus's situation, and yet there are some interesting similarities and contrasts. They both came to Jesus out of desperation. Jairus came to Him with a public request; the woman secretly approached Jesus. In the case of Jairus, twelve years of sunshine had suddenly been taken away from him with the death of his little girl. In the case of the woman, twelve years of darkness and suffering gradually wore her down, causing her to feel an intense desperation within her heart.

So great was her desperation and determination to reach Jesus that she was able to fight through the great crowds of people that were pressing so close to Jesus that He could hardly walk. In her weakened condition, that must have been very difficult. But, she did it. LUKE 8:44 says that "she came up behind Him and touched the edge of His cloak." Immediately, her bleeding stopped.

Just think about this for a moment. Crowds of people were pressing in on Jesus, and one person touches Him. Jesus can always tell the difference between the pushing of the crowd and the touch of a needy soul. Referring to this story, Saint Augustine once said, "Flesh presses, faith touches."

And so, Jesus asked the question, "**Who touched Me?**" It is a question He is still asking today. The crowds still come to Jesus because they are curious or because they want to see some great demonstration of power, or because they want to be entertained. Among the crowds of people, we can often hear comments like, "Wasn't that awesome?!" or "Wasn't that a great service?!" But, every once in a while, someone will come out of desperation. They will be at the end of themselves. Having done everything to try and help themselves, they will finally come to Jesus as their last and only hope. And, when they do this, they will touch the heart of our Savior, and He will answer. Jesus knows the touch of need, and He will always respond to it.

In this case, the woman found instant relief from her trouble. We must believe that this was the best way for God to cause her faith to grow and mature. And, as I have already mentioned, the instant healing and her testimony was also the best way for Jesus to help Jairus grow in his faith.

And so, in both the case of the desperate parents and in the case of this woman, we see our Lord responding to their desperate cries and working in their behalf. This, I say again, is always the way that God will respond to the person who truly reaches out in faith because he has come to the end of himself. God always responds to those who are desperate and have decided that there is nowhere to turn for help except to turn to God.

But now, we have to go back to the question that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. Both in the case of Jairus and the woman, from a human point of view, the stories both have happy endings. But, we know that all stories don't have happy endings, at least not from a human perspective.

I have a sister who has been suffering from a rare disease for over twelve years. She, too, has cried out in her desperation. But, she is still suffering. What can I say about her case? From a human perspective, it seems like she got a bad deal.

How can a compassionate God allow so much suffering to go on in this world? Beware of people who come up with easy answers to this question. I cannot tell my sister why she is made to suffer so. But, from the story recorded in today's scripture, I can hold on to some truths that help me as I struggle with this question.

First, I can know that God sympathizes with all our pain. He does care about the suffering of people. He does not turn a deaf ear to their cries. Just because God does not always relieve the pain does not mean that He doesn't care. He cares more than we will ever know.

Second, God not only cares about suffering people, but He also responds to those who cry out in desperation. Sometimes we have to wait a very long time before we can actually see how God responds. Perhaps for many, they will not know until they get to heaven. But, God will always act in a way that will help people grow in their faith and come into a relationship with truth. God's ultimate purpose is to save and not to destroy.

Lastly, what God sees as best and what we see as best are not always the same thing. We see a dead child and wonder how God could have let it happen, but God knows that sometimes allowing a child to die is not only the best thing for the child, but it is also the best thing for others.

No, I have no easy answer to all the suffering I see, but I do have certain truths that I can cling to by faith. It is by faith that we must accept these things to be true, because in moments of desperation, we will not find our feelings to be a whole lot of help. In fact, in times of desperation, our feelings often become our enemy.

When we are searching for the difficult answers in life, we must think beyond this life. We must believe that God is merciful. We must reach out and touch the mercy of God. And, then we must believe that, when God helps us, He will help us in a way that will last for eternity and not for just the present. Like the woman, weak as she was, who reached out and touched Jesus, may God also grant us the grace in our moments of desperation to reach out and touch His heart of mercy and love.