

"Promise, Hope and Future" 2016
John 16:16-22 Philippians 3:10-16

A few years ago a *Newsweek* reporter noticed and found it curious that no matter how bad film-critics said that a movie was, Dave Manning of the Richfield Press, always gave it a glowing review that would be prominently featured in all its print advertising. But then after a few telephone calls, it was revealed that other movie critics had **no idea of who Dave Manning was**, and the Richfield Press, a small-town weekly newspaper in Connecticut, had **never heard of a film critic named Dave Manning**. As it turned out, **Dave Manning was invented to write false reviews**, by an executive at Columbia Pictures Studio. And as a result, the company had to pay a 325k fine and a 1.5 million dollar settlement for that sneaky deception.

That story reminds me of when my seminary classmates and I used to watch some of the slicker and slimier evangelists on TV, and wonder how they could get away with such blatant lies, deceptions and distortions of Holy Scripture. I don't mean that every preacher on TV is a crook or charlatan, but there are some who **shamelessly distort truth and Scripture** so outrageously that it's almost beyond belief... **in various forms**, claiming that if you send them enough money, then God will see your faithfulness, and make you prosperous, or fix whatever trouble or difficulty you are struggling with. That teaching is a heresy known as the "**prosperity gospel**", promising that if you are a faithful and generous Christian, then God will surely reward you with wealth, good health, and generally make your life easy and comfortable, after all, you are a **child of the King of Kings**. * **The Prosperity Gospel is based on the false assumption that since God is all-powerful and loves you, then if you do what God wants, God will do whatever you want**. Now there are Bible passages that teach us that obeying God's ways and commandments is beneficial in life, and pleasing the Lord is obviously better than disobedience, **but the Bible does not say that we won't also struggle & suffer, or that by donating money, we can buy God's favor & blessings**. Clearly Jesus is not talking about a **prosperity gospel**,

vs. 20

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.

This passage today is part of the "farewell discourse" of Jesus, spoken just hours before his betrayal and death, to prepare his followers for that season of darkness...

vs. 22

So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

His disciples were about to go through the pain and loss of Jesus being betrayed, killed and put in a tomb. But three days later he would be raised from the dead, they would see him again after his resurrection and rejoice, and through the Holy Spirit, **he would be with them, even after he ascended to the Father in heaven**. When John wrote this gospel, it was probably 60 years or so after the ascension of Jesus, and the Christian community John served was suffering under very severe persecution and harsh opposition... **it was a most difficult and discouraging time, and they were certainly not living a gospel of prosperity or ease**. The writer tells this story and conversation of Jesus to remind them of his promised presence and hope, and to make a connection, that just as the suffering and death of Jesus was terrible and discouraging, followed by **the incredible joy of his resurrection**, so too the struggle and suffering of their faith community would be followed by **the promised joy of God's kingdom**. There is no promise in Scripture that our Christian lives will always be comfortable and easy, only that in the end, **our joy will far surpass our suffering**... to which Jesus compared, a woman's pain during childbirth to the joy of a baby,

vs. 21

When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.

I came to appreciate this passage years ago in a very personal way, when a very bright young woman started attending my church who wasn't a Christian, but asked lots and lots of questions. Frequently, she would drop by my office during the week to ask about topics that came up during our worship on Sunday... **she was on a journey of exploration, of coming to faith**. Even later on, after she did receive Jesus as her Lord and Savior, she still continued to come by with more questions... always interesting, thought provoking, and inquisitive in wonderful ways that defied simplistic stock answers. And when she and her husband moved away to another area, she continued to explore her

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faith with more questions by email. So when she became pregnant with her first child, we celebrated their good news by email, and she had theological questions for me even about that:

"Okay, here's my latest question: I figure God gave me this baby to take care of, and so he must think pregnancy is a good thing. So then, why has he made the process so difficult? I thought being pregnant was supposed to be 'a glorious time', but I am always either sick or tired, or both. Why doesn't God make this sort of thing easy?"

Do you hear the prosperity gospel connection in her question?, assuming that if in accord with God's good and purpose, then surely her pregnancy should be easy and comfortable.

Indeed, why doesn't God make our lives easy and comfortable, for surely he could, especially for those who love God and serve faithfully? Wouldn't it make perfect sense, that once you accepted Christ and tried to live a godly life, then surely God could reward us with a few simple perks, health, material prosperity, well-behaved kids, etc.... and yet we all know that Christians do suffer and struggle at least as much as anyone else and the truth is, living a Christ-centered obedient life is very hard in fact, even for the Messiah, even for the Son of God, faithful obedience to God was costly and difficult, and certainly neither comfortable nor easy. In Jeremiah, chapter 18, the prophet writes about the suffering and struggles of the people of God. His perspective and teaching recognized that suffering & struggle are part of a process through which God changes and remakes us, remolding our whole lives into vessels that are useful, **just as a potter works and reworks with the clay, to produce a vessel of great beauty and strength. Jeremiah's point is that God's purpose runs much deeper than just providing easy and trouble-free lives for his chosen people.**

But rather, God uses the struggles and challenges of our lives to teach us, to strengthen us, to help us develop, so that we know by experience that we can trust the grace and power, the mercy and compassion of our God. So to answer my pregnant friend's question, "why doesn't God make this sort of thing easy?" and why do we still struggle even in our faith? Because, as we read in Jeremiah, we are the clay, still being **lovingly reworked** in the Master Potter's hands. Consider your own life's learning and experience.

What are the achievements and accomplishments of life for which you feel the most satisfaction and pride?

Are they not, those which were the most difficult to attain?

What have been the greatest and critical lessons of your life that are the most significant and matter the most to you?

Are they not, those lessons learned through the most difficult and arduous struggle and stain?... for do we not learn far more from troubles & mistakes than we do from comfort & ease? **So why is life difficult & hard, a struggle more than comfort & ease? ... maybe because surely God's still got some work yet to do in us before we are ready to live eternally in heaven's glory.** Suppose that it is God's purpose to transform us – rework us as clay, to prepare us and equip each of us to serve more usefully, **and so over time to prepare and equip us to live forever in the glorious kingdom of God... then surely our Christian task to accomplish in this life, must be to be malleable, submitting willingly to God's purpose by giving ourselves unreserved, and as entirely as we can to our life-long journey of learning to know God, and how to respond and live within God's grace.** We are Easter people even when it feels like Gethsemane. We will be better and stronger for what we've endured, and because we've received refuge and strength, hope and help, that is grounded in God, God's truth, promises and love... ... which means that whatever suffering or loss we must endure, it does not have to be pointless or accomplish nothing, * **for our God CAN transform disaster into good and blessing.** Jesus could not have been more clear,

vs. 20, 22.

"...you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy... and no one will take your joy from you."

There may be some dark days of struggle and suffering ahead, but know that always the light of God will shine through. God is with us and for us, God's love and power will sustain us, therefore, we need not fear, whatever this life brings. * **And we can know that God is up to something, and will transform our losses and struggles into blessing, and use our disasters to draw us closer in our walk of faith.** And perhaps most amazing, even when my suffering is my own fault, even when I did bring in on myself, **God is still with me.** God's embrace comforts and guides us through all our tribulation, for our God knows and loves us, and will never, never abandon us. Today you may be facing or about to face the worst days of your life, struggling with disaster beyond all comprehension -- and the sure promise is that God is still with you, not merely to survive, **but to walk in joy of victory.** My pregnant friend did not endure her 'glorious' time alone, but God was very much present with her and for her... **with her for every groan and grunt, sharing even in her sickness and God did bring her through to the joy of the other side.** I know this for sure because I remember very well the look of her joy as I held her daughter when I baptized that precious child... all as Jesus promised,

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vs. 20-21,

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, ... you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.

Somehow God CAN transform even our worst suffering & pain through grace into something else, that can be useful and life-giving.

Through Christ, our darkness turns to light.

Through Christ, our sorrow turns to joy.

Through Christ, our struggles turn to victory.

Thanks and glory be to God, whose love for us, has no limit, and so let us persevere in the gracious love of our Lord God. **So what does all that mean for us?** When I was a receiver running a pattern to catch a football, I remember hearing footsteps of the defender ready to tackle me... **and if I lost focus, and let fear of the tackle distract me, I wouldn't be able to catch the pass.** I had to focus on the football, and trust the quarterback to drop the ball in my arms... so too, I can't be faithful in my walk and journey of faith, if my focus drifts to my struggles and troubles in this world. **I have to trust the grace and promises of my Savior, and keep my eyes and heart focused on Jesus and his gracious love.** As the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians,

vs. 10-12, 14

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ... Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. ... **straining forward to what lies ahead, the promise of joy!**