

GOODNESS OF GOD

Week 5 God of Mountaintops, God of Valleys

May 6, 2018

Someone recently told me about a funeral they attended for a child who had died of a wretched disease.

At the funeral, a relative addressed the mourners saying that his faith comforted him because he knew that God had taken their little girl so He could have another angel in heaven.

What kind of God kills our children so He can have the company of a pretty little angel?

Not the God of the Bible.

I sat in a hospital waiting room listening to a sobbing woman say that her faith was shattered.

She'd prayed, her church had prayed ... but still her husband had died.

Hadn't God guaranteed that he'd be physically healed because they believed?

Not the God of the Bible.

Nearly 3000 years ago, King Ben-Hadad of Aram forged an alliance with 32 neighboring kingdoms to attack Israel.

He sent a message to King Ahab of Israel demanding all his gold and valuables, all his children and his most beautiful women.

At first, King Ahab relented but later changed his mind, so Ben-Hadad launched a massive attack in the hill country of Central Israel.

Even though the Israelites were vastly outnumbered, God directed them to inflict a humiliating defeat over the Arameans.

The next year, King Ben-Hadad returned to seek his revenge, but this time his generals proposed a new strategy.

1 Kings 20:23 *“Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us (last year).”*

Their assumption was that Israel’s god only had power in the hills, not in the valleys.

So, King Ben-Hadad marched his army with many chariots to engage Israel in the plains and valleys.

1Kings 20:27b *The Israelites camped opposite them like two small flocks of goats, while the Arameans covered the countryside.*

The Arameans prepared for an easy victory because they were about a hundred thousand strong coming against Israel with just 7,000 men.

LORD OF YOUR MOUNTAIN TOPS & LORD OF YOUR VALLEYS

1Kings 20:28 The LORD says (to King Ahab): “Because the Arameans think the LORD is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the LORD (of both).”

But, 7000 + God is undefeatable.

That could be your Cliff Notes for today’s message: God is God, not just of your mountaintop experiences, He's the God of your valleys too.

God is your God, not just when you get exactly what you prayed for, not just in your victories, not just in the high points of your life.

He’s your God as you travel through your low points and valleys, too.

1 Peter 4:12 Friends, when life gets really difficult, don’t jump to the conclusion that God isn’t on the job.

VALLEYS ARE INEVITABLE & IMPARTIAL

Valleys are an inevitable part of life.

You may be in a relationship valley, a financial valley, a health valley, a grief valley, a depression valley – but whatever it is, God is with you.

You may be in a valley right now, or you may have just come out of one, or are heading into one – because our valley experiences are inevitable parts of life.

Not only are they inevitable, they're impartial – everyone goes through some hard times.

I sat with a man who'd just gone through a series of tragedies.

He said, “I think my past has caught up with me, and God is punishing me for the crap I did in the past.”

I said, “Nobody just sails through life, so don't assume that every difficulty comes from God.”

One day, Jesus and his disciples came across a man who had been blind since birth.

Jesus confronted their cultural assumption that all hardship is God's retribution for sin.

John 9:1-3 Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?”

Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do."

Good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people.

There was a woman in our congregation some years ago who went through a grueling series of cancer treatments.

I remember her telling me about conversations with other patients also undergoing chemotherapy.

Some, she said, would ask, "Why me?"

And her answer was, "Why not me?"

We don't have problems because we are bad people.

We have problems because we are human.

No one is immune.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:45 *"The rain falls on the just and the unjust."*

So, the Bible does not promise to insulate you from all hardship.

It does not promise that your faithfulness will immunize you from hardship.

But it does promise that God will be with you through your times of hardship.

YOU DO NOT TRAVEL ALONE

Psalm 34:19 The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all;

You may recognize some of the lines from Psalm 84 that were incorporated in our responsive reading today – they even appear in some of our favorite hymns and praise songs.

For example, Psalm 84:1, 10 How lovely is Your dwelling place, LORD Almighty! ... Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere;

This psalm was written for people living in Babylonian exile, yearning to return to Jerusalem, or possibly for people who had just returned to Jerusalem and found it in ruins.

There is joy in the promise of being in God's temple, but first they must pass through hardship.

Psalm 84:5-7 Blessed are those whose strength is in You, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs.... They go from strength to strength, growing until each appears before God in Zion."

Where is the Valley of Baca?

It is a desolate area known as the “valley of weeping”.

In this valley you feel no joy.

You don't feel close to God.

You're burned-out, dried up, just going through the motions.

But pilgrims have to pass through this valley before they can arrive at the temple.

On our pilgrimage through life, we will pass through the valley of weeping, but as we trust that God is walking beside us, even our journey of weeping is blessed.

Weeping is an honest expression of emotion, but if we get stuck at “poor me”, “this isn't fair”, or “I'm all alone”, then we remain in the wilderness.

We don't receive our strength, our blessing, our growth unless we pass through the valley.

More than one of the people who came to our GriefShare groups started the process but then quit.

Some said it was too painful, some turned to a variety of diversions or new relationships to avoid the pain of losing a loved one.

But until they walk that valley – the Valley of the Shadow of death – they will not be healed.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

God doesn't want you to camp out in this valley but to seek God down there because He will use the experience to build you up, for your growth and maturing.

Romans 5:3-5, We can even rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and that kind of hope does not disappoint us."

This isn't false hope or cheap grace.

This hope does not disappoint because God is building your character while you're going through that valley.

That's why this psalm speaks of growing.

We build personal resilience and trust in God when we face life as it is – we lost a spouse, we lost a job, whatever – but we are not alone.

Face where you are – you're in a deep valley, it's not fair but that is what life has placed before you.

Begin by accepting that you are in a dark place.

Denial that something has gone wrong can lead to disaster – like the person who ignores cancer symptoms or the business owner who avoids lay-offs when business turns south.

That doesn't mean God caused this problem, but you can begin exploring where God may show-up in all this.

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

God can use what He did not choose.

Last week, Michael and I were at the Central Association meeting.

Among other things, several people shared about their ministries as chaplains.

When you're talking about getting through the Valley of the Shadow of death, chaplaincy is where the rubber meets the road.

One of the speakers was Jamie Ito.

She went to seminary with Michael, and I hope she will be able to speak here later this year.

Jamie lost a child to leukemia – an unspeakable tragedy, an unbearable pain.

But from that heartbreaking experience she decided to become a chaplain at Children’s Hospital, because who can better counsel parents with a critically ill child than someone who has been through it themselves?

LOOK FOR THE LIGHT

Shortly after Jesus faced down Satan in the wilderness, he got word that John the Baptist had been thrown into jail.

Those were dark days, but Jesus looked for the light.

He found it in Isaiah:

Matthew 4:16 ... the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

Whenever we’re in the valley of shadows, the darkness feels threatening and permanent.

So, we remind ourselves of God’s promises.

John 8:12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

But the reality is that for most of us it takes more than reading an uplifting scripture to get through tough times.

So how do I find the light?

First, face the facts.

Second, pray, ask God to reveal Himself in this situation.

Third, be honest about what you're feeling – anger, confusion, self-pity, hopelessness - whatever.

No judgment or shame.

Whatever it is, get it out there ... you're not going to offend God.

Revealing your feelings is the first step to healing.

Then, to find the light in your darkness, prayerfully explore powerful questions:

What lessons does God want for me to get from this situation?

Where might God be leading me?

Where might I look to find God at work here?

You know the old story about the man who tried to escape a flood by climbing on his roof.

The waters kept rising, he kept praying.

A neighbor came by in his little raft and offered to row him to high ground.

He declined because he was waiting for God to save him.

This happened a couple more times with other neighbors, until he was eventually swept away and drowned.

When he got to heaven he was angry at God.

“I’ve been a good Christian. Why didn’t you save me?”

God replied, “I sent you a life raft, a row boat and a motor boat but you wouldn’t get on board.”

God wants to work through your entire life, growing you from one level of maturity, to the next level of maturity, and the next level of maturity.

FOLLOW THE SHEPHERD

The most well-known valley in scripture is in the 23rd Psalm.

Psalm 23:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me

But here's the deal: If God is your shepherd, then you need to follow him.

You need to trust and obey.

How do you do that when you feel wrung-out, depressed, confused?

If you've already built your relationship with God, then just do what you've learned is right and trust that God is there – even if you don't feel like it in the moment.

Steven Curtis Chapman is one of the most popular Christian singers and composers.

With dozens of Grammys and other awards, he regularly packs concert halls around the world.

He and his wife Mary have six children, including three of whom they've adopted.

In May 2008, the family was preparing to attend their son's Caleb's high school graduation when little Marie Sue ran out to greet her brother, Will, who struck her with their SUV as he was pulling into the driveway.

Paramedics could not revive her.

Chapman faced a huge challenge.

How could he continue a series of concerts about praising God right after his daughter had been killed?

He later said this in an interview, “Jesus tells us in this world, you will have trouble. ... (but Jesus than said) But take heart because I've overcome the world.”

“(Jesus said) that there's another story being told that we don't always see.”

Steven says, "if I didn't believe that, I'd be an extremely bitter and angry man. My little girl's death underlined and solidified what I knew and believe but it made it more real."

He said, “When there was nothing else to hold on to, I heard myself say, ‘God I'm going to trust you and worship you and it's not because there's an audience watching.’”

He said he would go on stage, but not to perform for the large crowds, but for an audience of One – and trust that God would be revealed even in his darkest valley through his faithfulness.