

How many hours of your days are filled with sighs and laments about the problems you have? Sometimes it can seem that this is all life amounts to, right? Our lives, defined just by the string of difficulties we have to deal with. Some are just bothersome enough because we have to take the time to fix them, and some wear on us day after day because they are a burden that we cannot change. Even from the faithful, many cries have gone up to the Lord. Why? How long? Help me.

God would like you to understand. Not so much the specifics, but he wants you to understand enough about these troubles that you can be comforted and not despair. For that understanding today, we turn to Jesus in Mark chapter 1, who had just began his earthly ministry. <Read text: Mark 1:29-34>.

He had been baptized, he had called his first disciples, he had even created a stir at the local synagogue already. He had barely begun his earthly work but word about him was going to spread very rapidly. That evening, at the home of Simon, they found that his mother-in-law was very ill and Jesus had compassion on her. He healed her of her illness and she resumed her regular life. And apparently between that and the demon-possessed man that Jesus had healed at the synagogue that day, the word had gotten out. Everyone in town started to show up at the door needing help.

These sinners. These people who had dishonored God with their lives now turned to God himself for help? I would expect that few of them truly understood whom they were asking for help here, but they knew he could help. And so covered in sin, and full of ignorance they came to have it made better, and yet God loved them. He had compassion, he healed them. We do note though, that after the incident in the synagogue that we read about last week, he did not allow the demons to speak because he did not want to be identified just yet. We'll discuss the reason for that shortly.

But first, let's ask a few questions of why. First of all, why were so many suffering from so much? In fact that's a cry that always seems to go up from the human race, isn't it? It's a cry that many who reject God use as their argument. If God is so loving as you claim, then why is there so much suffering? God is in control, right? God may not cause evil but he can allow or prevent its action by his will. So if he was going to show up as Jesus and heal these people, then why allow the troubles in the first place?

But if their lives had been carefree and easy, where would they not have gone that evening? They would not have gone to Jesus for help. They needed Jesus. In fact, they needed Jesus far beyond the aches and pains that brought them to him. But they didn't understand that yet. So these temporary problems that the Lord allowed served a much more important good; to draw them close to their Savior. Again, they didn't know. And even after the fact they may not have understood. Jesus still healed them regardless. They had problems, and he was the answer. He fixed what was wrong and healed what hurt when they came to him.

Can you see that God's methods have not changed? We started with the question of why. Why our problems, why our suffering. Our God says he loves us and yet he allows these troubles to happen. Some are just annoying, some are minor but mentally exhausting. Some are literally physical torment. But they all serve the same purpose, to drive us to Jesus. They all exist to make us recognize how much we need him and to run to him for help in the same way the villagers crowded at Simon's door to see Jesus.

But, that's not really the whole story, is it? Because in our lives we know that asking God for help with a problem doesn't always just make it magically go away. And even in our reading today, events changed after that night with the crowds from the town. The very next verse continues: <Read v35>.

Again, why? Why did Jesus withdraw? He was helping people, wasn't that why he was there? But it tells us he went to a solitary place to pray. We may become a little befuddled at Jesus needing to pray to the Father, weren't they both God? But it certainly sets an example for us if nothing else. If this was important to God the Son then it should be doubly so for us who are not connected to God the Father in the unique way he was. He wanted to simply recharge spiritually. To spend some time alone with the Father and simply be with him.

When our troubles drive us to God is that what happens? Are we driven closer to our God to simply be with our God and be recharged by his presence... or do we beat down his door like the villagers, demanding that our problem be fixed so that we can get back to our lives? Do you understand and see the difference?

When difficulty comes, God has a good purpose behind it, our reading from Romans makes that perfectly clear. And as this example in the gospel illustrates, many times that purpose is to draw us closer to God. But do you come to God simply to demand he fix your problems, or do you draw close to God to simply be with him, be filled with him and in that fullness remember his great declaration, "My grace is sufficient for you."

All this is made quite clear by what happens next: <Read v36-39>. The disciples go looking for Jesus. And while everyone in the town wants to see him, Jesus declares he wants to move on. The people in the town did not seem to get it. They had failed to learn the lesson, as we humans so often do. He had offered them healing so that he could heal them for eternity, but all they wanted was more of the temporary, they had failed to grasp the eternal. They clamored for him, but for the wrong things.

Is this what we do when we turn to our God for help? The troubles that our God allows are there to drive us to him. They are there to teach us and remind us regularly that we are not capable of caring for ourselves. They are there to teach us that if we can't even overcome this limited human problem, how can we expect to deal with the real, eternal problem? The problem that we are by nature a sinner and in that nature have violated God's perfect law more times than we could ever count. You cannot fix that. You cannot change that. In your own strength and power you will die forever.

God can help. God wants to help. He wants to fix that for you. He lived and died and rose from the dead to make that possible. You understand that this is the only real problem you will ever have. The only real question, the only thing that will actually matter in the end. Will God rescue you or will you reject him and be condemned? Everything you have done wrong has been corrected by God. The sins you committed, the ones you are in right now, the ones you will do tomorrow, they all were taken to the cross and loaded on the shoulders of Jesus and there they were paid for in his suffering. There is no longer any punishment for sin because they cannot be punished twice. And the good life you should have lived, the one that had no other gods but the Lord himself, that life Jesus lived for you and you receive the credit for it. He gave it to you as a robe of righteousness that you wear in the presence of the Father, that makes you clean in his eyes.

It has all been done. The problem is solved. God wants to draw you to himself to give this to you. The only choice we have in the matter is if instead we run away from him and all he offers. The difficulty is that running from God is our sinful human instinct, all the way back to Adam hiding in the Garden. And so in love, God must use every tool at his disposal to continue to draw us back to him so that we do not slip away.

Every part of your life is orchestrated by God to make this happen. Everything that happens, good or bad, is allowed by him to this end; that you are saved. That you put your full trust in him at all times. Whatever difficulty we must face to make that happen is absolutely worth it. No matter the annoyance, the pain or the outright torment, if they are what is needed to keep you close to God then there is not even any comparison. They are worth it.

The people of Simon's town apparently did not learn that lesson. Jesus offered them a heavenly banquet and they just wanted the scraps from the table. They wanted solutions to the wrong problems, and so Jesus withdrew and moved on so that he could share the true solution with as many as would hear it. Consider yourself how you approach God with your troubles. Do you approach him to be filled with the joy of the real solution to your only problem? Or do you approach to tell him which problems he needs to fix for you in order for you to be happy? If it's the latter, we have learned the wrong lesson. Yes you came to God for help, but you came to ask for scraps instead of the banquet.

For every problem you have, God has the solution, and the solution is your forgiveness through Jesus, the solution is the eternal life he won for you. If we do not come to him first and foremost for this solution, then we are drawing close to him for the wrong reasons. And God loves you too much to leave it like that. However, I don't want anyone to lose heart or despair over this, I simply want us to understand. I am not saying that God will never help our earthly troubles. Jesus *did* heal all those people that evening, despite knowing where it was going. Our God is compassionate. He wants to help. And he will only use what troubles are necessary to keep his people close to him.

But our earthly troubles will never vanish. We should not expect that they would. Even if we right now had a perfect understanding of our need for God's salvation, even if we were perfectly united with him, that would not bring us a perfect life of ease. A life without trouble would tempt us to think we don't need God. We will always have trouble here. For every one we fix, another will happen. That is not a call to laziness or neglect of our responsibilities, it's simply a matter of having the right perspective and understanding so that our expectations are set properly.

It's also not a call to despair. Because it doesn't matter if the earthly problems never stop coming in this life. God has the solution to them all. He is the solution. God bled and died and rose for you to stop all the problems permanently. We are asked to stay here for a time, to help others reach that same understanding, but that time will end and all problems will cease and our God will deliver the full solution to our real problem. We will be with him completely forever. Where we go when we're done here is the only real problem. And God has the only real solution. Amen.