

“The Pain of Damnation”

Psalm 22
Mark 15:33-41

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The pain of rejection is more than a metaphor, according to a study recently published in the journal *Science*. Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to monitor brain activity in 13 UCLA undergraduates while the students played a computer game. Each participant thought he was tossing a virtual ball with two other players in remote locations, but was actually playing with the computer. The computer was programmed to stop throwing the ball to the live player at a crucial stage in the game, which left him feeling excluded. During that time, fMRI scans revealed elevated activity in an area of the brain that generates the experience of physical pain.

I suppose that at one time or another we have all experienced the pain of rejection. It hurts when we find that feelings we have for someone are not returned. It hurts when we were kids on the playground and we did not get picked to be on anyone's team. But rejection by a parent is perhaps the most intense rejection we can experience. I cannot imagine what it feels like to have a mother or a father leave. Or even in general, just an absence of a parent whether it be through death or the many reasons parents and children become estranged. Perhaps some of you know this pain?

Last week we talked about the pain that Jesus underwent in order to save humanity. He underwent the most intense physical pain this world had to offer. He also, underwent the pain of being rejected by his fellow human beings, even being deserted by his closest friends. But there was still a pain that Jesus had to share with humanity. The pain of rejection by both his Father and his God.

Psalm 139 tells us that we can never be truly separated from God's Spirit. Where can I flee from your Spirit? But many people have experienced a feeling of rejection from God. Perhaps it is from an intense feeling of guilt often made worse by preachers or priests who spend more time speaking of human guilt than God's grace. Or in general, a society that rejects people whom it does not understand.

I'll share a story told by Christian writer and pastor Tony Campolo. "There was a boy in my high school, named Roger. It's not really his name. I'm just giving him the name Roger. We knew he was gay and the day he was most at pain was the day of gym because after we played some games we had to go into the shower and he would never go into the shower with us. When we left the shower, we took our wet towels and would sting his body by whipping the towels at him. As we walked past Roger we would whip the towels at Roger and sting him and we thought it was great fun to see this queer dance under our taunts. We thought it was fun to work on him. I wasn't there the day they shoved him into the corner of the shower and 5 guys urinated all over him. But that night Roger went home and went into his garage and he hung himself."

This story disturbs me on so many levels. I cannot begin to imagine rejection this intense. I feel certain this rejection that Roger experienced on that day was only a drop in the bucket of rejection that he had experienced in his short life. Perhaps his own father had rejected him. Perhaps his church had shunned him. Perhaps even his pastor had told him that he would be damned for all time. It wouldn't be the first time. Perhaps Roger felt that his God had rejected him. He was utterly alone. Damned by his friends, damned by his parents, damned by his church, and damned by his God or at least the God that he had heard about on Sundays. But is that truly God?

The night before Jesus was crucified he prayed, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." Abba, Father. Jesus' addressed God in these intimate words. Abba is a more intimate word for Father, more like daddy. Paul tells us that when we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. Jesus is indeed God's Son. But on the cross, he addresses God differently. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me (or maybe better put) why have you abandoned me or why have you rejected me." No Abba. No Father. That intimacy had been removed from him. God's Spirit had pulled away. It's unthinkable. God had rejected his own son. He had condemned him; he had damned his own son.

We ask the same question along with Jesus: Why?? Why did God have to do it this way? Why suffering? Why the cross? For Roger. Jesus had to experience what Roger and countless others in this world have experienced: the pain of utter rejection. The pain of feeling so alone, so rejected, all you want to do is die. Jesus had to dive down to the very depth of human despair in order to pull the lost to safety.

In the words of 16th century reformer John Calvin, "This is the wondrous exchange made by his boundless goodness. Having become with us the Son of Man, he has made us with himself sons of God. By his own descent to the earth he has prepared our ascent to Heaven. Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality. Having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength. Having submitted to our poverty, he has transferred his riches. Having taken upon himself the burden of unrighteousness with which we were oppressed, he has clothed us with his righteousness."

Jesus cried, "My God! My God!" experiencing our damnation, so that we could say, "Abba! Father!" So that we would know that we are children of God. So that we could have God's own Spirit living within us. So that we could experience the life of God, closeness and intimacy forever, rather than experience of damnation, separation from God, forever.

As Jesus breathed his last, Mark reports that that temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. Behind the curtain was the presence of God where only the high priest could enter once a year on the Day of Atonement. In other words, God was kept distant from the people by the priests. But Jesus' death changed all that. The curtain is torn giving everyone access to God's presence. You don't need a priest to know God; you don't even need a church to know God. To know God you only need to know Christ.

The Roman Centurion who stood facing Jesus during the crucifixion, who had probably stood before hundreds of crucified criminals, some how saw God. Some how in all Jesus' weakness and his nakedness and ultimately his death he saw God. Surely this was God's Son. He saw the likeness of God in his face. The curtain was torn and God was revealed. Perhaps in Jesus' "My God, My God!" This outsider, this roman, found his "Abba! Father!" his moment where the Spirit entered into his heart and whispered to him, "You are my son." Abba! Father! Perhaps in this painful death that could only be described as the work of evil he felt included in God's world.

My friends, this world is filled with rejected and lonely people. Our own neighborhood is teeming with them. Christ gave everything that he had so that the distance between God and people would be removed. That any curtain that separates anyone from God might be torn a part.

This God, will not be seen in our moments of earthly success. This God will not be seen through powers of this world. This God will be see through the suffering of this world. Through the vulnerability and nakedness of the unjustly oppressed. Through a suffering Savior, hanging on the gallows of oppressive power. And this God will be seen, not as a judge, but as a loving Father who would give up everything for the sake of our eternal souls so that, though, we may experience the pain of damnation from this world, we would not experience it in God's world.

Cassandra was alone. She lost her job due to her age and physical disability. She also lost her health insurance. She want to die. Work was the only place she had contact with people and without work she was alone, except the Mexican restaurant in her neighborhood, that she dined at every Sunday evening without fail. She also had the same table and the same waiter, Carlos, whose wife Maria also worked there. Carlos always talked to Cassandra. He knew she was alone, and he knew she lived nearby. One Sunday, Cassandra did not show up like she always did. Carlos was worried. After his shift, he drove around the neighborhood looking for Cassandra's car. He found it parked in front of Cassandra's house. He knocked. No answer. He knocked harder. No answer. He took a chance and turned the knob, it was open. He and his wife found Cassandra on the floor. She had been unconscious for 2 days. They called got her to the help she needed. And now Cassandra is part of their family.

In response to this amazing redeeming love, we must not reject others. We must not exclude others in our world. In fact, we must go a step further, and go out and seek the lost and rejected and into their world. For it is there, suffering and naked, depressed and alone we will see our savior, Jesus, suffering still today. Amen.