

God's Healing

This evening, we're going to talk about a difficult topic – pain and suffering.

This topic has been tough to prepare for, because pain can run so deep in our lives that it can be overwhelming. In all we discuss today, I want to affirm the depth of pain and hurt each of us has experienced and may be experiencing right now. Nothing that we talk about is meant to minimize the pain. I also know that what we discuss will not cover all situations – and it may not cover yours.

Pain comes in many forms. There is physical pain as we are struck with cancer or a devastating accident. There is relational pain from dysfunctional families, prodigal children, adulterous betrayals, and friction between neighbors, church members, or co-workers. There is financial pain as we struggle to make ends meet, prepare for retirement, or meet unexpected large bills. There is spiritual pain as we are battered with doubt, despair, and discouragement. The list goes on.

Pain comes in many degrees. We can have a very bad day, or a very bad year. One person may struggle to cope with a single problem in life, while someone else might be hit with multiple challenges at once. One person may feel like they are being pulled under by a situation that another person can handle apparently easily.

What I have found is that it doesn't matter what form pain takes, or what degree it is. Pain hurts. It doesn't matter whether I stub my toe or break my leg – at the moment I am hurting, the pain is all that I care about. It is all-consuming.

In that moment of pain, I want one thing, and one thing only: "Get me OUT, and get me out NOW!" Stop the pain. Stop the suffering. I want it to end. Whether that means physical healing, emotional healing, relational healing, financial healing, spiritual healing ... whatever I am going through, my prayer tends to be the same, "God, make the pain stop! Fix the situation! Get me out of this!"

Sometimes, God does answer in that way – instantly, completely, and even miraculously. And we rejoice and overflow with gratitude, and testify to the great things that God has done in our lives. We see examples of this in Scripture: Jesus calms the storm the moment the disciples cry out to him. God halts the sun in the sky so that Joshua can rout the enemy. Elijah and Elisha raise the dead children of the widows who helped them. Moses raises his staff and the Red Sea parts for the Hebrews to cross to the other side.

But there are other times – perhaps even most times – when God does not answer with an unqualified "Yes" to give us instant relief and release from the pain we are undergoing. What do we do then?

The answer to that is a tough one. Because, the fact is, God does not always give us what we *ask for*. But – and this is vital to remember – he always gives us what we *need*. In ALL God's responses to our cries for help and healing, God is ALWAYS loving. His response – whatever it is – is designed to achieve our good and his glory. He loves us, so he will always do what is best for us.

We often don't realize this truth because we are looking at our situation through a microscope, viewed from the single moment in time that we occupy. God looks at the big picture: at the full array of our needs, at the sum total of our circumstances, at our complete sanctification, at the span of our whole life – recognizing that our life doesn't end on this earth, but continues forever in heaven ... a theme we will take up tomorrow morning.

From this big picture perspective, God knows that an instant and unqualified "yes" to our cries for healing may not always be in our best interest, or according to his best purposes. So he has other responses that he might give to us. These responses aren't usually our *first* choice, but – and here's the key – if we listen to what God is saying and accept his decision and work with him in the way he directs, we will find that God's choice is always the BEST choice. And I believe that they will result in our ultimate healing – in his own time, and in his own way.

But, if we stubbornly will only "accept" the answer we want – an unqualified "Yes" – then we may *never* experience God's healing: of ourselves, our circumstances, or our relationships.

So today, we're going to take a look at how God has spoken to others in their times of pain. By understanding the variety of answers God may have to our cries for help and healing, we will be better positioned to hear him and to receive what he wants to give us. Let's learn to listen to the many ways God may choose to speak into our pain, and to bring the healing, the wholeness, and the holiness that only he can bring.

"Yes, but wait."

The first alternative response God may give us is "Yes, but wait." In these instances, God does fix the problem, but his timing doesn't exactly match ours. In fact, his timing may seem to be way, way off from our point of view.

Look at Abraham. He longed for a son, an heir. This was a source of great grief and pain to him. He brought his concern to the Lord and the Lord promised that a son from his own body would be his heir.

And then there was a wait. A long wait. A wait of about twenty-five years.

A wait as he and Sarah grew older and older, and less and less able physically to have a child. In the meantime, he and Sarah took things into their own hands and Abraham fathered Ishmael by Sarah's maid Hagar. And still God said, "Wait."

Waiting is hard. Waiting means the pain stays around. Waiting means the questions remain. The wondering if God will come through.

When God says, "Yes, but wait," it would be nice to think that the promise of healing would make the hurt go away in the meantime. But, it doesn't. Usually, in fact, we don't know that God has said, "Yes, but wait." To us, it may seem like he has not answered us at all. Or we might think that he has said, "No." But even if he assures us that he will answer our prayer, the waiting is hard.

So why does God sometimes ask us to wait?

Perhaps because he wants to see if we will live in hope or despair. Romans 4:18-22 records that Abraham never gave up hope:

"In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, 'So shall your descendants be.' Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness."

Abraham lived in hope. He believed God's promise. He held firm, year after year after year.

I tend to give up too quickly. Perhaps it comes from our instant-gratification society. Perhaps it's just my own impatience. My own lack of faith. I beg and plead. Then I get angry and pout. I get discouraged and eventually embrace despair.

And God still says, "Wait."

God is willing to wait. To wait through our impatience. To wait through our self-centeredness. To wait through our anger and fury and temper tantrums. To wait through our self-pity and despair. To wait until we have gotten well and truly past ourselves so that we finally turn to him – not in apathetic resignation, but in peace and acceptance and hope that says, "God can – and if he chooses to, he will. In his time, not in mine. To his glory, not to mine. For his purposes, not mine."

And then, God answers. He answered Abraham with a son named Isaac, a son named laughter. And when we learn the lesson of waiting, we, too, experience God's final "Yes" with laughter and rejoicing. We see the fruit of our hope. The harvest of joy that we sowed with tears.

But what if we don't accept God's sovereign "Wait"? We grow resentful. Angry. Rebellious. We tap our toes and scowl at the divine delay. And if God then does choose to give his "Yes," we

respond with a sullen, “It’s about time!” or an apathetic, “Fine, but it’s too late now, anyway. Whatever.”

This is the danger of not working in concert with God – and we’ll see this in each of the responses we look at today. *If we don’t work with God, we get none of the benefits of the answer.* We won’t experience true healing within.

For this “Yes, but wait” response of God, if we work with God in the waiting, seeking to come into alignment with his purpose, to trust his timing, to submit to his leading, then we can respond with joy and gratitude in the response – and our joy and gratitude will be all the greater because our souls will have been sanctified and purified *in the process of waiting.*

We are so impatient to get to the final “Yes” that we may miss the equally important “but wait” that is part of the very healing that we seek. Take God’ whole answer and accept it in full: “Yes, but wait.”

“Yes, but fight.”

Another response – and one that we don’t think of nearly so often – is that God might say, “Yes, but fight!” We see this all over the Old Testament:

- The Israelites were being oppressed, and Deborah the judge and prophet said to Barak, “Behold, the Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded, ‘Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and from the sons of Zebulun. I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his many troops to the river Kishon, and I will give him into your hand.’”
- Another oppression, and God called Gideon and said, “Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?”
- When the Canaanites made war on Judah, Jehoshaphat cried out to God and God replied, “Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s. Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the valley in front of the wilderness of Jeruel. You need not fight in this battle; station yourselves, stand and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.”

The list goes on and on. And we see that God comes through when his people get up off their quaking knees, strengthen their spine, gird on their armor, and enter the battle. Barak’s army routed Sisera’s army. Gideon’s 300 defeated the Midianites. Jehoshaphat’s men didn’t even have to fight – God did the work for him by causing the enemy armies to kill off one another.

God came through – but not before his people proved themselves willing to do their part in the battle.

The lesson for us is the same. We might be hurting because we are faced with an enemy who appears much bigger and much more powerful than us. Crushing debt. An impossible job situation. Family dysfunction that is beyond imagination. And in our pain, we cry out to God. And God says, “Yes, but get up and get into the battle! Do your part!”

Why might this be God’s answer? Because we might have given up too soon. In fact, we might not have tried at all. Haven’t you ever known people with horrible debt – but they refuse to learn how to budget? Or known someone with anxiety or depression who won’t see a counselor? A family that has major misunderstandings, but no one is willing to bring the garbage into the open to be discussed and addressed?

We want God to do it all. Wave his hand and fix everything for us without us lifting a finger. But we can’t expect God to do our fighting for us if he wants us to get into battle! When we fight, we grow stronger. Bolder. More confident. We demonstrate our faith in God. Our trust in his guidance. We see that we can partner with God in this life. He wants us to give our 100%, and he will then gladly give us his 100%. Our best might be a drop of water compared to the ocean of his resources, but he wants us to give it.

And if we don’t get up and fight, then what? Often, God simply will not give us his “Yes.” His “Yes” is conditional – we have to do something for it. We might think we are being holy and faithful by praying and praying and praying, but if that means we are sitting on our hands when God wants us to get out our sword, we are *not* being either holy or faithful – no matter how many prayers we pray.

That’s why it’s so important to hear what God is saying and how he is responding to our hurts. He may want to give healing, but we may have a role to play in making that happen. If we keep *waiting* when he is asking us to *take action*, we can miss the healing he is ready to give.

“Yes, but rest.”

The next response God may have for us is, to me, one of the most tender. It is the answer he gave to Elijah, after the victory at Mount Carmel. Queen Jezebel vowed to kill Elijah when she heard how the priests of Baal had been put to death. Here is how the story unfolds in I Kings 19:

Elijah was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.” He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, “Arise, eat.” Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you.” So he arose and ate

and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

God knew that Elijah's real need was for new strength and courage. So God gave this answer: "Yes, but rest." He gave Elijah time to sleep. He brought him food. He comforted him.

This story reminds us of how gentle and tender and loving God is. He knows all our needs. He hears the cry of our heart when we can do no more than whimper. And if what we need is rest, he gives that. Then, with a quieter heart, we can go on to hear the rest of his answer – to be strengthened and encouraged, as Elijah was on the mountain when God came in the wind and the fire and the still, small voice.

Sometimes we fight against the rest that God calls us to. We are so anxious and tense and wound up inside that when we hear him say, "Put it all down. Rest for a while. Trust me, I'll take care of it," that we resist. We insist upon trying to handle it all. And we miss his rest, and, in missing his rest, we miss his healing touch that we so desperately crave.

So if you hear God telling you to rest – to put away all the technology, to cancel some meetings or appointments, to let the housework go for a few days, to take a quiet walk or make a cup of tea and drink it while doing absolutely nothing – listen. Rest is a gift from God, and it is often necessary before we can take the next step toward the healing of our hearts.

"Yes, but wrestle."

God may call us to rest – or he may call us to wrestle.

Jacob found this out. As a young man, he had stolen his brother Esau's birthright and blessing. He fled, and in the years that followed he married Leah and Rachel, had children, and grew very wealthy. But now it was time to return to his homeland ... and to the potential wrath of his brother Esau.

Jacob heard that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. He sent presents ahead of him to his brother to try to appease him. He took steps to protect his family. Finally, he sent everyone on and spent the night alone. Genesis records what followed:

Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved."

Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." This is the same cry he must have had when he sent his family on: "Lord, protect my family! Bless us! Heal this broken relationship with my brother!" And God does bless him – but only after this long, long night of wrestling.

Think about it – think about fighting someone hour after hour. Being thrown to the ground. Having your muscles straining to achieve mastery. Realizing after a time that your opponent is infinitely stronger than you and could win any moment he chose – but that he is holding back his strength so that you must fight on – and on – and on.

There are times when this is what God calls us to. In times of doubt, despair, and discouragement. When we feel like our world is collapsing – or that it has collapsed. When God doesn't answer in the ways we hoped and believed he would. When all our ideas about God have come crashing to the ground. When we really, really don't understand this God whom we serve and in whom we have put our trust.

And we cry out in agony – "God, where are you? WHO are you? Can I trust you?" And God answers – but still not in the way we want or hope. Instead of answers to our questions, instead of astonishing revelations of himself that take away all our doubts, he calls us to wrestle with him. To forge a new understanding of him that will be an unshakeable foundation for our faith.

Our wrestling may take days, weeks, or months. I have to be honest – it may take years. Time in which we search the Scriptures, read books to help answer our questions, spend time in prayer, share our hearts with friends ... and cry in the loneliness of the pain we are experiencing.

We wrestle with God. But in the end, we receive his "Yes" – and his tremendous blessing, as Jacob did. We know him more intimately than ever before – and more than was ever possible before we began to wrestle with him. Our understanding of the Scriptures deepens, and we know how to give hope and strength to others with quiet faith and gentleness. We grow in wisdom, as we recognize that life and faith are more complicated than we ever dreamed – and yet more simple than we ever imagined. We understand ourselves in a new way, and the assurance that we have spreads out in ripples to minister to many.

But remember, there is an alternative. Jacob could have walked away from that divine fight. He could have given up in the first few moments of the wrestling match.

And we do that – all too often. Instead of being willing to wrestle with God, to ask the hard questions and search out the answers we crave, we give up. We stop reading the Bible, convinced that it doesn't have answers to our questions. We stop praying, since God seems so distant. We let our friendships with our Christian brothers and sisters grow stale, since we'd rather not hear about what God is doing in their lives, and we certainly don't want to admit to the mess in our own hearts.

We aren't willing to put forth the time and effort. We demand an instant answer and instant healing, and, because God doesn't respond with the efficiency of a Google search or heal with the immediacy of an ibuprofen, we shrug him off as a loss.

When that happens, we walk away from the faith. We may do it openly, literally leaving the church, destroying relationships, and saying to any who ask that God let us down and we've given up on him. Or, we may continue to go to church, putting on a smiling face and carrying our Bible, knowing all the time that we are hollow inside.

I can tell you that wrestling is hard. I have been in the place where I didn't know if God was real. Where I felt such agony of heart I thought I would die. But I also can tell you that if you want healing and crave wholeness within and a deeper faith, then wrestling is worth it. It is worth giving it all the time God demands, and all of yourself. Fight through the long, dark night of your soul – the dawn will come and, with it, the blessing of God.

“Yes, but confess.”

There is another “Yes” from God we may receive that carries a condition: “Yes, but confess.” There are a lot of examples of this in Scripture, but we'll look at just one: good old Jonah. God gives him a task, and he runs the other way – as far and as fast as he can.

Do I understand Jonah? Oh, yes! And I suspect you do, too. There are times when God tells us to do something and we outright refuse. And then, like Jonah in the belly of the great fish, we end up in a place that is ... less than ideal.

Have you thought about being swallowed by a fish? This wouldn't have been a cavern where you could find a comfortable place to sit and even walk around to ponder your situation. You would be in a living creature's stomach, with the stomach acid eating into your skin, other food being digested.

Gross. Awful. Terrible. And it certainly bears a resemblance to some of the ugly situations we find ourselves in when we disobey the Lord. And so we, like Jonah, cry out for help and healing.

And God is willing – but only if we confess our sin and get back on track with what he wants us to do. When Jonah did that, he was spit up on the shores of Nineveh. Definitely the worse for wear, but alive and able to do what God wanted him to.

But what if we don't confess? What if we choose instead to hug our sin to ourselves, justifying our actions, rationalizing our choices? Then that is our choice and, instead of healing, God will let us continue to sit in the muck and mire that will eventually kill us.

Remember, God always has a way out – but when we have sinned, the sign above the path out always reads “Confession.”

“No; you must face the consequences.”

We now move into the times when God says “No” – and how even his “No” is the route to ultimate healing.

The first “no” has to do with the consequences for our sin. How many times have you sinned and then cried out to God to get you out of the trouble you got yourself into? I know I have done so – many times.

It’s like David after he committed adultery and murder. “Then the Lord struck the child that Uriah’s widow bore to David, so that he was very sick. David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him in order to raise him up from the ground, but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them. Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died.”

When God struck the child born of David and Bathsheba’s immoral union with sickness, David prayed earnestly for God to heal his child. But God said, “No, you must face the consequences of your sin.” And the child died.

Facing the consequences of our sin is an important part of the healing process if our hurt has been caused by disobedience to God’s will. Consequences help us to remember that sin always brings pain and death. Consequences remind us of the serious nature of sin, and that it cannot be played around with. Consequences draw us closer to God when we ask for his grace to walk through the consequences.

Remember this: although God may say, “No, now, face the consequences of your sin,” it doesn’t mean that he deserts us. When we submit to his righteous judgment and the consequences for our sin and ask him to help us, he will give us the grace to come out both holy and whole on the other side. Just like David did, we will be able to sing songs of God’s unending faithfulness, his overwhelming lovingkindness, and his matchless grace.

But there is an alternative. We may choose the path of anger, bitterness, resentment, and even hatred against God because he chose not to remove the just consequences for our sin. In that case, we get all the pain of the punishment, and none of its benefit for us.

“No; get up and get moving.”

Here is another tough response God sometimes has for us, that is, when God says in answer to our prayers, “No, now, get up and get moving.” That’s what he did at one point with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was hurting – he was a prophet whom no one listened to – and he cried out to God, saying, “Why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream with water that is unreliable?” (Jeremiah 15:18). He wondered where God was in all of his hurt. He wondered if God was going to let him down.

You might expect God to answer Jeremiah with words of rest and comfort. Far from it. Instead, God said, “If you return, then I will restore you – before Me you will stand; and if you extract the precious from the worthless, you will become My spokesman. They for their part may turn to you, but as for you, you must not turn to them” (Jeremiah 15:19).

When I first studied this passage – and even since then – I have struggled with God’s response to Jeremiah’s doubt and despair. Here, his prophet poured out his heart to God, asking if God was really with him, if he cared, if was going to act. And God’s answer is almost brusque: “Get your relationship with me right, stand up, and get back in the game.”

Not exactly comforting. But sometimes, the fact is that we don’t need comfort. We need a kick in the pants. Pain can mire us down – as it evidently was doing for Jeremiah. Plus, he had apparently let his doubts draw him away from God, which is why God calls him to return to him.

God knew that this was a time for tough love, so he pointed out the problem, and commanded his prophet to get his act together and do his job. Likewise, we sometimes need this tough love. It’s as if God is saying to us, “Yes, you’re hurting. Yes, things are hard. Here’s my answer: get on your knees and start praying, then stand up and do your job, doubts or no doubts, pain or no pain.”

What happens if we stay in our little pity party? God won’t hang around. But he’ll let us stay there as long as we want, getting more and more miserable. The only way out is to get up and get with the program. When we do, we’ll find that God is more than willing to support us every step of the way. That is what God promised Jeremiah after delivering his rebuke:

“Then I will make you to this people
A fortified wall of bronze;
And though they fight against you,
They will not prevail over you;
For I am with you to save you
And deliver you,” declares the Lord.

“No; my grace is sufficient.”

Let’s look at another “no” answer – one of the most famous of them all. The apostle Paul stated in his second letter to the Corinthians, “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

Paul lays it all out for us here: the pain hurt – and Paul pleaded for healing. But God said “no” because Paul needed the pain to keep from becoming proud. Paul needed the pain for God’s power to be shown as perfect in every way. Paul needed the pain to truly understand God’s daily, all-sufficient grace.

And so it sometimes is for us. God may not take the pain away. He may not give healing on this side of heaven. But, as he said to Paul, we can be assured that if he chooses to give us a “no,” then we will experience his grace and his power made perfect in us if we turn to him in trust and obedience.

“No; I am your Answer.”

No discussion of pain and suffering would be complete without spending time with Job. Job, who, in a triple catastrophe, lost his wealth, his children, and his health.

I know that I would have questions for God in such a circumstance. And Job did. He cried out his questions chapter after chapter, while he put up with the so-called “comfort” of his judgmental friends.

But the book of Job ends without an answer to all the questions. Job never understood the “why” of what had happened to him. He didn’t have a glimpse into the spiritual battle that was playing itself out in his life.

In response to all Job’s questions, God said, “No – I will not give you any answers. Now, turn to me as your Answer.”

God came in the form of a whirlwind to Job. Instead of answering Job’s questions, God asks a series of penetrating questions of his own, starting with “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”

Job replies with humility to God’s questioning:

“I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted ...
Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” ...
I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees You;
Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes.”

When confronted by God's divine power, wisdom, and holiness, Job simply retracts his questions. He says, "I don't need answers to all the questions I have been asking – you are all the Answer I need."

This is so challenging – if we insist upon answers and God chooses not to give them, we can fall into doubt or anger or bitterness or apathy. Yet some answers are beyond our ability to understand. There is no answer that we can comprehend in our humanness for the death of a child. For the terrors or war. For cruelty and wickedness. But God is our Answer to all those tragedies of life, and to *every* tragedy of life that we experience. He reveals himself to us through his Word, through our Christian brothers and sisters, through his Creation, through his Spirit within us ... and he calls us to trust him. To trust in his goodness. To trust in his power. To trust in his love. To trust in his justice.

To trust that, in the end, we will see that he is utterly worthy of our trust. He is the only Answer that satisfies and, in him, we can find rest for our souls.

"No; there is a purpose to your pain."

There is one more "No" we need to look at today. And that is the "No" that God gave to his own Son, to Jesus.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus poured out his prayer to his Father, pleading that, if it was possible, the cup of suffering might pass from him. He was in such agony that the capillaries in his skin burst so that his sweat was bloody. But God said, "No. You have to go through this for a bigger purpose."

Again, on the cross, Jesus cried out in desperate pain – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And again, he received no answer. The silence of his Father was a profound, "No – I cannot bring either help or healing. You must endure the pain."

Praise to the Lord, Jesus did endure – as Hebrews puts it, "who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

So it is sometimes with us. Sometimes, God says, "No" because there is a bigger purpose – one we may see at the moment of our suffering, or one we may not grasp right then, or one we may never understand on this side of heaven. But we can endure knowing that, through our suffering, God will work something beautiful and great and good. His kingdom will come. Lives will be transformed. Souls will be snatched from the fires of hell. And when all suffering has passed, we shall know true joy.

Conclusion

Pain hurts. It hurts more deeply than we can imagine. It spreads its fingers into each area of our lives, devastating us. We cry out to God for help, for healing, for wholeness – for instant relief and for release from the pain.

But instant relief and release may not be what is best for us. As these responses of God show – along other responses we could not touch upon today – God knows the best way to help us. The best way to heal us. The best way to bring us wholeness. The best way to bring us to holiness.

I'd like to close with an anonymous prayer dating from the years of the Civil War:

A Christian Confederate Soldier's Prayer

(Anonymous - alleged to have been found on a CSA casualty at the Devil's Den, Gettysburg)

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy.
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for but got everything I had hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am, among all people, most richly blessed.