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### **Making Sense of Pestilence and Personal Tragedies**

Just two weeks ago our own Steve and Margo Hampton suffered the tragic loss of their only son, Jessie. At this very moment, 9-year-old Dylan Gardner is getting treatment for Leukemia. And I could go on seemingly without end listing the people who are suffering in various ways. On top of all this, one could add the emotional instability and, on the part of some, panic that has set in as we watch the spread of Covid-19.

I'm inclined to think the best way to respond to such personal tragedies, such as the sudden and inexplicable death of a loved one or an extended illness or the loss of a job, is simply to say nothing. I have little patience for those who feel the need to theologize about such events, as if anyone possessed sufficient wisdom to discern God's purpose. On the other hand, people will inevitably ask questions and are looking for encouragement and comfort. So how best do we love and pastor those who have suffered so terribly? How do we persevere in faith when the future days seem so bleak and uncertain?

I'm not certain I have the answer to those questions, and what I'm saying today I say with considerable hesitation. I can only pray that what I say is grounded in God's Word and is received in the spirit in which it is intended.

I first put my thoughts together on this subject when the tsunami hit Japan a couple of years ago, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of men, women, and children. Not long after that the earthquake struck Haiti and once again thousands were killed and many more left homeless. And, of course, there are the numerous tornadoes that have devastated portions of Oklahoma over the past twenty or so years. Today, and for the foreseeable future, it is the Coronavirus.

So here are my thoughts.

#### ***(1) God is good all the time.***

“O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!” (Psalm 34:8).

“For the LORD is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting, And His faithfulness to all generations” (Psalm 100:5).

“Praise the LORD! Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; For His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Ps. 106:1).

“The LORD is good to all, And His mercies are over all His works” (Psalm 145:9).

Quoting those biblical texts that speak of God's goodness, and there are dozens more in addition to the four I just cited, may sound hollow. And I understand why. How can we speak of God's goodness in the face of so much horrific pain and devastating loss? I'm not trying to harmonize a profound mystery and I don't claim to have a convincing answer to the question, but I don't know where else to turn. I don't know of a better and more persuasive alternative.

To say nothing about God's goodness when we encounter evil and pain is to suggest that, in point of fact, he isn't good, or that he may simply be indifferent to human suffering. But I find no comfort in that. I would rather cling to God's goodness and live with the mystery of how to reconcile it with suffering than to face suffering without any hope that a good God can make sense of what strikes us as senseless.

#### ***(2) Although God is good all the time, he doesn't promise us that we will always see or perceive it to be true.***

In the end, we must, like Job in the Old Testament, join the apostle Paul and say: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! **How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!** For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:33-36).

I have to confess there are times, such as now, when in my arrogance I would like to provide God with some counsel. I'd like to give him advice on how to run the world. But then I put my hand over my mouth and confess that he is God and I am not. He is infinitely wise and I am not.

Paul's use of words in this passage are both a challenge and a comfort to me. He says that the things God does are both "unsearchable" and "inscrutable." We may search forever and seek the counsel of numerous philosophers and theologians and average people, but we will never fully fathom or grasp God's ways. The word "inscrutable" suggests that even if we were to find an answer, we wouldn't be able to make sense of it. It would baffle and confuse us.

But I'm also encouraged by what Paul doesn't say in this passage. He refers to God's "judgements" and his "ways" as being unsearchable and inscrutable, not his character or his goodness or his love. We don't have to live in doubt or wallow in mystery when it comes to God's character. His ways, why he does what he does, is another matter. But let there be no doubt about his compassion and kindness and tender-hearted personality.

***(3) Although in times of tragedy and great loss God seems to be far from us, he is in fact always and ever near to the broken-hearted.***

"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, And saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

"He heals the brokenhearted, And binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

"But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Thy works" (Psalm 73:28).

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

God promises to be present with us in the midst of the worst of tragedies, the darkest of days, and the most devastating of losses. As David said in Psalm 23:4, "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Some might prefer (and even presumptuously demand) that God insulate us from all evil and darkness and suffering. Some might even pray that he always take us "around" or "over" or "in the opposite direction" from all troubles and trials. But God's unfailing promise is that he will walk "with" us "**through**" the valley.

God doesn't simply send us into the valley with truths about him or even angels to guard our steps. He pledges **his personal presence** "with" us. Wherever we go, whatever we suffer, he's there, with a "rod" to beat off ravenous wolves that seek to consume us spiritually (cf. 1 Sam. 17:33-37) and a "staff" to keep us under his control and bring us back to the fold should we stray too far.

***(4) It will not accomplish anything good to deny what Scripture so clearly asserts, that God is absolutely sovereign over all of life and over all of nature. God is sovereign, not Satan.***

God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11).

"The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; And His sovereignty rules over all. (Psalm 103:19).

"Who is there who speaks and it happens, unless the Lord has ordained it? Do not both adversity and good come from the mouth of the Most High?... Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD" (Lam. 3:37-40).

"The steps of a man are established by the LORD; And He delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong; Because the LORD is the One who holds his hand" (Psalm 37:23-24).

"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

I've heard many ask whether this recent outbreak of the Coronavirus might be the work of Satan. Perhaps. But I can't speak definitively concerning what our enemy does or doesn't do. I do know that he will do everything in his power to exploit present circumstances to undermine our confidence in God's goodness. To what extent this plague is the work of Satan or the work of God or simply something that God permits Satan to do, much as he permitted him to torment Job in the Old Testament, God is never at a loss for what to do. Satan may still be on the loose, but God has him on a long leash. He can do nothing apart from the express permission of our heavenly Father. And through it all, we must never lose sight of what Paul labored to make crystal clear in Romans 8:28, that God is orchestrating everything we encounter, yes, even persecution and pain and staggering losses to our 401(k), to work for our ultimate good and his ultimate glory.

I emphasize the word "ultimate" in that last sentence. Most often we will not see the immediate fruit of what God does or silently permits. We have to take the long view. We must press through the present pain and discomfort and discombobulation of our lives knowing with all confidence that he is changing us to look more and more like Jesus. No, I can't tell you how that works. No one can. But God does not lie. He can be trusted.

***(5) Events such as this should remind us that no place on earth is safe and that we will all one day die (unless Jesus returns first).*** Whether by a peaceful natural death at the age of 90, or from complications of the Coronavirus, or by a sudden heart attack at 50, or in a car accident at 15, or by a slow battle with cancer at virtually any age, or be it after only three days of life, ***we will all likewise die.*** We are not immortal. The only ultimately and eternally safe place to be is in the arms of our heavenly Father from which no tornado or earthquake or tsunami or cancer or car wreck or deadly pestilence or mysterious death can ever snatch us or wrench us free.

Perhaps I should also mention at this point that what we are witnessing with Covid-19 may be one expression of the fourth seal described in Revelation 6:7-8. I'm always hesitant to say "this is that" when it comes to current events and the book of Revelation, but we would do well to heed the fact that God has in the past, is in the present, and will also in the future pour out judgments on the earth, one of which is pestilence. We read:

"When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, 'Come!' And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with the sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth" (Rev. 6:7-8).

***(6) There is no tragedy so severe or pain so intense or loss so great that it or anything else can ever separate us from God's love for us Christ.***

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

Simply put, there are many things we face in this life that can take everything else from us: money, family, health, church, job, etc. But one thing, the ultimately only important thing, that cannot be taken is our salvation in Jesus Christ. God's love is invulnerable to every conceivable attack. It will always remain and keep us secure.

***(7) We must learn to weep with those who weep.*** We must pray for them, serve them, help them, give to them, and do all within our power to alleviate their suffering. Sometimes we struggle to know how best to do this. We know we can't make the pain go away. It may simply be the case that we are there, with them, through it all. Always available. Always praying.

So let me give one word of counsel to all of us. Don't ever feel that you haven't been a blessing to someone who is suffering today unless you provide them with some explanation for what is happening. God has not given us an explanation and you will only make things worse trying to come up with one on your own. Answers are way over-rated. Explanations, even if they were available to us, do little to lessen the pain of loss.

***(8) God will one day wipe every tear from our eyes.***

“For the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17).

“He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (Revelation 21:4-5).

Twice in Revelation we are assured that all our tears will be wiped away. But not just wiped away. They will be wiped away personally by God! Whatever may have caused the tears will be forever banished from our experience, because God is “making all things new.”

### *An Example of Persevering Faith*

I will conclude by telling you a story of a remarkable man. Or, better, still, one man’s experience of a remarkable God.

On Saturday, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007, at the age of 50, Pat Bickle departed this life and entered into the presence of his Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Most of you will probably never have heard the name of Pat Bickle, but he was one of the more remarkable men I’ve been privileged to know. He was the brother of my good friend, Mike Bickle, who leads the International House of Prayer in Kansas City.

I officiated at the memorial service for Pat, together with other friends of the family, where upwards of 1,500 people were in attendance. It was bittersweet, to state the obvious.

In September of 1973, Pat was in his junior year of high school and no doubt was looking forward to a successful year on the football field. But on the second play from scrimmage in the third game of the season, he launched his body into that of a much bigger, all-state fullback on the opposing team. Pat fell to the ground, motionless. Motionless he would stay for the next 33 ½ years.

Pat’s quadriplegia was unlike that of most who suffer this sort of injury. I’ve known several quadriplegics who can at least, to some extent, move their arms and hands. But from that day in September of 1973 until he entered into glory on May 5<sup>th</sup> of 2007 Pat could move nothing other than his head. Nothing.

A close friend who worked for several years with victims of spinal cord injuries told me that those who suffer what Pat did have a maximum life expectancy of 12-15 years. We were all amazed, and rightly so, when actor Christopher Reeve lived 9 ½ years following his injury. Pat lived 33 ½ years!

But he didn’t just “live”. He refused to become bitter or resentful or angry at God. He was determined, instead, to be an encouragement to others, to point them to God and his goodness and to inspire their walk of faith. I can’t begin to tell you the number of people whose lives were challenged and changed by the life and testimony of Pat Bickle. He was a model of humility, honesty, and perseverance. Of course, he would have been the first to tell you it was by the grace of God alone that he endured and thrived as he did.

For the final three months of his life, Pat was in the hospital, unable to breathe on his own, rarely able to speak. Each time after visiting him, Ann and I would walk away befuddled by his faith and stunned that we were so presumptuous as to take our ability to walk away for granted. Even in his stillness and silence, Pat inspired and motivated and awakened people, like us, to the mercy of God and the importance of redeeming each moment for the glory of Christ.

Do you know what the Bible calls 33 years of paralysis? ***Light, momentary, affliction!*** Read that again. Here is the way Paul said it in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight [or “light,” NAS] momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

The “outer nature” (v. 16) refers to our bodily frame, our physical constitution, our creaturely mortality (cf. 4:7 and Paul’s reference to our “earthen vessel”). In view of the broader context of this passage, the “wasting away” of the “outer nature” would include the hardships of vv. 8-9, the dying of Jesus in us of v. 10, the being handed over to death of v. 11, and the death that is at work in us of v. 12. Of course, it also includes the progressive decay or deterioration of the physical body, whether a result of persecution, disease, or just growing old.

What I’m saying here is not meant to minimize the hardship that Pat or his family endured, or the disappointment experienced from his lack of healing.

No one is suggesting that we are to treat pain as though it were pleasure. Paul is simply calling on us to bring all earthly adversity into comparison with heavenly glory. However crushing and disillusioning Pat’s condition may have been, *when compared* with the eternal and infinite weight of the glory of heaven, it was a *momentary, feather-like inconvenience*.

“But Sam, I can’t see it! I just can’t see this! It makes no sense to me.” If you can’t “see” it, it’s probably because you’re looking at the wrong thing! Paul says that this perspective is possible only for those who gaze intently at what they *can’t* see! That’s not a contradiction in terms. Look again at his language. We are enabled to “see” persecution and paralysis, oppression and every obstacle as a weightless trifle only so far “as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

In spite of the horrendous and tragic decay and disability of his outer nature, Pat’s “inner man” was being renewed daily because he resolutely fixed his gaze upon what he couldn’t see with his physical eyes. With the eyes of faith and hope and love he riveted his heart and soul on the reality of eternity and the unending glory and grandeur of his savior Jesus Christ!

Listen to me well: you only have two options. *Either God is great or you are a fool*. Both can’t be true. If God is *not* great, then you are a fool to trust him. If God is not great, Pat Bickle should have taken the advice of Job’s wife who told her husband, “Curse God and die.”

On the other hand, if God *is* great, then Pat was no fool. If God is good and great, Pat was among the wisest of men to have trusted him. If God is good and great, the most sane and rational thing Pat could have done was to continue, notwithstanding his paralysis, to love and honor and cherish God. And that’s precisely what he did.

I conclude with this one final question: What must this God be like to have warranted Pat’s love and faith through 33 years of absolute paralysis? What kind of God is it that can remain the focus of a man’s devotion when that man lives as Pat Bickle did?

Some of you may be more inclined to ask: “What kind of God is it that would have permitted this horrible tragedy and then left his child in complete paralysis for 33 ½ years?” I understand that reaction. Truly, I do. But I’m more inclined to ask: “What kind of God is it that could inspire and sustain such love and devotion *in spite of* 33 ½ years of paralysis?”

Some look at Pat and say, “Wow, that’s some kind of *faith*.” Well, yes. But may I suggest we look at Pat’s faith and say, “Wow, that’s some kind of *God!*”

Have you thanked God today for feet and hands and eyes and ears that work? Have you praised him for the ability to think and speak and eat and play with your grandchildren? Do you take driving a car for granted? Have you presumed upon the sunlight or the air you breathe or the blood coursing through your veins? When was the last time you paused to reflect on the thought that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28)?

I’m sure I’ll think often of Pat until I stand (and dance) with him before the throne of God above. But until then I pray that by God’s grace I will be able to look at his life, his paralysis, his death, and the example that he set and say: *God is good! God is great! God is glorious!*