

I. Gerard Long Video

II. Introduction

A. A couple months ago, after I was out of the hospital but still spending three days a week in therapy, I said to Brittany (the woman in charge of my physical therapy) “This weekend I am going to have one of my boys take me to the beach, and I’ll run on the sand. That way if I fall down I won’t get hurt.” And she looked at me and said, “Wow, it’s been a long time since I’ve heard an idea that bad.” About now you may be thinking, “Whose idea – who’s bad idea was it to devote the fall to pain and suffering?” Well, that would be me – the same guy who wanted to run in the sand.

B. You might also be thinking, “Well, haven’t you said enough already? I mean, six sermons and five books on one topic? Enough already. Too much already! And next time you decide to focus on one thing, how about ‘being happy’ or something like that.”

C. Trust me, I feel your pain. I ended up doing a lot more personal research on brokenness than I ever intended. It has occurred to me that if God is going to arrange field trips for me then I’m going to be more careful about what topic I pick. And next fall’s series will be on “how to be ridiculously happy, or “what to do when you have too much money and too much free time,” or the Song of Solomon. Not ‘being broken.’

D. Well, we are about to move on. But there are a few things that I feel I need to cover. So, though I’ve never done this before – and I hope there are no homiletics professors from Trinity here today because I’m sure they end up using me as an example of what not to do – I want to address three of the questions that were sent to me.

1. First: How can I tell if I’m stuck?

2. Second: is it possible to tell why I am suffering? What’s behind it? This is Job’s question. It’s not the question behind the Book of Job – that is about suffering more generally. But the question Job asks is: What’s going on? Why am I going through this? Can someone answer that question?”

3. And finally, can I expect to cycle through the six stages we’ve been exploring and grow if I am the cause of my problems? If, instead of being broken by cancer or a stroke or the death of a loved one, I’ve been knocked down because I committed adultery or I got caught lying at work or I drink too much?”

E. One at a time:

III. Question One: How can I tell if I'm stuck?

A. I have presented these six stages as if the process we cycle through is a bit neater and more linear than it is, but I stand by the idea that following a major trial we move through various stages – Shock, Sorrow, Struggle, Surrender, Sanctification and Service – and that many people get stuck, or stall part way through.

B. If I had it to do over, I'd stress the link between stalling in one of these stages – getting stuck because you don't grieve or refuse to surrender – and a lack of progress on the spiritual spectrum. One of my ah-hah moments about ten years ago was that people who are in really broken emotionally don't grow spiritually until they get some help, which may require time and counseling.¹

C. So, how can you tell if you are one of those people? How can you tell if you're stuck? If you don't know that you are growing, then you're stuck. In fact, it's safer to assume that you are stuck than that you are growing because most people are. Let me make three observations here.

D. If you are growing you know it.

1. Wow, I'm thinking differently about things.

2. I value different things.

3. I spend my time differently. I spend my money differently.

4. I would have expected to yell when that happened and I didn't.

5. I now have a very different idea of what the good life looks like.

6. And if you are growing, people are commenting on it. Just like they did when you grew physically. I stand outside and watch families walk in and often say, "Wait a minute, are you ?, who was 3 feet tall last week, and now you are 5'5". Wow. You are growing.

7. That is what growth looks like. If you are not experiencing that, then you are not growing.

E. Tragically, growing is the exception not the rule, and always has been.

1. We see this idea sprinkled throughout the Bible.

¹ It's also fair to say that those who are very broken physically – i.e., starving – need some of their basic needs met before they move forward and head towards flourishing as well.

a) In Hebrews 5:12, the writer chastises the readers saying, “by this time you ought to be teachers, but you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again”.

b) In I Cor. 3:2, Paul says: Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?²

2. And by the way it’s harder for us today because we have so much money. And while that doesn’t make spiritual growth and interest impossible, it does make it harder. (And I’m not implying that you are rich if you have five cars and three houses, but because if you make fifty thousand a year you are in the top .3 percent of the world’s wealth.

F. People who are stuck often don’t know it.

1. You know how every family has that aunt or uncle that is really weird and inappropriate and causes lots of trouble at every gathering? Well, if you can’t name who that is in your family it’s probably you. In the same way, do you know how every family has someone who is stuck (or stalled) but doesn’t see it? Well, that’s probably you as well.

2. I had a friend who was stuck. I’ve lost track of him since moving here. But there was a topic he could not talk about without getting really agitated. And so I brought up the topic and let him go into his little tirade and then pointed out what I had done.

3. For a number of years I was stuck in my relationship with my Dad. Ask Sheri, she says I would turn just about anything into a conversation about him. I did not see it for some time.

G. The experience of spiritual growth is a bit surprising, and often different than you might think.

² Other passages: 1) Hebrews 12 says: "Let us lay aside the sin which so easily entangles us:" 2) 2 Corinthians 7:1 says, "Let us cleanse ourselves of all filthiness of the flesh;" 3) Eph 4:22 says, "Laying aside the old self which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit."

1. I read an interview with the guy who holds the Albert Einstein chair at Princeton. He has an IQ that is off the charts. The interviewer asked him, “What was it like to realize that you were so smart?” And he said, “That’s not how it is experienced. You don’t marvel at what you know. You marvel at how stupid everyone else is.”

2. The experience of spiritual growth is sort of the opposite of that. It’s not, “Hey look at me, I am arriving!” and much more, “Wow, God is even better and more awesome and more loving than I thought... and I am worse.” The more you grow the more you realize, I thought I was at 3 on the spectrum but I’m at .3. The experience of growing spiritually is all about God getting bigger and grace being more amazing. It’s never about being impressed with yourself. You do recognize that you are changing, but you never are impressed with your progress. If anything you are amazed that God would be using even you.

H. The other day I was reading an article that noted that we have a growing number of elderly people in our society, but fewer elders. The author asked, “Where are the men and women of great stature: who are wise and kind and selfless? Who have virtually no ego? Who live to help others? Where are the elders, the senators?” His observation may be a bit unfair, but not much. And I want to keep growing.

I. And, by the way, growth is expected. We are to become more like God, the Fruit of the Spirit is to be increasingly evident in our life. But we often give our lives to the wrong things. We love the wrong things. To use the language of Hebrews 12, we get entangled in sin.

1. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

2. Preachers used to talk more – warn more often – about besetting sins or habitual sins. The idea is that we each have a propensity for certain kinds of sins.

a) All sin gets easier over time. Every sin makes the next sin easier. But we often have a default sin that it’s hard to shake.

b) Sin is powerful. Our will is weak. Over time it holds us back.

c) We talked about some of this with the Seven Deadly Sins. Remember, people would go out to the Desert to get away from all temptations, and discover that it didn't matter. The sin was inside them. Sin is tangled up with our best motives.³

J. Men and women, here's the deal – you should assume you are stalled and look for signs that you are not. If you are growing, you should know. It doesn't happen by accident any more than we accidentally get into shape. The picture painted in Scripture is that we are weak, our heart gets entangled in the wrong stuff, so growth is uncommon.

K. We have to care for our soul in order to get better. It's hard work. This is some of what we are supposed to be doing on a Sabbath. Sabbath rest is to be restorative. We look back at the week we just lived, review it and allow God to speak into our lives about how it might have gone differently. And then we look ahead to the next week and prepare for it.

L. If you suspect you are stuck: 1) ask a friend what they think; 2) Ask God for help; 3) you may need to get help – from a therapist, pastor, etc.

M. Let me end this question by asking you to watch a brief video of a person who is growing. Stephanie Martin video

IV. Question Two: Can we tell why we are suffering? Can we know what's behind it?

A. To frame this more personally: can I ever get clarity about why I had a stroke? Was it: 1) to punish me for my sin; 2) to make me more caring; 3) because of the sin of others; 4) the result of spiritual attack; 5) was it just because the world is broken and cursed by sin; 6) was it just the result of capricious fate; 7) was it in order to better serve someone else later on; 8) was it all of the above?

B. I believe the answer to the question – can we know why we are suffering? - is: sometimes but not always.

³ We have the great Solzhenitsyn quote: If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

C. Things would be simple if ‘good people’ always prospered (and bad people always suffered) or if we could always determine cause and effect. But that is not generally how it works. Job didn’t know what was behind his suffering. We do. If you read the Book of Job you know what was going on – God said, “Have you considered my servant Job?” And Satan said, “I can turn him, just let me try.”⁴

D. So, “Can we tell why we are suffering?” Not always. At least not this side of the grave. Does that mean that we can never know what’s going on? No. It doesn’t mean that. There are several things that can be said and that should be said. Let me make three comments:

E. One: If we know Christ, we can know for sure that we are not being punished by God for our sin.

1. In I John 1:9 reads: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. Most people do not think this through carefully. The first time we do we think, “Wait, shouldn’t it read: if we confess our sins God will be loving and kind and not demand justice but let us go? If we are guilty of something, we do not want justice we want mercy.”⁵ So, isn’t what we want to hear, “If we confess our sin God will be loving and merciful with us, not faithful and just?”

2. No. The reason it doesn’t say that but is still good news is because if we are in Christ – if we confess our sin, repent of our sinfulness and call out for Christ, then the penalty for our sin has already been paid by Christ and it would be unjust for God to demand a second payment. So, if you are a Christ follower and you are suffering you can be certain that God is not punishing you. That would be unjust. Which is why, when someone says, “God is punishing me by giving my son cancer because I’ve been unfaithful to my wedding vows.” No. No. No. God doesn’t do that. Christians are not punished by God for their sins.

F. Two: Does that mean that I will not suffer for my sin? No.

⁴ We know more than Job did about what was going on in his life. When he was going through his trials he really wanted to know what was going on. He felt like there had been a mistake. And though He would not curse God and die like his wife suggested, he eventually demanded a hearing with God. But even after God shows up, God does not explain why Job is suffering.

⁵ Justice is getting what we deserve; mercy is not getting what we deserve; **and** grace is getting blessings that we do not deserve.

1. You almost certainly will suffer for your sin because sin is harmful. God is not punishing you, but sin is harmful. God's laws are not random, they reflect the way the world works, and God – who loves us and is trying to help us – knows how the world works better than anyone else because He made it. And with His Law He provides us with insight into how life works best. When we sin we do so to our own harm. His Law marks the, saying, “Don't lie, because if you do you'll get a reputation as a liar and no one will trust you. Do not commit adultery because it will damage your marriage.” When we disregard the signs and bad things happen, it's not that God is not punishing us, we are simply suffering the consequences of our choices.

2. Let me frame it this way. There are two kinds of laws: the Law of the Stop Sign and Law of the Flame.

a) The Law of the Stop Sign works this way: someone decided to put a stop sign at an intersection and if you go through it you might get a ticket or you might get in a wreck, but you might not. As a matter of fact, it's possible that it shouldn't be there. Maybe there could be yield sign or no sign at all. Or the other person has a stop sign.

b) The Law of the Flame says, if you put your hand in the flame it will be burned. And guess what, it will. With this one wrinkle – it doesn't always happen quickly, so we don't get the benefit of being burned right away and know that what we are doing is harmful. It may take ten years for the side effects to show up – and our soul may be so distorted by then that we never see it.

c) God's laws are never random – they are never the law of the Stop Sign, where there is no good reason for them to be there. They are the Law of the Flame.

d) So, while those who are Christ followers can be sure that God is not punishing them, that does not mean that our sinful actions do not contain bad results. If you cheat on your taxes you may get caught and go to jail. But, if you cheat on your taxes God will not punish you by giving your child cancer.

G. One more comment here: There is a difference between tempting and testing.

1. One: If we are in Christ we can know that we are not being punished for our sin; two: that doesn't mean that we will not suffer because sin is ultimately self-destructive behavior – we'd not chose it if we could see the effects and if we had a stronger will. Point number three: We need to understand that although God does not punish us, He does discipline us. He does not tempt us to sin – set a trap so we will fall. (We are promised in James 1:13 that He will never do that). But He will test us (as He did with Abraham) so that we can get stronger.

2. As I've said several times in this series: God is more concerned with our character than He is with our comfort. He is more focused on our holiness than our short-term happiness. Contemporary Americans place a high value on comfort; God does not. In light of this He will test us, even melt us down so we can be refined.⁶ It can be hard to know what is going on. Our world is not controlled by karma, which teaches that what goes around comes around. Suffering is the just and proportionate consequence to a previously committed wrong. Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that suffering is often unjust and disproportionate.⁷ We should not be surprised when innocent people suffer and guilty people walk away free. This is part of the world we live in. The prime example of this is Jesus himself. Though he was the only truly innocent person, he suffered willingly for the sins of others. As some have said, Life's not fair, and we're lucky it's not!⁸

⁶ James 1:13 is clear that God never tempts anyone, and therefore we should never accuse or suspect him of doing so. Testing, however, is a common method through which God seeks to build faith and confidence in his people. Consider the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. The story begins by saying that God was *testing* Abraham. By his willingness to give up his only son (through whom God had promised to give him many other descendants), Abraham demonstrated complete trust in the Lord. At the end of the story, after God provides the ram to be sacrificed in place of Isaac, Abraham renames that place "The Lord *will* provide," because he now had greater confidence that the Lord would always keep his promises. In summary: testing is not the same as tempting the first is meant to build character; the second to corrupt it. Testing is meant to strengthen confidence; tempting is meant to undermine it. God tests us, but he never tempts us.

⁷ The story of Job reinforces the idea that suffering is not always the result of sin. It was actually Job's righteousness that led to Satan request to put Job to the test. It should be noted, however, that the Bible does not claim that *all* suffering is underserved. The wisdom offered in Proverbs is that we often reap the natural consequences of our actions, though not always and not directly.

⁸ A world controlled by karma would be a simple world. (The symbol for karma is Ying and Yang. Life is full of good and evil, so we should accept both as they come. The symbol of Christianity is the cross. Christ suffered on our behalf, and he is reconciling all things to himself. If we get to choose, I pick the latter.) But to tell people that the world is run by karma when it is not is cruel. Karma urges people to try to alleviate their suffering by doing enough good to outweigh the bad – a demanding task that will always leave you frightened and exhausted.

H. So, we need to hear that we cannot always tell why we are suffering. It could be one of many different reasons – or some combination of several of them. We walk by faith not by site. We trust all of these things to God – who is Sovereign and who we can trust and who we know loves us – and we seek to be faithful to Him in the situation we are in and to grow more like Jesus who suffered unjustly and bore it all.⁹

V. Conclusion

A. There is much more to think about, pray about. Suffering produces lots of questions. Let me end by circling back and saying, trials can be a catalyst for growth. Don't waste your pain. Leverage it to become more like Christ. Learn to serve out of your brokenness, everyone wins when you do.

B. Let me pray for us

VI. Wrap up: (To be done by the campus pastor)

A. I said (Mike said) that there were three questions. You are not being cheated. I briefly end with the third. He framed the question this way: Can I move out of shock, sorrow and struggle and on to surrender, sanctification and service if I am the source of my struggles? If instead of being undone by cancer or a stroke or the death of a loved one, if I brought my problems on myself as the result of an affair I had or lies I've told or greed I pursued? Can I still move on?

⁹ In his book *Acts of God*, (Bob Russell, *Acts of God: Why Does God Allow So Much Pain?*, 18-22), Russell identifies six reasons why evil and suffering may exist. 1) Discipline: Some parents seem very willing to do anything for their kids – denying them nothing that they want – believing all the while that this is the loving thing to do. God is not one of those parents. Hebrews 12 tells us that God disciplines his children, and discipline always involves some level of pain. But it is always motivated by love and for our good. 2) Poor Decisions: If we make dumb choices, we have to live with the negative consequences that come follow. This is the law of the fire. If we put our hand in the fire, we will get burned. 3) Satanic Attack: We are in a spiritual battle, and sometimes this means we get hurt. But even when Satan brings suffering into our lives, it is because God has allowed it and God will use it for his purposes. Satan's attack on Job resulted in Job learning new things about God. When Satan gave Paul a "thorn in the flesh," God used it to protect Paul's humility. 4) The Sins of Others: When a gunman opens fire in a theater or a drunk driver crashes into a car full of teenagers, many people suffer because of someone else's sin. These are terrible, tragic event, but unfortunately they are part of life. And they affect us and the ones we love. 5) Persecution: One of people's favorite passages to forget is 2 Timothy 3:12, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." If we are living as faithful disciples of Jesus, we ought to expect that some persecution will come. In some parts of the world, this is no surprise. In America, it tends to catch us off guard. 6) A Fallen World: There are certain events that seem to have no clear explanation other than the fact that we live in a fallen world that is suffering under the effects of the curse. Natural disasters often fall in this category. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis introduce a great deal of suffering for many people – suffering that cannot be traced to anything other than living in a broken world.

B. The answer is “Yes! Absolutely!” I could not do my job if I didn’t believe that we could recover from our stupid, sinful actions. For starters, many of my problems are of my own doing. We don’t see it that way at first, but over time we do. As we grow we make fewer excuses and own our own sin.

C. The Good News is: God died for our sins. We can grow even if our problems are of our own doing. There is only one caveat: we have to own what we did. We have to call it sin. We need to repent. The Good News is that Christ died for sinners.

D. If you are going to call what happened to you a mistake (and not call it sin) then I’m not quite sure what to do for you. I think you stay stuck.

E. We make lots of excuses for ourselves – for our behavior. We justify it a dozen different ways. It was someone else’s fault or it was an honest mistake. We seldom call it sin. But until you do you are not dealing with reality and it’s very hard to get better.

F. To repent means to turn and go in the opposite direction. In order to do that you have to acknowledge that you were headed in the wrong direction.

G. Men and women, Christ didn’t die for the mistakes of the world. He died for sin. And we are told – in I John 1:9, that if we confess our sin that He will forgive us.