

## ***An Abreactive Atonement***

Romans 5:1-5

Over the course of a year, I come across many unhappy people. It's not that I'm pathologically drawn to malcontents; everyone I meet who is unhappy in a particular moment normally is upbeat, optimistic, and far more satisfied. The reason for their unhappiness when I meet them is because they are hurting in some way.

I meet unhappy people in the hospital when they are dealing with acute illness or surgery; I come to them when they've lost a loved one and need to plan a funeral; I sit with them when they are unloading the burdens of their lives, because it helps to vent and know that someone else listens and cares.

Unhappiness doesn't usually define their daily existence, at least to the level I'm witnessing in the moment. It's just that life has gotten them down, it's been overwhelming and hard on them, enough that their normal temperament gives way to stress, tears, disappointment, irritability, frustration or depression. To paraphrase Tolstoy: "unhappy [people] are unhappy in their own way."

When I meet people in times like these, they expect me to inquire about their outlook and spirits—how they are handling everything that is coming their way. In most cases, they explain they're doing okay—not great—but okay. But if I know better, I'll sense the emotional edges and probe a little more—not intrusively—just enough for them to elaborate a bit on how they are coping.

Why? Because when people are not happy, then they are more likely to find fault with the best remedies for their pain. Without a tolerable limit to their suffering giving way to recovery and improvement, they are apt to

question the effectiveness of that which is supposed to bring healing. They might complain about their doctors or the medication they're taking; they may express frustration or impatience at family or friends trying to help them through a time of bereavement; they often isolate themselves from social gatherings and normal daily interaction; they don't feel up for doing their usual activities; if they choose to speak in religious terms, they might remark that God doesn't seem to answer their prayers anymore because things didn't work out well. When the ordinary sense of wellbeing and optimism no longer accompanies them over the course of a few days, weeks, or months, then grace and gratitude give way to grumbling and grief.

Everyone goes through unhappy times, at least once in a while. Some go through them on a regular basis. A few cannot seem to find their way out of their unhappiness. It's a tough place to be, because it seems as if one is constantly a victim—a victim of circumstance, a victim of someone else's doing, a victim of misfortune, a victim of one's own doing. When a person feels victimized, then the perception of powerlessness comes along with it. Powerlessness is pain-inducing in its own right, in that much of our personal happiness comes from a sense that we're in control of our life and, to some degree, even our destiny.

When things go wrong, all of those facile assumptions about who we are, what we can do, where we can go, and all the beneficial things we want to see happen and all the good we want to yet do, all get tossed out the window. When people lose the power to be independent enough to determine the course of their lives, when they are on the sidelines, while everyone else seem like they're still in the game, then it suddenly feels as if

they don't know where purpose and meaning will come from anymore—what is the point of all this?

It's often assumed that people, in such a vulnerable state, would immediately turn to a higher power for spiritual insight and strength. Those who regularly cultivate their religious faith naturally do this, at least initially. They turn to God for help in strengthening their faith to help them cope with their setback. So will those who haven't been engaged with God for a while. The difference is, those who haven't figure their current misery is directly attributable to their prodigal ways. They are motivated to consider religious avenues for delivering them from their pain. They might start to read the Bible, try to pray, or listen to a TV evangelist to convince them to repent. Repentance is a typical pain-relieving reaction for wayfaring believers (“get your life right with God and the blessings will flow”). Looking for spiritual triage, they hope that if they turn back to God (or for the first time), they will find relief and balance. Everything will start to make sense.

Ironically, that's less likely the case for those who have been religiously active, yet find themselves like Job contending with the negative forces and traumas in their life. These are the ones who are more likely to become disillusioned with suffering. Their spiritual confidence and faith go haywire in times of personal misery. Why? Because, for them, faith and trust and an awareness of God has consistently been in their life—a source of peace and divine providence associated with good feelings and wellbeing. When circumstances are not good, or when they are overwhelming and gut-wrenching, then, like Job, that strong sense of trust often gives way to worry, fear, compounding grief, and sometimes cynicism—especially for those who are angry that God hasn't intervened and their prayers seem

impotent. When all things don't work together for good for those who love God, it's like having the bottom fall out on your entire world.

Underlying this spiritual crisis is a complaint of unfairness that strains the credibility and utility of belief—something that might not be admitted, but is certainly felt. A resentment builds up inside because divine love and care has failed to deliver a person from their pain. God has been absent in their time of need. The providence and love of God seem less real and trustworthy. Some of the most bitter and unhappy people I know are those who believe God has done them wrong and in their anger, they've given up believing altogether—almost as if to strike back at God.

Honestly, to expect someone in this downward spiral to have much faith is like looking for water in a dry well. Well-intentioned clichés and spiritual simplisms don't help or inspire (e.g., “Just let go and let God”; “Know that God has a plan for your life”, “God is only testing you”; “The Lord won't give you anything you can't handle”, etc.); they come across as trite and dismissive of the pain one is enduring. Not all misery is meant to test us or serve as a teachable moment. Some of it happens for no good reason. There are times when Christianity must provide us a means to complain about God—just like Job—rather than just submit to pain and cope with the misery that comes our way. Honestly, sometimes getting angry and letting God have it is the best way to recover a meaningful faith!

In my view, Christianity has actually accounted for this important dimension to faith—something that is remarkably underutilized in the Christian life. It's found, as I see it, in the meaning of the cross. The cross of suffering that Jesus bore is reflective of human misery, but we rarely view it for its potential to viscerally or cathartically deliver us from our pain. We don't avail ourselves of one of the redemptive elements of its

spiritual significance, i.e., as an abreactive atonement for our spiritual agony.

Abreaction is a technical term from Freudian psychoanalysis for purging emotional tension and pain. Its effect is somewhat like it sounds—what we feel in our gut—the abs, if you will—is what we address (“ab-reactive”). The deepest pain we feel (many times, what we won’t admit) is what gets aired and purged. Abreaction is the process of reliving it in order to let it go. One must identify and own the toxic feelings that lie within in order to promote healing.

How do we do this in a moment of spiritual pain, especially if it includes a crisis of faith? We direct all of our anger and emotional energy toward the cross of Jesus; the cross is where we strike back at God for forgetting us in our time of need! We don’t just lay it there passively; we hammer the nails into the very one God loves most! The cross is more than a passive symbol of human sinfulness; the suffering of Christ is also meant to be deeply empathetic with human suffering and a victim’s wrath.

I don’t think Christianity has done a good job of recognizing the cathartic pulse that runs through the theme of salvation, where the cross serves as an active, engaging medium for emotional deliverance. Our relationship to the cross has been rather passive, limited to the abstract concept of substitutionary atonement—something that God does on our behalf through Christ—a theological innovation of the Apostle Paul and carried through the Augustinian tradition. Unrelated to Jesus’ own teachings and mission, they concluded Jesus’ death was the divine means to atone for human sin. Thus, it’s Christian tradition, orthodox doctrine; it’s what all those bloody Gospel hymns romanticize. But what does that mean when you’re losing your faith because you’re a victim of life’s endless

cruelty? Is the sole response of God merely that you will be forgiven your sins when you already feel abandoned by God?

In my experience, faithful people lose their religion more often when they sense that God doesn't care—that their lives and beliefs and suffering don't ultimately matter. They are angry at God which, if left unaddressed, turns belief and trust into cynicism and despair.

If there's to be relief, then we need catharsis—a way to purge our pain, of emotionally releasing and draining misery out of us. The question is, how do we do this if it is God at whom we are angry? If the perception exists that God has let us down, then it would seem the most effective remedy would begin by calling it as it is—name the source of the spiritual pain and take God on and directly strike back for all the unfairness of our condition, for allowing us to suffer endlessly, for burying us in grief, disappointment, and bitterness—feelings of despair that are real to a victim of life's tragedies and torments and strike at the core of human existence and faith.

Obviously, this has to be done imaginatively. One way to unload in a viscerally cleansing way is to take it out on Jesus—God's beloved Son—the spiritual face of God to us. Make him the scapegoat. Let him be the target of your wrath. He's our connection to God, so he represents the One who inflicted this spiritual wound upon you! So nail him to the cross, hammer those nails again and again, so that all of your pent up emotions come out, all of your resentment is reckoned with, and all of your despair is drained completely from your soul! That's how to purge pain! That's a cross of catharsis! That's a meaningful, abreactive atonement!

Granted, this may sound wildly sacrilegious, if not downright blasphemous—the last thing any person of faith should ever want to do.

However, is that not the problem? We don't trust God enough to be honestly angry. So instead, we stop trusting; we give up believing. Or we harbor resentment and take our bitterness and anger at God out on someone else.

God would rather have us drive emotional nails into Jesus—God's own deepest love—than to never find deliverance from our pain or redemption for our souls. Faith will endure through suffering when we can vent all of our anger, shed all of our tears, shout out all of our complaints, until we have exhausted every ounce of our misery. Atonement is supposed to be visceral and cathartic—not abstract and emotionally distant from our lives; we need to purge our pain in order to exhaust its power over our souls. For only then are we ready to rise again to find God and to find faith and to find peace.

For me, an abreactive atonement for human spiritual pain is so much more meaningful than the traditional theology we associate with it. Why this hasn't been considered by theologians escapes me, since so much of human sin is derived from deeply harbored human pain, not vice versa, as it's commonly thought. Instead of pondering how to purge ourselves of the stain of original sin, we would do better to examine the scarring effects of spiritual pain. For that is what plagues humankind on a daily basis and sickens our souls forbidding us from finding the peace we seek for living this life.

As you might imagine, Paul's letter to the Romans reads entirely different if interpreted in light of abreactive atonement, rather than through the standard lens of substitutionary atonement. But I like it better; it's easier for me to grasp. We might embrace our theology more if it were

less about abstract concepts and dogmas we are taught to believe and more about providing remedies for the suffering and pain in our souls.

In my opinion, an abreactive atonement that cathartically delivers us from pain brings new meaning to these profound words from the Apostle Paul, who had to overcome so much spiritual pain and conflict in his own life:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith [through this atonement], we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace to which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Only a heart of pain that has been delivered can grasp the true meaning of hope and the grace that comes in the midst of human despair and misery. Catharsis through the cross is a remarkable resource we have for strengthening faith—a faith that becomes strengthened within and a faith that strengthens us amidst our suffering.

When we think about it, perhaps what Job lacked was an outlet for his spiritual pain—a catharsis, a way to vent and strike back at God, as he suffered through his losses and sorrows and pain in that ancient, timeless story. All Job could do was complain to God in silence without ever receiving an answer. What he missed was the cross to strike back at God—that supremely powerful instrument and medium of pain—so that God could feel the same anguish that he, and everyone else like him, felt. Otherwise, God remains this stoic, unfeeling deity that rules the universe, but doesn't dare to take a punch from an angry sinner or saint. All Job could do was bow before the fury of the wind and the awesome power of the Almighty One, and surrender his complaints to eternity, unanswered.

Though he was restored eventually, he could not have forgotten how much God let him down by being absent to him in his time of need. Even as a proverbial figure, his memory of pain must have remained as an unhealed wound.

We, on the other hand, can come to the cross to voice our complaints against God, vent our anger, and empty the pain from our souls. In that way, Christ suffers our wrath for a good reason that saves another human soul.

Once we purge our pain, we can find our peace again, with God and with life, with all that remains wrong and all that turns out right, as well as with the endless, unfair suffering of this world that only seems to mock our faith. Resurrecting our faith is the great Gospel hope that Christ offers to the depths of our soul. Through him, in a very abreactive way, our spirits are allowed to heal well enough to carry on.

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