

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“A Cup to Drink”

Mark 10: 35-40

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James and John had given the appearance of listening to Jesus talk but they sure hadn't heard. He'd just said that he was going to Jerusalem and when he got there, he'd be betrayed and condemned and ridiculed and killed.

James and John must have drifted off because Mark writes, **“Then...”** Then, as in no sooner had Jesus gotten this description of his suffering out of his mouth, did they sneak over to ask Jesus for special favors when Jesus made it to the big show.

It wasn't enough to be among the twelve.

Wasn't enough to be in the inner circle with Peter and Jesus.

They wanted to be Valedictorian and Salutatorian.

Number one and number two. Hertz and Avis.

Of course, eventually they'd have been competing for the right hand spot had they gotten into those places of privilege. The right hand was the upper hand. These two come off looking pretty silly.

It's clear they hadn't heard... they did not understand. Which means that you can follow Jesus, be very near to Jesus and be mistaken about what Jesus is up too... who Jesus is.

James and John had said yes to his initial request to follow him... **“Follow me!”** **“Sure thing.”** They'd said yes to the journey with Jesus. Understanding what that journey was all about would be unfolding for them for years.

In that moment, they were clearly still in the dark. **“You don't know what you're asking... trust me, you haven't the foggiest.”**

And then Jesus uses two fairly common expressions to make his point. **“Can you drink the cup I drink?”** It's a question about the lot he's been handed, the hand he's been dealt. “Can you play these cards?”

“Can you be baptized with the baptism I'm about to experience?” The word means submerged and it's entirely possible Jesus wasn't using religious language here. **“Can you get underneath this... can you be submerged in suffering?”**

They're quick to answer. **“We can,”** they said enthusiastically in unison.

They were unaware of the implications of their answer. Understanding what following Jesus will mean isn't clear when the first steps are taken. Hasn't it evolved for you over time and aren't there times when it really isn't clear at all?

It's not clear here to James and John.

One thing Mark is clear about, **“they were on their way to Jerusalem with Jesus leading the way. The disciples are shocked** (shocked that he would go there), **other's were scared to death.”** (Scared they'll be implicated.) Jesus is leading the way to Jerusalem. He's going to the place of suffering. Into it... on purpose... choosing suffering.

Contrary to what we might like, the Bible doesn't really speak with one voice on a lot of things. It depends on where you open it and where your finger falls when you read. That's certainly the case when we read the Bible with regard to suffering and all that ails us in this life. It kind of depends on where you look.

For instance, if you look in Isaiah 53 (that we read earlier) you'll hear that really common thinking that whatever suffering comes our way, comes our way because of our sin. It's "tit for tat... do the crime, do the painful time" kind of thinking. **"We considered him stricken by God... smitten by God... afflicted,"** "given all he'd gone through."

That's a pretty common notion and certainly we know it touches on part of the truth and Biblical teaching. Genesis tells us there are consequences, right? Bite the wrong fruit and the garden goes to pot.

Psalm 90 sort of follows that thinking but in reverse, I suppose. Remember earlier where we read that if you belong to God and because you love God, you won't so much as stub your toe. Of course, we've loved God and our toes have been plenty bloody so we don't know what to do with that, do we? Except we do believe that God takes care of us...(nasty paradox, huh?)

Sometimes... it's the sin of the parents or of some previous generation that's to blame in the Bible. Sometimes it's just the way it is, **"the rain, it falls on the good and bad alike, that's just the way the world works."**

That honest author of Ecclesiastes has a balanced take. **"To everything there is a season." "Bad things happen, the world is imperfect, but that seems to be the way it's supposed to be."**

And that's a common teaching in the wisdom and mystical traditions. That somehow this perfect world wouldn't be perfect without pain.

Would we be able to grow up with out it?

Could we become without suffering?

Would light exist without darkness?

Meaning without chaos? Grace without judgement?

Rumi the Sufi poet speaks to this so well.

*Pain is a treasure of Mercy;
the fruit is juicy when you peel the rind.*

The... child first wipes the tablet and then writes the letters on it.

*God turns the heart into blood and desperate tears;
then writes the spiritual mysteries on it.*

The Sufis teach that the imperfection of the world gives rise to the reality of love. It's the reason for agape... unconditional love happens because of the conditions of the world. (Helminski 123)

Jesus doesn't really offer anything new by the way of explanation. I think he'd tell us that all of the above are true... at least some of the time. Sin causes suffering... and life does... and I do and we do... and sometimes, as grace disguised, even God does.

Covert mercy. All of that is true about suffering... sometimes. Jesus doesn't offer a new theory... but he does offer something. There's not a new why. He doesn't offer a new explanation. What he offers is himself.

What we see of the Divine in Christ is a God who suffers. Not a God who calls time out for an incarnational moment, so He can say, **"Been there done that."** But a God who bears our pain... our humanity... and all the suffering that comes along with it.

I love that scene in Forrest Gump, the one where Jenny and Forest are going for a walk and they come upon the house of her childhood. It's a rickety... dirty symbol. It was the place of pain and abuse for her.

Tears well up... anger... and she begins throwing rocks, with all her might, slinging rocks at the source of her pain. **"Why?"** she's crying as she hurls. **"Why?"** A rock breaks a window and she falls down in the dust. **Why?"**

"Sometimes," Forrest concludes, **"They're just aren't enough rocks."** He would change this if he could but he can't... so he goes to her. She's there in a crumpled, broken reality and he simply joins her there... he squats in the dust of the road. That's the only thing to do for now.

Later he bulldozes that old house... a dramatic way of saying to sin and to pain that they aren't going to win. Jenny's struggle will remain for a time... certainly the scars of it but she is on a road towards healing, propelled I think by the grace Forrest gives her and the love he has for her.

I like that... love sitting in the dust of suffering so healing can begin.

And I like that... The gospel portrait painted by Jesus is that God joins us in this mess because that's what love does. God moves intentionally into suffering on our behalf just like Jesus moved to Jerusalem... and to a cross to say in a dramatic way to sin and death... **"You aren't going to win."**

Jesus goes to Jerusalem for that... And don't forget, with all of us in tow. All of the followers. Those of us who've said yes along the way and are coming to learn what that means. Those of us who are still doing silly things with our lives like vying for position. We're suffering, but usually for all the wrong reasons.

Jesus invites us to suffer with him in a different way. He not only offers himself for a suffering world but invites us to do the same. **"You want to be near me... be like me... Are you sure this a cup you can drink? Can you be submerged beneath this great reality? Can you bear it with me?"**

As Christians, we believe this is the Bible's final word on suffering. It must be born away.

So the question comes... Can you drink this cup. It comes to all disciple in every time and place. It'll come to you... maybe this week. You'll be with someone in pain, needing an ear and you'll hear the voice of Jesus, **"Can you drink this cup?"**

You feel the world and it's brokenness tugging at you... and hear the question again, **"Can you bear this cup?"**

Someone who bothers you or intimidates you will want something from you. **"Can you bear this cup?"**

A loved one will be struggling. **"Can you bear this cup?"**

You said yes to Jesus once and you didn't know all that meant... now's he's asking you. **"Can you drink this cup?"** It is the cup of our salvation. Take all of it. Amen. (Copyright, Burt L. Burleson, 2003)