

Word of Life from the Cross: The Suffering Word!

A sermon based on John 19:28,29.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Man up!” Has anyone ever said that you before, or have you ever told someone else to do that? You at least know what it means, don’t you? You’re telling someone to be brave or tough enough to deal with an unpleasant situation.

That was my thought a few years ago as I was watching Lebron James on TV. Name sound familiar? He’s one of the greatest basketball players in the world right now. But anyways, it was the first game of 2014 NBA Finals...the championship round. There were seven minutes left to go, Lebron’s team was only down by a few points, he went up for a shot, came down and started cramping up in his leg. He could barely walk; he was actually carried off the court. And, my, how the howls came from the crowd and criticisms from online viewers...calls for him to “man up” and get back in the game.

If you’ve ever had that type of pain before, perhaps you can commiserate with Mr. James. And yet, there was a little bit of this sweet satisfaction in seeing this professional athlete, who we sometimes put on a pedestal and treat as though they’re something akin to a god, brought down to our level. Obviously, not that we’d wish any real harm to them, but at the same time, it’s nice to have the reminder these beasts of men are human, just like us.

And then there’s Jesus. Yes, as Isaiah reminds us, ***“[Jesus] grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:2-3).***

But that’s not the appearance Jesus had given so often throughout his life. People didn’t just treat him like something akin to a god (what, with his miraculous prowess and transcendent teaching); he himself claimed to be God.

But, now, where was this “God”? Taken down several pegs by his enemies... defeated, hanging on the cross, bleeding, dying...suffering, exhausted. Now, on the edge of death, this “God” could only muster the strength to mutter, ***“I am thirsty.”***

I wonder if the cackles from the crowd and the “man up/be a man” chiding started to roar back to life. We know how ruthless the religious leaders, the passers-by, even the robbers hanging there with Jesus were in their scorn. They had been relentless with their, ***“You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God...He saved others, but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, “I am the Son of God” (Matthew 27:40,42-43).***

They saw a man, a fool, finally broken and beaten. We see a man, too, but differently. We see his humanity shining through so clearly. I mean, his words, how ironic?! He thirsts. Jesus refreshed a wedding run dry at Cana with 180 gallons of water turned into wine. He promised living water to a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, water of which one may drink and never again be thirsty, saying, ***“The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).***

Jesus spent his entire life providing the living water, filling others up with the truth and the love and the life-giving Word of God. And now he – the God-man - thirsts.

Do not imagine Jesus had some special exemption from suffering because He is the Son of God. Quite the contrary! His pain is all our pain combined. ***“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,”*** Isaiah reminds us. He is the Sufferer who embodies all suffering, bearing in His own wounded flesh the suffering and sickness of a humanity fallen into decay and death...that’s us.

He’d been taking it like a man the entire time...the physical beatings at his trial, before Pilate, on the road to...there on the cross. The agony of cruel mockery from all sides. The disciples deserting him. God leaving him. Bearing the sins and eternal punishment of all people of all time. . And, now he thirsts. It’s been suffering beyond imagine, could you blame him if he desires some small semblance of respite?

Could you? We don’t know his pain. We can’t even try to imagine it. But we know suffering. Physical, emotional, financial, health-wise, relationships...take your pick. You and I, we know suffering.

But my question is this: when we suffer, the attacks of sin, temptation, the consequences of sin – whether our own specific sins or the results of sin just existing - what alleviates the pain? Where do you find your respite?

When it’s one of those days at work where the mistakes keep piling up, or the boss is breathing down your neck or a co-worker is acting like a jerk, or you look at the clock at the end of the day and wonder what you actually did because you feel like you put in tons of effort and have nothing to show for it...when that happens, what do you do? Drown your sorrows in a big glass of wine or a couple of beers? Do you take out your frustrations on your spouse or children or friends, bring them down to your level because misery loves company? Do you just disconnect yourself from the family altogether?

When relationships are sour and suffering – maybe it’s an intense argument with the spouse, a friend who’s mad at you for something you said or did, the kids aren’t listening or Mom/Dad won’t let you do what you want to with your friends - what do you do? Lose your cool and say something you can’t take back? Go to someone else with your frustrations, instead of trying to work out the problem, start the gossip, maybe create an unfair perception of the other person? Do you just sit and stew in your anger or self-pity?

When you read or hear all the negative press and pressure being put on our core values and morals and our faith in Jesus today - and maybe you’ve felt the effects personally or else you’re expecting you will – what do you do? Go on the attack, bringing down others with your own hurtful words? Do you go into hiding, become a closet Christian, refraining from talking about your faith or about Jesus with others out of fear of being put down?

When you’re stressed, when you’re angry, when you’re lonely, when you’re sad, when you’re hurting (physically or emotionally) where do you go? What do you do? What do you turn to? Use and/or abuse of food, recreational drugs, porn, alcohol? Is your solution retaliation, depression, self-loathing, complaining, rejoicing in the sufferings of others?

When suffering comes, do you find Jesus? And is that your first option? Or are you too focused on yourself and your own sufferings and what you have to do to alleviate them...to get some small semblance of respite?

But wasn't that Jesus here? Have you ever wondered why Jesus spoke these words on the cross? I mean, we listen to so many of the other words he spoke there, and we see...his focus was on others, right? "God, forgive them!" "You will be with me in paradise!" "God, you're forsaking me so you don't have to abandon them to hell forever." "Women, here is your son, someone to take care of you because I can't anymore."

But now, simply, it's "I thirst!" Was that Jesus only thinking about himself..."I'm in pain...I'm so dehydrated...what will help my suffering?" Because you know, what he did get to drink – the wine mixed with vinegar – that concoction was often used as a way to alleviate pain...like his morphine drip to make him comfortable in the last moments of his life. Was that him merely mirroring our humanity and our weakness and our frailty when it come to suffering?

I don't think so. Some have mentioned how that drink gave him that final oomph to cry out his last word, ***"It is finished!"***

There may be some validity to that, but even more than that, Jesus said, "I am thirsty" because it was written. As our verses remind us, Jesus spoke those words ***"so that the Scripture would be fulfilled."***

And what Scripture is being fulfilled? Psalm 22 and Psalm 69: ***"My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death...I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched...They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar to drink."***

Think of everything he had undergone, and not even just during the hours he was on the cross, but the days leading up to Good Friday as well. What was his prayer in Gethsemane? ***"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup (of suffering) be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will...My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done"*** (Matthew 26:39,42).

Unlike LeBron James going down with an injury during the NBA Finals, where they could get a substitute to come in and finish the game for him (although, yes, it would be a huge drop off in talent), Jesus couldn't call in the reserves. That work of salvation belonged to him alone. That cup of suffering was for him alone...and he drank it. Jesus spent all of his energy, all his love, his entire life there on the cross – suffering death and hell – for you.

And what was left for Jesus, in His hour of suffering in the darkness—stricken, smitten, and afflicted—there was only thirst. The lips that once spoke blessing and peace are now chapped and broken. The tongue that once proclaimed the kingdom of God is now thick with dryness. The throat that shouted the good news that God's reign had come with His coming is now as dry as the devil's wind. All of that suffering He healed, He now bears in His own body...for you.

The Fountain and Source of living water is thirsty. His strength is dried up; His tongue cleaves to the roof of His mouth; He is on the brink of physical death, and he thirsts. He thirsts for us, and His thirst becomes our refreshment. ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,"*** Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, ***"for they shall be satisfied"*** (Matthew 5:6). His thirst is our satisfaction; His

pain quenches our lips too parched to praise, our throats too dry to confess. His suffering satisfies our punishment for sin and brings resurrection and life to our dry and dusty and dead bones.

He drinks the bitter cup of suffering and pain and hell so we might drink of His sweet, new wine. ***“Take, drink, this is My blood of the covenant.”*** Now He gives His sacred blood in his holy Supper, a foretaste of that great feast to come when wine will flow in unending joy in the marriage supper of the Lamb in His everlasting kingdom. He drinks of the stinging cup of our human woe, of our suffering and misery, our death, our hell so that we might be refreshed and renewed by His cup of salvation, which we hear in his Word and get to experience on our own lips in the Lord’s Supper.

So, when suffering comes, what can you do? How can you “man up”? Look to Jesus. Remember Jesus in His thirst when you are in pain, when the most the world can offer you is a drink of sour wine, when your suffering seems unquenchable. Remember Jesus in His thirst, thirsting for your salvation, and know this: You are never alone in your time of need and your time of suffering. Your Savior is always there with you, even though you may not detect it by your senses or even your reason, He is there with you, as he’s promised he would be.

Think of Him in your time of spiritual thirst, when your prayers and devotions are dried up, when your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth, silencing your hymns of praise. Come to Him in the Lord’s Supper, where He refreshes you with His body and blood. Do not let anything get between you and him, for He will quench your thirst as no one else can. He, who drank the cup of suffering and death will quench your thirst. Amen.

We pray...For Your thirst and agony, for Your cry in time of need, for Your drinking the sour wine of our disobedience to its dregs that we might seek and find refreshment for our souls in You, all thanks and praise to You, most holy Jesus. Amen