

August 18, 1968
I Peter 2:19-25 (N.E.)
Norman S. Ream

"WHY DID THIS HAPPEN TO ME?"

"But when you have behaved well and suffer for it, your fortitude is a fine thing in the sight of God."

--I Peter 2:20

When those of you who are my age were children, you may not have realized it, but 90% of the preaching to which you listened, or at least to which you were exposed, was what is referred to in homiletical circles as expository preaching. The sermon this morning is an expository sermon. What that means is simply that I wish to cite a passage of scripture and expostulate upon it--to explain it and to apply it as best I can.

It is another instance of those many experiences I have had in which suddenly as I have read a particular section of the Bible a whole new avenue of thought has opened up to me. In this case it occurred as I reread the epistle of Peter in a new translation. Much as I love the King James version, I doubt that I would ever have got from that translation the same significance out of this passage from Peter.

Peter is addressing himself to slaves. Slavery was an accepted institution in his century, and even had the early Christians desired to eliminate it, they would have had little chance of doing so. They were a small minority. Few of their number were wealthy enough to own slaves. So Peter is not attacking slavery. He is advising slaves how to accept and use their circumstances so as to be most pleasing to God, thereby leading the most useful and satisfying lives. What Peter says to these early Christian slaves is applicable to each of us as we labor in a world which in many respects is a hard taskmaster and often seems very unjust in its treatment of us. The relevant words are these:

"For it is a fine thing if a man endure the pain of undeserved suffering because God is in his thoughts. What credit is there in fortitude when you have done wrong and are beaten for it? But when you have behaved well and suffer for it, your fortitude is a fine thing in the sight of God."

One of the questions every minister has been asked many times by those in the midst of suffering, pain or difficulty, is the query, "Why did this have to happen to me?" The implication, of course, is that the questioner can think of many persons to whom this ought to have happened and who richly deserve this punishment. But as for himself, he cannot see or understand what he has done to deserve such massive injustice. "Why did this happen to me?"

It is not stretching Peter's admonition to slaves too far to suggest that he might well have been answering such a query with the statement, "Well, why not you? Are you so much better than others who have undergone similar suffering? Others have had this experience; why not you?"

Most of us, if we were carefully to tally our virtues and our vices, would arrange for the former to outnumber the latter. It's not because we suffer from a superiority complex or a false pride in thinking that we are really good people. It's because we are human and have to live with ourselves. If we were constantly confronted with our worst selves we would all become the victims of depression. We have to look at our best self most of the time in order to remain sane. Such being the case, we find it difficult to imagine that we ever really deserve the disappointments, the frustrations, the road blocks, that life so often puts in our path.

A certain minister one day preached a sermon on pride. When the service was concluded a young woman expressed a desire to talk with him. When they were alone she said she wanted to confess to the sin of pride. "The other day," she said, "I sat before my mirror for hours admiring my beauty." The minister replied, "My dear, that was not the sin of pride, that was the sin of imagination."

It is not difficult, is it, to imagine ourselves better than we are and as a result have difficulty admitting that perhaps we deserve this evil thing that has befallen us. So we ask, "Why did this happen to me?"

II

This morning I would like to suggest some of the reasons why it may have happened to you.

First of all, this is a universal experience common to all human life. Many persons spend hours, sometimes years, envying others who seem to have so much more of the good in life and so much less of the difficulty. Their envy is completely unfounded in fact. Only a minister knows how many of those supposedly fortunate people good fortune is presumably smiling upon with enviable consistency are hiding broken hearts, frustrated ambitions, heartbreak and disappointment. More than one finds himself thinking how fortunate a certain person is who seems to have everything life has to offer, only to have that very person come into the study a short time later with a tragic tale of unhappiness and woe. I have learned that envy is the most wasteful of all human emotions.

Pain, suffering, periodic unhappiness, for any one of a multitude of reasons, is a part of life which we cannot escape until we learn how to escape from life itself. If you want life, you must expect some rain to fall into that life. The more vital and dynamic and adventurous you want that life to be, the more likely the rain will occasionally become a cloudburst. If you want to live at all, you must accept the consequences of living.

An appropriate parallel can be found in almost any active sport. If you want to play football or baseball, you enter the game realizing (consciously or unconsciously) that you may and probably will sustain some injuries. If while you are playing you are constantly afraid of the possible injuries and play so as best to avoid them, you will certainly not play very well. It is even so in the game of life. Injuries are a part of it.

III

Let me now briefly present some other possibilities in answer to the question, "Why did this have to happen to me?" One possibility we must always consider and the most difficult to accept is, "I deserved it."

We all know how easy it is to rationalize and to justify ourselves. We may indeed condemn some particular action in all other persons under all circumstances, yet justify it in ourselves. Be strictly honest with yourself and the untoward events of life will not seem nearly so mysterious and unexplainable. "Why did this happen to me?" "Well, I was getting a bit vain and proud. I thought I was a bit better than others, and what happened to them could not happen to me. Yes, perhaps I needed this."

It is also conceivable that this, whatever "this" may happen to be, happened to you because you are better able to handle it than others would be. Perhaps you are being tested and tried for the future. Life does have a peculiar way of discovering talent and ability, power and strength, before putting it to the ultimate test.

It is a strange thing and we have seen it happen so many times, that men and women have been able to stand and to endure far more than they ever dreamed they could. Had they foreseen what was to happen to them, they would have insisted, "No, I could never tolerate that. It would be far more than I could bear." Yet when it came, they endured it all and more. Somehow or other God never seems to give us more than He knows we are capable of enduring.

Every experience of life, no matter how exhilarating or debilitating, holds within itself opportunity; opportunity to learn, to grow, to develop. What happens to us doesn't have to matter, but how we respond to what happens to us matters supremely. Perhaps this happened to you, whatever it may have been, because God wanted you to learn how to respond positively and constructively.

IV

At least we know this, God created a world and an environment wherein these things that we complain about can happen. This to me testifies that God wanted these things to be able to happen.

Let's take, for example, the matter of grief over the loss of a loved one. Grief is not an accident of a capricious universe. It is the consequence of one of God's greatest gifts--the ability to love. If it was impossible for us to love someone, we would never grieve when we lost that someone. God made grief a possibility when he made love a possibility. You cannot eliminate grief without eliminating love. Were it in your power, would you choose to wipe out love?

"Why Did This Happen To Me?" - page 4

God could also have created in such a fashion that there could be no vice, no disobedience of his creatures to his will. But in eliminating the possibility of vice, he would likewise have eliminated the possibility of virtue. We would have no great men to admire, no saints to emulate, no challenge to achieve great character. Had you the power, would this have been your choice?

There is in this universe which God created no chance or accident. Nothing just happens, without a reason. For every cause there is an effect, and every effect becomes another cause. We may not, indeed we cannot, understand and explain all that happens. We can understand and explain very little that happens, but that does not mean there is no reason why it happened.

You and I would not find it difficult to say that much evil befell the apostle Paul. He was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked. But in the end, as we now more objectively scan the life of Paul and see how he responded to all that happened to him, can we be so certain that it was evil? Without these experiences would Paul have been the man he was?

"Why did this happen to me?" Well, why not? Are you not a part of mankind, subject to the same experiences, worthy also to be tested and tried, worthy of an opportunity to respond and grow?

Just one word of warning. I am not saying, and I do not believe, that God wills everything that happens. I am saying that God has created a world in which all of these strange and mysterious, sometimes painful and heartbreaking, experiences can take place. What God does will is that you and I respond constructively and creatively to every experience of life. He enables us so to respond by offering to share every experience with us.

V

Let us return to Peter from whom you may think we have long since departed. Peter is saying two things. If you do wrong and suffer because of it, you have no right to complain, and you deserve no particular blessing for bearing your well-deserved consequences with fortitude. But if you suffer pain and suffer undeservedly, and you bear that with fortitude and with faith because God is in your thoughts, it is a fine thing, pleasing to God, for it will enable you to grow and develop the character which God intends you to have.

Ask not therefore why this has happened to you. Ask, rather, how you can bravely face and courageously endure whatever happens to you so as to be pleasing to God and satisfying to yourself.