

Lesson Two Sermon

THE
GOSPEL
IN
HARD
TIMES

The Gospel in Hard Times

Lesson Two

Jesus Identifies with Our Sorrow

Story: Maybe you saw the national headlines when it was announced that Pastor Rick Warren's son took his own life in 2013, after years of struggling with mental illness. Pastor Rick and his wife Kay took several months to grieve before returning to their congregation at Saddleback Church in Southern California. In a blog post a couple of years later, Kay shared some insights into what they learned through those dark days:

Most of you will not face anything as devastating as the loss of a child due to suicide, but every single day you will face something that threatens your attempts to live with joy. Health problems, financial worries, marriage issues, loneliness, unresolved relational conflicts, anxiety about our nation or our world, stress over how our kids are turning out – the devil is at work nonstop to interfere with or interrupt your plans and dreams. Your primary task in life is to get to know God intimately and to send your spiritual roots deep into the soil of his love; to develop convictions and certainties about him that will become the source of your strength when happiness isn't enough.¹

Introduction: Jesus, as the Suffering Servant, entered into our world to experience suffering and sickness with and for us. When we encounter pain and disease, or struggles, we can trust that our Savior understands.

Big Idea: In our darkest hour, when human comfort fails to touch the depth of our pain, Jesus stands with open arms as the ultimate expression of empathy.

Text Reading: Isaiah 53:3-4

Context of Scripture: The figure of the Servant in the last several chapters of Isaiah has been the subject of much discussion. At times the Servant is identified with Israel as a whole (41:8; 44:1; 49:3), but ancient Israel clearly failed to carry out the Servant's mission to witness to God's glory and shine light in the darkened pagan world. Elsewhere, the figure sounds like Isaiah himself (53:1), but Isaiah's suffering never seems to have reached the level described in Isaiah 53. The Suffering Servant would reveal God in a paradoxical way: through suffering and humiliation, he sacrificed his life to rescue the people of God.

¹ Kay Warren. "How to Choose Joy," December 15, 2015. <http://kaywarren.com/kays-blog/category/choose-joy/>

Hundreds of years later, Jesus started his public ministry with a sermon from Isaiah 58 and 61 (Luke 4:16-21), emphasizing that people affected by disabilities were at the center of his saving activity. Later, the New Testament writers clearly identified Jesus as the Suffering Servant, and they regarded many of the details in Isaiah as being specific prophecies about Jesus.

The Suffering Servant was described as appearing not in majesty but “despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief” (53:3). He would bear our weaknesses and carry our sorrows. He would be pierced for our sin and rebellion, whipped and beaten for our healing. Our sin would be laid on him. His death would be underserved—like a lamb led to the slaughter without resistance. His body would be buried in a rich man’s grave. His death would (miraculously) produce a host of descendants, and he would be satisfied by the accomplishments of his anguish.

Every line of this prophecy fits the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. The figure described here is no stranger to alienation, abandonment, and anguish. As Hebrews says, Jesus Christ is our great High Priest who learned obedience and was made perfect through suffering, who understands perfectly what we experience (Hebrews 2:10-18; 4:1; 5:8-9). Every aspect of our experience of suffering is familiar to Jesus Christ, and he accompanies us in the midst of each painful moment.²

Transition Question/Statement: Jesus is the God-Man, but to what degree does he really resonate with the human condition, especially as it relates to suffering?

Point 1) Jesus Understands Rejection (Vv. 53:3a, c, d)

- A. Isaiah tells us that the Suffering Servant would be well acquainted with rejection, he will experience what it means to be despised, and forsaken. (V. 3a, d)
- B. Furthermore, the Suffering Servant knows the feeling of being repulsive to others. (V. 3c)
 - a. He would be so gross, that folks would turn their faces from the very sight of him.
 - b. Some people affected by disability experience this rejection far too often.
 - c. Those who’ve become disabled or disfigured through an accident, or military combat, are hurt by stares and whispers, or when people treat them like a “freak.”
 - d. Perhaps your sins were made public, and people have turned their backs on you? In all of this Jesus understands your pain of rejection.
- C. Jesus, the Suffering Servant, also experienced what it is like to be devalued, disregarded. (V. 3d)
 - a. For those who have been devastated by someone who took one look at you and concluded that you’re not worthy, not able, or not good enough, remember that Jesus encountered that as well during his life.

² Adapted from the *Beyond Suffering Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, 2016, p. 831.

- b. He handled repulsion with dignity, grace, and a kingdom perspective—and so must we.

Transition Question/Statement: During Jesus’s life he would experience the social implications of suffering, but would he know them personally?

Point 2) Jesus Understands Affliction (V. 53:3b)

- A. Isaiah says that Jesus would be a man of suffering and would personally know sickness.
 - a. Isaiah predicts that Jesus would *possess*³ pain and suffering. In our modern vernacular we might say, “He owned it!”
 - b. Sometimes those who are suffering, living with disabilities or other challenging conditions feel like no one else understands their grief. They may even wonder if God knows what’s going on or even cares. The answer is, “Yes, he does.”
 - c. Jesus, in his humanity, experienced joy, pain, laughter, tears, and all the other human emotions and needs that we have. Born of a woman, Jesus was swaddled in a manger, nursed, probably got scrapes and bruises as a child, grew in wisdom and stature as an adolescent (Luke 2:52), and worked as a carpenter. Jesus also dealt with the loss of loved ones—he wept at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35).
 - d. Often, we tend to compare our lives to the lives of others with questions like: Why do good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people?
 - i. We don’t have all the answers, but we can agree that life is not fair. And, as we learned last week, we shouldn’t expect it to be. Think about it. If life was fair, we would all be on a crash course to hell because Jesus taking our place of damnation, well, it certainly wasn’t *fair*. In fact, the pain, suffering, ridicule, rejection, and grief that Jesus experienced was so severe, he was referred to as a “Man of Sorrows” by Isaiah in the text we are looking at this morning. That’s not fair!
 - e. **Illustration:** I love Joni Eareckson Tada’s perspective on suffering and dealing with times when life seems unfair. She’s been a quadriplegic most of her life and was diagnosed with breast cancer, not once, but twice. Driving home from her chemotherapy appointment one day, God gave Joni a different perspective on her struggles. She shared:

My husband Ken and I were talking about “splash-overs” of hell. I’ve always said that suffering is like a little splash-over of hell, reminding us of what Christ rescued us from—like a tiny taste of what life could be like for all of eternity, were it not for God’s graciousness. So we started talking about what splash-overs of heaven are; the places or times when

³ In the Hebrew, “man of pain/suffering” is in the construct state. Meaning the two nouns: man and suffering are linked together communicating a possessive relationship. A concrete translation would be, “a man who possesses pain/suffering.”

there's no suffering and life is breezy and things are going our way . . . but then we decided nope, splash-overs of heaven are not that. They're not the mountaintop experiences.

Splash-overs of heaven are when you find Jesus in the splash-over of hell. It was so encouraging to suddenly feel that powerful little insight take root in my heart. So instead of trying to be so quick to escape pain—even as I keep praying for change—I've been learning to be quick to sit and wait and see what satisfaction the Lord will give. I know that yielding to him and patiently waiting on him is winning me “an eternal glory that far outweighs [it] all” (2 Cor. 4:17). When I stick with him in “the fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10 NKJV), I'm increasing my capacity for joy and worship and service, and that draws me closer to Jesus. It gives such meaning to the pain.

- f. Wow! Imagine what God could do through us if we all approached the challenges life throws at us with an attitude like this. I believe we can, through Jesus's strength living in us.

Transition Question/Statement: Jesus was socially rejected and knew suffering and sickness intimately. But did he also experience the gut-wrenching shame many of us experience with our misfortune?

Point 3) Jesus Understands Reprehension⁴ (V. 4)

- A. Jesus was misunderstood and falsely labeled by his own people.
 - a. His people saw his pitiful state and determined that he was plagued, struck down by God, and humiliated. (V. 4b)
 - i. As people looked intently at the Suffering Servant, many concluded that he must have sinned and God was chastising him for unrighteousness—so Jesus was getting what he deserved.
 - ii. Jesus *was* accursed by God, plagued, and humiliated, but not for the reasons the people thought.
 - iii. He endured the condemnation of God, not because he was a sinner, but because we are.
 - iv. So it is with folks facing adversity or various sufferings, they may be experiencing hard times not because they've sinned, but simply as the result of living in our fallen world.
 - v. When we see someone going through hard times, let's not default to “they are being punished by God,” our default position should be one of compassion, empathy, and grace.

⁴ Reprehension is the idea of a judgmental blame, fault finding, censuring & disapproval for another person's unfortunate situation or circumstance. Guilt & shame are birthed out of reprehension.

- b. **Illustration:** I go back to my story of Rick and Kay Warren’s tragic loss of their son Matthew. Although many knew of their son’s struggles with mental illness, his suicide put a spotlight on the shame and stigma associated with mental illness, especially in the church. The Warrens determined to use Matthew’s suicide as a catalyst for change to help eliminate some of the judgment and wrong assumptions about those who struggle with mental illness. In a magazine interview Kay shared, “Because Jesus rose from the dead, our pain, our loss, has meaning, and we have a hope that we can base our entire lives on. Keeping this pure hope and leaning on God are the only ways to find joy... and survive all the things that feel unsurvivable.”⁵
- B. Often, we can get so caught up in temporal things that we forget about the eternal and vice versa.
 - a. Suffering, adversity, tragedy, and difficulties present opportunities to test how worldly we are.
 - b. Are we fixated on our personal comfort and serenity, or is our highest priority the glory of God?
 - c. How we approach adversity will either bring glory to God or detract from it.
- C. Now, let’s turn to the eternal for a moment. Isaiah concludes with this: “Therefore I will give him (this man of sorrows) a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 53:12).
 - a. We learn from Jesus what it is like to suffer with extreme patience. Jesus was patient because he knew what his suffering, and ultimately his death, would accomplish. And friends, what it accomplished is forgiveness and eternal life—a life free from pain, suffering, disability, and all of the other challenges we face in the here and now.
 - b. So, we too, can live with confidence and be comforted during our times of trials in this life because we know one day, we will be with our loved ones who have new bodies and experience life the way God intended it to be. But during this brief time, we must suffer patiently trusting God’s plan, even when we don’t fully understand it. Yet, one thing we can cling to in all of our uncertainty—Jesus understands!

Takeaway

Allow Jesus, the one who understands pain, suffering, and sorrow better than anyone, to guide you through your times of struggle, comfort you in your grief, and show you the way forward.

⁵ Kay Warren. “After the Death of Her Son, Kay Warren Says Easter Gives Her Hope Again,” March 1, 2016. <http://kaywarren.com/article/after-the-death-of-her-son-kay-warren-says-easter-gives-her-hope-again/>