

## the **hard thing** about sanctification

Since February, apart from Easter, we've been in a series entitled "**All Things New**" - a study on the gospel, sanctification, and everyday life in Christ.

The title of the series coming from **Revelation 21:5** - where Jesus says,  
"**Behold! I am making all things new.**"

And I won't review where all we've been - but let me simply say: this series was born out of two things. One, **real hope**. And two, **real need**.

First and foremost: the **real hope** that Jesus' words in Revelation 21:5 are **true** - inviting us - *each of us* - *all of us* - into a life of honest discipleship to Jesus - that brings not simply a re-shuffling of our habits, but **the RE-ORDERING of our HEARTS** (of our affections + passions, our thoughts + our will).

As Jesus declares in **Matthew 4:19** (*my life verse*) -

**"Come, follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men and women..."**

*I will transform you, Jesus says, into vessels of my life for the world...*

So that's the **hope** - the **real hope** - that has inspired this study.

A **Real Hope** that speaks to our **Real Need**. Every one of us. Our **real need** for sanctification - for God's redemptive work in the deep places of our lives... the ongoing renewal of **our minds, our desires, our habits, our will**.

The *uprooting* of sin's grip on our hearts and minds and lives, and the planting, watering and nurturing of **GOD'S life & GOD'S desires** in us - over time, as we follow Jesus. And not just at the **outset** of our journey of faith, but **down through all the seasons of our lives**.

And this morning, on our last Sunday in this series, we come to a theme that I've had on my horizon from the start (and long before)... A topic that I knew we needed to spend some time on, *and yet maybe also felt a bit uneasy to address.*

Because it's so personal and complicated and hard to make sense of - though undeniably essential to the larger context of Jesus' words in Revelation 21:5 - and with that, the larger context of our lives...

Sometimes, when I preach, it feels like I'm trying to gather us at the water's edge + inviting us to embark on a journey together for 30-40min. A journey with God that will hopefully conclude somewhere better (maybe even unexpectedly), or will maybe bring us right back to where we started but with new perspective - a fresh or renewed awareness of God's presence and grace right where we are...

But **sometimes** preaching feels more like *rowing out into the deep waters and doing all I can **just to find you*** - hoping to somehow either help you find your way back to God's shore, or to help you find hope that God's rescue is coming... or maybe simply to help you know that God is right here in the deep waters with you - and so are we...

And today's text and theme feels something like rowing out into the deep waters to find some of you... And maybe a bit of myself too...

If you were to look at the page in front of me, you'd see that I've titled this message: "the **hard thing** about sanctification".

Which might make some of you wonder **what it is - what the hard thing is...**?

But that's exactly it - according to Jesus (and the Bible's overwhelming witness and teaching) **the hard thing about sanctification is that it often involves the hard things.**

Which, if I'm honest, **I wish it didn't**, and yet, **I'm also so glad it does...**

That God's deep work in us - God's sanctifying, redeeming, sin-killing, life-giving work in us - **often involves hard things.** Struggling with hard things. Persevering through hard things.

As Dane Ortlund, a wise Christian teacher, explains,

"Our natural instincts tell us that the way forward in the Christian life is by avoiding pain so that, undistracted, we can get down to the business at hand of growing up in Christ. The New Testament tells us again and again, however, that pain is a means, not an obstacle, to deepening in Christian maturity."

Pain is a **means**, not an obstacle, to deepening in Christian maturity.

**The hard thing about sanctification is that it often involves the hard things.**

Suffering. Pain. Sorrow. Grief. Disappointment. Tensions. Complicated relationships. Fractured families. Setbacks. Roadblocks. Catastrophes. Anxiety. Frustration. Isolation. Sickness. Crippling conditions - whether physical, mental, emotional - or all three. Injustice. Persecution. Trials.

**Hard things.** Some, **unfathomably hard.**

And often, as Dane Ortlund wisely describes, "**without our permission.**"

It's just a brief line in his beautiful book on sanctification ([Deeper](#)), but it has rung out to me so profoundly.

That there is much **pain** in our world and in our lives – that comes "**without our permission**".

In truth, hardship is **unavoidable**. We **all** experience pain in this life – in **some** way, if not in **countless** ways.

[And let me just acknowledge, I'm very aware that **this is not a Mother's Day sermon**. But in a way, **maybe it is** – because being a mother involves pain, doesn't it? And not just in childbirth, but in raising another (while you yourself are still in process).]

Truth is, we **all** experience pain in this life.

And knowing Christ – following Jesus – **doesn't** mitigate or do away with this.

In truth, **it can**, at times, **intensify** the pain.

Why? Because the Bible tells us the Story of the world – God's dream for the world – and for us. **And this wasn't it. This isn't it.**

**This is not the way things are supposed to be.**

Cancer. Infertility. Vocational disappointments. Anxiety. Wayward children or parents. Unwanted Affections. Grinding Poverty. Gender Dysphoria. Broken vows. Overwhelming Loneliness. Systemic Racism. Elder Abuse or neglect. And on & on...

**This is not the way things are supposed to be.**

This was NOT **God's dream** for humanity...

And **knowing this** can make it even harder at times...

But with that too, in the Gospel, God has revealed **His Heart** to us. And above all, **in JESUS, God has opened his Heart to us** - His Goodness + Mercy, His Kindness + Compassion, His Power + Glory.

And so when the waves of **THE CURSE crash** against us - or worse, seem to **flood** our lives - *as they do at times* - it is no wonder that **our** hearts break. That **we** ache. And cry out.

## **It's not the way it's supposed to be!**

But thankfully... thankfully... **the Gospel itself rows out to us - into the fury of the storm itself - with comfort + hope that can sustain us.**

In a number of ways.

I'm sure there are many - but these are some of the ways the God of the Gospel **rows out to me** when the storm of the Curse feels so hard (in my life or in the lives of others around me).

**FIRST**, there is a grace in how the gospel - the Story of Scripture - helps make sense of the brokenness of the world - the brokenness we encounter + experience.

There is a grace - a **comfort** in knowing that **In the Beginning** the world was filled with joy - with shalom - with blessing. That in the world as God made it to be - we don't find any suffering or evil, fear or shame. **Not until** sin invades and interrupts God's good + beautiful world.

And there are lots of questions that can come with this, but amidst this, there is a comfort in know that the **Source** of the suffering and pain in this world **is not God**,

but it is the **consequence** of the Fall... the fallout of **humanity's ancient rebellion**... of a world unhinged from the fullness of God's shalom.

I've been reading a book recently on the **costly obedience** of celibate gay Christian men and women (the book is literally called, Costly Obedience).

And at one point, reflecting on how once individual had come to understand and accept the deep brokenness of the world, one of the interviewees in the book remarks,

"The fact that there is **brokenness** is not an indictment against God. If anything, the fact that there is brokenness is a reminder... that we need the redemption that God brings, that we need the change that God offers, the healing and the restoration that God brings to the world." (Charles)

In a way, when we find ourselves ravaged by the pain of **the curse**, the gospel invites us to understand that **GOD IS NOT OUR ENEMY**.

No, God is **our Hope... Our Refuge. Our Healer. Our Comfort**.

**Second**, the **gospel** rows out to us in our pain - with the news that because of Jesus, there is coming a day when, as **Revelation 21:4** tells us,

"There will be **no more** death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away."

And let's be honest, this is a hope - the promise of God - that many of us know, but that, for whatever reason, has never gripped some of us **as truly good news**. A hope **that matters**.

And I suspect this was probably the case for me in my younger years - maybe because I hadn't experienced much suffering or hardship.

But at this point in my life - I have. At this point in my life - this is a truth **that sings**.

Because I've felt deeply the brokenness of our world. I've sat with friends in the wake of sexual assault by a co-worker. I've spoken at a friend's funeral after the tragic and traumatic death of their youngest child. I've walked hand in hand with loved ones through seemingly unending seasons of suicidal ideation, or pain that never leaves, or marriage vows that have been abandoned by a partner. I've wept with friends over childhoods ruined with abuse... and I've learned to listen with my heart open to injustices in our world - in our day and land, around the world and down through the ages...

And I've felt the sting of suffering and trials, grief and chaos - in my own life - as well as the consequence of sin (my own and others).

I've been a pastor for almost 20 years, and an elder for more - and so I've listened to more pain and suffering than I ever expected...

And more and more, I have come to find true comfort in the knowledge that there is a Day coming when things will no longer be as they are. When as Amos 5:24 declares, "*justice will roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream*".

When the "**Never again**" of Isaiah 65:20f will come to pass...

*"See, I will create new heaven and a new earth..."*

And **never again** will injustice carry the day. **Never again** will a people be ruled by an oppressor. **Never again** will a child live but a few days or a few years - and be robbed of life so tragically. **Never again** will holy vows be broken. **Never**

**again** one nation obliterate another. **Never again** will addiction destroy a life and a family. **Never again** will God's Name be dishonored...

**Never Again...** Why?

**Because Jesus will be Lord over all + in all.**

**Amen. Come Lord Jesus. Right?**

Ok, but what about **here + now?**

It's one thing to find comfort in God's original vision for creation and the hope of the Kingdom Come. But what about right here and now - *in the midst of **the hard things*** - *when your life is burning before your very eyes?*

**How does the gospel row out to us** *in the midst of the **hard things** of our lives?*

Cause it does. **Jesus does.** In at least two ways. Two ways that have been deep gifts of grace to **me** in the hard things of the last season of my life...

First, the gospel announces to us the **grace** that **right now - in this moment** - *in the moment or season or long journey of our pain* - God is **not** indifferent to or removed from our pain. Just the opposite. **God is with us in the hard things.**

As God promises in **Isaiah 43:1-3,**

*"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the **waters**, I will be with you, and when you pass through the **rivers**, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the **fire**, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, **your Saviour.**"*

This is a **promise** many of us know and cling to.

But there is **a deeper comfort** here that I don't think we've always been alert to. The Gospel tells us that **the God who is with us** - in the hard things - **is the**

### **Crucified One.**

The Lamb of God - slain for the world.

### **This is the God who is with us in our suffering.**

Think about that.

The God who is **with you** - *in the hard things of your life* - **IS** the God whom the prophet Isaiah (in Isaiah 53:3) described as - **"a man of suffering, and familiar with pain."**

And then in the next verse, Isaiah says of God's Suffering Servant, **"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering."**

This is the God who is WITH US in **our** suffering.

This is why I asked Simon - a few months back - if we could learn and sing a new song I'd just heard called **"Son of Suffering"**.

When I asked him, I'd honestly only heard it only two days before - in worship at a pastor's conference - standing beside a friend going through a world of grief.

The kind of grief that makes it hard to sing along with many of today's popular worship songs - about *the goodness of God*.

I was tired. Fatigued from the long day and poor sleep the night before, but more than that, I was also heavy with my friends ache.

And yet standing in that moment - alongside my friend - carrying his burdens in my own soul - the words of this song met me as the good news that my friend and I both truly needed. That we *all* needed.

Here's the lyric...

*Oh the perfect Son of God - in all His innocence  
Here walking in the dirt with you and me  
He know what living is. He's acquainted with our grief.  
A man of sorrows. Son of suffering.*

*Blood and tears, how can I be?  
That there's a God who weeps  
There's a God who bleeds.  
Oh praise the One  
Who would reach for me  
**Hallelujah, to the Son of Suffering.***

We can sing about the "Goodness of God" over and over (and we must - we need to), but when we are in the throes of the **hard things** of our lives and world - it is an astounding gift - a true comfort - a sustaining grace - to know that the God who is with us is *a God who weeps - a God who bleeds.*

*Hallelujah to the Son of Suffering.*

And I want to linger on one more line in this song - because it speaks a truth that we need to hear and take to heart today.

We find it in the last line of the second verse. Which reads,

*To the sinner You were grace  
And the broken You embraced.  
**And in the end the proof is in Your wounds.***

I think this is something we all - at times - need to hear.

And I say this because it is easy **and understandable** - when we find ourselves up against the wall - facing the hard things - maybe on **many** fronts - to look at **our** lives and **our wounds - our trials - our suffering** - and conclude that God must not truly love us. That God must not be truly for us. That God must not truly be with us.

*"Look at my life. My pain. My suffering. Look what I'm experiencing."*

It's understandable. We all have these thoughts like this at times.

But this song - *following the guidance of scripture and wise Christians down through the ages* - invite us to look **elsewhere**. Not to **our** suffering, but to **Jesus' suffering. To what Jesus has suffered for us - on the Cross.**

Suffering he endured - **WITH HIS FULL PERMISSION**. Right?

I mentioned at the start that often our suffering comes "without our permission". Which isn't to minimize it. There is a profound grief in this...

But as this song rightly contends, *"In the end the proof is in **JESUS'** wounds."*

What **God in Christ** has suffered - willingly - for us.

For the **joy** of reconciling and restoring us to Himself. As Hebrews 12:2 tells us, *"For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross."*

*"In the end the proof is in **His** wounds."*

Reflecting on this very thought, Dane Ortlund, in another brief portion of his book, writes,

**"If you are having thoughts like that as you hear about Christ's love. I want you to know that you are looking at the wrong life. Your life doesn't disprove Christ's love. His life proves it."** (80)

**Your life** doesn't disprove Christ's love. **His life proves it.**

**His suffering** for you.

**His wounds** - for you. For me. For us. For the world...

Wounds that **will** one day mean the end of all our suffering. **Thank God.**

Which brings us to the final way that the gospel **rows out to us** in the midst of **the hard things.**

And this is where we connect back to the larger context of Jesus words in Revelation - "*Behold! I am making all things new!*" Words spoken to a Christian community in the throes of suffering and persecution, injustice and chaos. Suffering and oppression so real that Revelation itself needed to be written in **code** - what scholars refer to as **apocalyptic** literature.

Which brings us back to the claim I made at the outset of this talk: that **the hard thing about sanctification is that it often involves the hard things.**

Which again, as I said at the start:

*I wish I didn't.*

**And yet, I'm so glad it does...**

That God's deep work in us - God's sanctifying, redeeming, sin-killing, life-giving work in us - *conforming us into the likeness of Jesus* - **often involves the hard things.**

Experiencing hard things.  
Struggling with hard things.  
Persevering through hard things.

Again as Dane Ortlund writes,

"Our natural instincts tell us that the way forward in the Christian life is by avoiding pain so that, undistracted, we can get down to the business at hand of growing up in Christ. The New Testament tells us again and again, however, that **pain is a means, not an obstacle, to deepening in Christian maturity.**"

Pain is a **means, not an obstacle**, to deepening in Christian maturity - to growing in true holiness.

To which my heart increasingly says - **THANK GOD. Thank God is it.**

When something in my life has gone south. When others have made a decision that sends my family life spinning. When a friend texts me on Thursday evening to say that his house is on fire. (*This literally happened this week*). When the hard things seem to mount up and overwhelm the good things - or to suck the air out of the good things - **I thank God.**

I thank God **that** the pain in our lives - the trials, the griefs, the disappointments, the sorrows, the setbacks, the detours, our sickness, our brokenness and our experience of the brokenness of others - **isn't wasted**. That it isn't **useless, pointless, meaningless...** or even just **passing**.

Not that we need to try to make sense of them. But, as children of a loving Father - a Father's whose heart is most clearly revealed in the Jesus - we are invited to trust that our God - the Crucified One - **will use even this...** That our God - the Crucified One - will be and is at work **even in the hard things** - seeking to use even the trials of our lives as the means of our sanctification.

This is a truth - a grace - that we learn from so many parts of scripture - but most famously from **Romans 8:28f.** A text that I'm sure has already come to some of your minds. It is a familiar verse for many of us. Let me read it for us.

Writing to a community of Christians who are deep in the throes of the **hard things** - real and ongoing suffering, real uncertainties and threats. And at the close of a **beautiful** passage on how God ministers to us in our suffering, Paul writes these famous words. **Romans 8:28.**

*"And we know that **in all things** God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*

And then in the next verse Paul clarifies what God's purpose is - that we would be *"conformed to the image of his Son..."*

And I know as I read this and we hear this - some of us might want to scream or to slip out the door - because of how this verse **seems** to imply or explicitly teach that **God Himself to be the Source of the hard things.**

**Or worse,** that God Himself **IS** the **hard thing.**

**The Hard ONE.**

## **Which is why I didn't start with this verse today!**

Because although some do teach and understand God's Sovereignty to mean that **God WILLS** all things that happen in our lives. That everything that happens in our lives and world is brought about **by the will of God.**

The Lord's Prayer alone - which Jesus Himself, God the Eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity - teaches us otherwise...

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray for **what?**

For God's will to be done!

**WHICH MEANS** that *NOT all that happens in our lives and in our world IS in accordance with the will of God!* Not all that happens in us, and to us and in our world is God's will for us.

Right? If God's will **IS** already being done - **in all things** - then this is not a prayer we need to pray. **But Jesus thinks it is.**

Which means that there **ARE** things that happen in our lives and our world - even in us - that are **not** God's will - I'm sure you can think of many examples.

**And yet**, according to Romans 8:28 - in the mercy and mystery of God's sovereign grace - we are invited to **trust** that the Crucified One - our God who has suffered for us - can and will be at work **in all things** - including the **hard things** - for our good...

**Thank God. Thank God...**

What a grace to know that God **can use** (and **does** use) *not only our worship and prayer, obedience and devotion, BUT ALSO our suffering, our griefs, our trials, our disappointments, our failures and the failures of others - ALL THINGS* - as the means of His sanctifying work in us.

Why? **Because He loves us.**

**And how do we know this?**

**Because He has suffered for us.**

As the song invites us to sing, **"The proof is in His Wounds."**

*Oh the perfect Son of God - in all His innocence  
Here walking in the dirt with you and me.  
He know what living is. He's acquainted with our grief.  
A man of sorrows. Son of suffering.*

*Blood and tears, how can I be?  
That there's a God who weeps  
There's a God who bleeds.  
Oh praise the One  
Who would reach for me  
**Hallelujah, to the Son of Suffering.***

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## re: Romans 8

We often start reading at

- Romans 8:28 ("And we know that in all things God works for those who...")
- Or at Romans 8:18 ("I consider that our present sufferings are...") - particularly because this is where most of my bible's begin this text (with a heading and new paragraph block).

But Paul's discourse on suffering is **grounded in Romans 8:14f** - where Paul declares the work of the Spirit in testifying to our Spirit that we are **God's beloved children...**

- V.15 - "And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'."