



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Why Them and Not Us?

When the Answer to a Prayer Is No

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Our Story

1. I was asked to preach today because 16 ½ months ago our world was turned upside down and a new normal we never would have imagined was thrust upon us.
 - a. In the fall of 2016, my wife Carlynn began to experience—and was treated for—symptoms that appeared to be a kidney infection or maybe a stone
 - b. In the winter and spring of 2017, she began to experience lower back pain. She thought it was simply another occurrence of what she had experienced before, pains in her back and legs that she attributed to too many high school band marches on concrete surfaces.
 - c. But the pain—and debilitation—grew worse. Physical therapy helped some, but clearly was not the answer. She began to need help getting out of bed, became unable to drive, had increasing difficulty sitting and then walking; she lost her appetite.
 - d. Results from a lab report prompted her doctor to send her for some scans. Because results from a later report were better, he indicated that he thought the tests were precautionary.
 - e. On Friday, June 30, 2017—the start of the July 4th weekend—we went for the tests. After examining the scans, the radiologist called her doctor who then called us before we left the hospital. The scans showed that Carlynn had tumors on both kidneys and her lower spine.
 - f. She spent fifteen days of July in the hospital where we learned that her kidney cancer was stage 4, and, in words branded into my mind, was “treatable, but not curable.”
 - g. Beginning before she went home, she had radiation treatments in the hope that the tumor on her spine would shrink and her pain would ease. The treatments had almost no effect.
 - h. She began to take immunotherapy medication in the form of pills.
 - i. On average, patients taking it lived an additional 2-3 years.
 - ii. Our hope—our prayer—was for her quality of life during that time, and for the development of more successful treatments in the meantime.
 - i. When she was readmitted to the hospital in August because of an infection, scans showed that the pills had helped; her tumors had gotten smaller.
 - i. But complications necessitated that she stop taking the pills. As I understand it, and speaking as a layman, once she stopped, the cancer came back with a vengeance.
 - ii. On the Friday before Labor Day, we were told nothing more could be done medically. Only she could make the decision to be admitted to hospice, and it took her a few days to make it. She was in hospice for a little more than a week.

- iii. She died September 16, fourteen months and two days ago,
 - a) She died eighteen days before her 61st birthday.
 - b) She died just over 3 ½ months before our 40th wedding anniversary.
 - c) She died just 2½ months after we learned she had cancer. We learned it nine days after the official beginning of summer. She died five days before the beginning of fall. Her illness was our summer of 2017.
- 2. Her life had ended, but our story has continued.
 - a. Our sons and daughter-in-law were left without their mother, friend, and counselor.
 - b. Her grandchildren were left without their Gamma, deprived of the delight she had in them and the tangible displays of love she intended to lavish on them.
 - c. And I found myself in “the club no one wants to join.” That’s a phrase used by Dean Miller who founded and conducts the Widowhood Workshop ministry and facilitates a Facebook group for widows and widowers in churches of Christ. His wife passed away five years ago.
 - i. I’m not alone in that club, of course. It’s not a scientific analysis, but as he has presented his workshop in several states, Dean has found that generally about 10% of a church’s Sunday morning attendance number are widowed.
 - ii. But while there are similarities—and many details about being widowed I don’t believe you can know until you face it—no two of us experience grief in exactly the same way. So, in no way do I intend to tell anyone what is typical.
 - iii. But I will share with you some commonalities I’ve discovered with some I’ve talked with in the last several months.
 - a) To date, this year, I’ve preached three funerals for families in our membership in Memphis where we were from 2000-2015.
 - b) I’ve talked with other friends, some we’ve known more than 30 years, who have become widowed since Carlynn died.
 - c) In August, Dean asked me to speak at a retreat for the widowed; my topic was, “Growing Our Perspective on Life and Trouble,” a presentation (that could be a series) in which I summarized some observations from years of reading, thought, and experiences both personal and ministry related.
 - d) In those situations, I’ve found that when I have said to a friend more recently widowed that it’s like a hole has been left, it resonated with them. If I talk about times of uncertainty and a hole of despair, I’ve gotten the sense that they understand.

The Question

- 3. Learning that I had agreed to preach this morning, some asked if I thought it was too soon. I didn’t think so, but I’ll let you know. I do know that they were perceptive to ask.
 - a. It’s been fourteen months. Has it gotten better? Yes—and no. “Getting back to normal” doesn’t happen in a few days or, as others who’ve been widowed longer than I have indicated, a few months.
 - b. I experience the deepest holes of despair less frequently. They typically don’t last as long.
 - c. But as I have entered year two, I’ve found that, as what I now realize was numbness in the initial months has worn off, nostalgia, a longing for the life we once had and hoped for, has increased. What has always been my favorite picture of Carlynn, a candid shot taken in the yearbook office at Freed-Hardeman where she was assistant editor, is now more precious to me. So are memories from years ago that often enter my thoughts without warning.

4. I have also *continued* to deal with the feelings that intrude when something is said or occurs—often in a church service—that prompts me to ask, “Why?”
 - a. Not, “why did this bad thing happen?” Not, “why did it happen to *us*?”
 - i. I have long known, believed, and taught—and Carlynn believed this even during her illness—that we live in a world where “it rains on the just and the unjust” (Matt 5.45); where the question is not *if* trials will come, but what to do “*when*” they come (Jas 1.2).
 - b. Typically my why question is not one that wonders if one or the other of us were being called to account for some specific sin, although I admit that thought has occurred more than once.
 - i. I know, from both experience and biblical teaching, that sins have consequences, that *sometimes* our suffering—and struggles in prayer—do result from sinful actions.
 - ii. But I also know that, if Job’s story teaches anything, it is that much suffering is *not* connected to any *specific* sin.
 - iii. And if Job’s story isn’t enough to confirm that, the story of Jesus is (1 Pet 2.21-25).
 - c. No, the “why” question that often troubles me is why the specific requests we prayed—and people here and across the country shared—were not answered affirmatively. (I was acutely reminded of this when I returned to the Caring Bridge site we established while she was ill and re-read many of the posts.)
 - d. Or, to put it another way, why were our specific prayers for her recovery, for 2-3 years where she enjoyed some quality of life, and so on, answered with a “No?”
 - e. More pointedly: why did we receive a “no” while others receive a “yes.”
 - i. I don’t ask that as a question about fairness.
 - ii. If I know my heart, I do not begrudge others their yes; I rejoice with them.
 - f. Let me also emphasize:
 - i. I am not questioning whether God hears, or answers, prayer.
 - ii. I am not questioning whether he sometimes answers in unexpected ways.
 - iii. I am saying that I’m among those seeking to come to terms with the reality that the *specific* request we raised in prayer was answered with a “No” while others in similar situations received a “Yes.”
 - iv. I am also saying that the question “why” I experience is more a longing “what if?” than an attempt to discern a reason. In fact, I’m not sure discerning a reason will ever be possible.
5. Understand, it has always part of my “wiring” to ask, “Why?” But also understand that my question is largely emotional.
 - a. How could it not be? God created me with emotions.
 - b. They are real, but they do require me to ask what I need to do to keep them from consuming me and eroding my trust.
6. The short answer is that I must walk by what I know through faith, not by feelings
 - a. By that I mean that the question must ultimately be answered in light of the testimony that comes by hearing (Rom 10.17), the faith that is “sure of what we hope for” because of the “certain[ty] about what we do not see” (Heb 11.1; NIV 1984).
 - b. Let me share with you some principles that are helping help me, and may help you should you ever pray a specific prayer that’s answered with a No.

Faith: Reality, Feelings, and Purpose

7. First, from Scripture I learn about reality in this world.

- a. I learn from Paul that the human condition was not the only thing in creation adversely affected by the fall (Rom 8.18-23). We live in a world where:
 - i. Suffering is real (v. 18) (the Bible is always realistic about that).
 - ii. "Creation was subjected to futility" (ματαιότης, *mataiotēs*; cf. Eccl 1.2, LXX) and is in "bondage to corruption,... groaning" in anticipation of freedom. (vv. 20-22).
 - iii. I am convinced that cancer is one of creation's corruptions; it was not supposed to be.
- b. In addition to knowing that about the effects of a fallen world, I am consoled when I read that inspired servants felt and voiced frustration and feelings like the ones I've experienced.
 - i. Depending on which scholar you read, about 1/3 of the 150 psalms are laments.
 - a) They are passages that ask God some bold, even impertinent questions and register a complaint about what is happening in life and/or what God is (or isn't) doing.
 - b) One writer identified 54 lament psalms,¹ the "commentary" I studied for this lesson.
 - ii. Here are three of the things that stood out in those psalms.
 - a) Some ask a form of the why question I've talked about here (cf. Psa 44.1-3, 9-11, 17, 20; v. 11, repeated in v. 22, is quoted by Paul in Rom 8.36).
 - (i) Note that Psalm 44.20 also raises the possibility that sin is the reason for a "No."
 - b) They often cry out to God, asking if he hears, why he does not respond, and so on.
 - (i) The address, "O God" appears 97 times in the ESV translation of Psalms; 64 (2/3) are in the 54 laments identified by Limburg.
 - c) I also found expressions of the same kinds of *feelings* I've experienced (though the specific reasons for them were not the same). See Psa 55.1-2, 4-6, 17.
8. Second, from Scripture I learn to let revelation rule over emotions.
 - a. One thing I noticed as I worked through the lament psalms is that, generally, the writers balance their complaints and expressions of despair with what I'll call a return to reality regarding what God had done and promised.
 - i. Psalm 44, for example, begins by recalling what God had done in the past (vv. 1-3).
 - ii. In Psalm 55.16, David expressed confidence that "the LORD will save me."
 - iii. He urged casting one's burden on the LORD and was sure "he will sustain you ... [and] never permit the righteous to be moved" (Psa 55.22).
9. Third, from Scripture I am reminded of God's ultimate purpose for us and that he is capable of realizing it despite the worst of circumstances. To merely summarize the revelation in Romans 8:
 - a. We are assured that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (v. 28, NIV 1984).
 - b. We are told what his purpose for us is:
 - i. "... to be conformed to the image of his Son,... (v. 29); he too asked, "Why...? (Matt 27.46).
 - ii. To be "called, ... justified" and "glorified" (v. 30; cf. "glory" in vv. 18, 21).
 - c. Jesus is the ultimate example of this truth: his pain, trauma, and rejection were overcome by his resurrection, his glorification (cf. 8.11, 17, 34). God worked things out for his good.

Hear Me O God

10. It is in view of the promises and purposes of the all-powerful, all-knowing, and above all, all-loving God that we can press on and endure in life.

¹ James Limburg lists 43 individual laments and 11 community laments. Individual laments: Pss 3-7, 9-10, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 38, 40, 41, 42-43, 51, 54-59, 61, 64, 69-71, 77, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, and 140-143. Community laments: Pss 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 137. ("Psalms, Book of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 532.

11. He is a God who will hear us, even when we are frustrated and in the throes of despair. And so, we pray, as did the psalmists of old, “Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer” (Psa 61.1). And we *know* he does—and will. I urge you to pray with me as we sing—and if we can pray specifically for you or help strengthen your relationship with God, please come.²

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² The song I asked to be sung after the sermon when I preached it at the College church was Tillit Teddlie’s “Hear Me When I Call,” drawn from the words of Psalm 4 (# 215 in the *Praise for the Lord* hymnal; ed. John Wiegand, Praise Press, 1992). From a search for information about it on the internet, I learned that when he wrote the song in 1962, Teddlie was in his late 70s. It was suggested in some reports I read that his reason for writing it probably had to do with the debilitations he was beginning to experience as he aged.

After I preached it at College, one of our members told me that she had known brother Teddlie as a girl and young adult. In fact, her grandfather and he had been good friends and associates in some endeavors. She related that she was among a group of singers who, during a brief visit as they were passing through the town where Teddlie lived at the time, had the opportunity to learn and sing the song before it was distributed.

She also told me that, not long before he wrote it, Teddlie had lost his wife and was coping with his own grief. Needless to say, the song now resonates with me even more than it did before.