

5:17:11
A GENESIS 18:1-15; MATTHEW 9:35-10:8

A STORY IS TOLD OF A BRIGHT YOUNG MAN WHO WAS A PRE-MED SOPHOMORE AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY. TO REWARD HIM FOR HAVING DONE SO WELL IN SCHOOL, HIS PARENTS GAVE HIM A TRIP TO THE FAR EAST FOR SUMMER VACATION BETWEEN HIS SOPHOMORE AND JUNIOR YEARS. WHILE THERE, HE MET A GURU WHO SAID TO HIM. DON'T YOU SEE HOW YOU'RE POISONING YOUR SOUL WITH THE SUCCESS ORIENTED WAY OF LIFE? YOUR IDEA OF HAPPINESS IS TO STAY UP ALL NIGHT STUDYING FOR AN EXAM SO YOU CAN GET A BETTER GRADE THAN YOUR BEST FRIEND. YOUR IDEA OF A GOOD MARRIAGE IS NOT TO FIND A WOMAN WHO WILL MAKE YOU WHOLE, BUT TO WIN THE GIRL THAT EVERYONE ELSE WANTS. THAT'S NOT HOW PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSED TO LIVE. GIVE IT UP. COME JOIN US IN AN ATMOSPHERE WHERE WE ALL SHARE AND LOVE EACH OTHER. THE YOUNG MAN HAD COMPLETED FOUR YEARS AT A COMPETITIVE HIGH SCHOOL TO GET INTO STANFORD, PLUS TWO YEARS OF PRE-MED COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY. HE WAS RIPE FOR THIS SORT OF APPROACH.

HE CALLED HIS PARENTS FROM TOKYO AND TOLD THEM HE WOULD NOT BE COMING HOME. HE WAS DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL TO LIVE IN AN ASHRAM. SIX MONTHS LATER, HIS PARENTS GOT A LETTER FROM HIM: "DEAR MOM AND DAD. I KNOW YOU WEREN'T HAPPY WITH THE DECISION I MADE LAST SUMMER. BUT I WANT TO TELL YOU HOW HAPPY IT HAS MADE ME. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, I'M AT PEACE. HERE,

THERE IS NO COMPETING, NO HUSTLING, NO TRYING TO GET AHEAD OF ANYONE ELSE. HERE WE ARE ALL EQUAL AND WE ALL SHARE. THIS WAY OF LIFE IS SO MUCH IN HARMONY WITH THE INNER ESSENCE OF MY SOUL. IN ONLY SIX MONTHS, I'VE BECOME #2 DISCIPLE IN THE ENTIRE ASHRAM. AND I THINK I COULD BE #1 BY JUNE!"

WE LIVE IN A VERY COMPETITIVE WORLD. COMPETITION IS SOMETHING WE ENCOURAGE IN CHILDREN FOR THE SAKE OF SURVIVAL AND SUCCESS. IN SCHOOL, YOUNG PEOPLE COMPETE FOR THE BEST GRADES AND FOR BEING THE BEST IN SPORTS. IN BUSINESS, THERE'S COMPETITION TO GET CUSTOMERS TO DO BUSINESS WITH YOU AND NOT WITH YOUR COMPETOR. EVEN IN THE CHURCH, WE SOMETIMES FALL INTO THE TRAP OF RATING OURSELVES BY NUMBERS FEELING OURSELVES IN COMPETITION WITH OTHER CHURCHES AND OTHER COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES, RATHER THAN CELEBRATING THE COMMUNITY WE SHARE TOGETHER. WE FEEL LIKE WE HAVE FAILED IF WE CAN'T FILL THE CHURCH EACH SUNDAY. THE POINT I MAKE IN THIS IS THAT SOMETIMES EVEN THE CHURCH FALLS PREY TO COMPETITION.

THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF COMPETITION. HOWEVER, IF WE GO THROUGH LIFE ALWAYS WANTING TO BE THE BEST, TO GET THE BEST AND TO BEAT THE REST, COMMUNITY BECOMES AN IMPOSSIBILITY AND LONELINESS BECOMES THE NORMAL STATE OF THINGS. OUR CULTURE HAS EMPHASIZED INDIVIDUALITY AND

INDEPENDENCE TO SUCH A DEGREE THAT IT SOMETIMES SEEMS DIFFICULT TO GET PEOPLE TO DO SOMETHING FOR THE GOOD OF THE COMMUNITY. THE QUESTION, "WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?" OR "HOW WILL THIS BENEFIT ME?" OFTEN SEEMS TO LURK CLOSE TO THE SURFACE. TOO MUCH COMPETITION CAUSES US TO WORK FOR OUR OWN BENEFIT AND NOT FOR THE GOOD OF ALL. IT IS THIS SPIRIT THAT OFTEN KILLS THE FAMILY, THE COMMUNITY AND CHURCH.

BUT JESUS CALLS US AWAY FROM THIS KIND OF COMPETITIVENESS THAT CAN ONLY RELY WITH CERTAINTY UPON OURSELVES. IN CHRIST WE ARE CALLED TO BE A COMMUNITY -- A FAMILY OF FAITH. I'M REMINDED OF A DINING ROOM TABLE WE HAD WHEN I WAS ABOUT THREE YEARS OLD. IT WAS AN UGLY BLACK LAQUER TABLE THAT WOULD SOMETIMES HAVE A LEAF COLLAPSE AND DUMP HOT FOOD ALL OVER SOMEONE'S LAP IF YOU WEREN'T CAREFUL. BUT WHAT I REALLY REMEMBER ABOUT THAT TABLE. WAS THE FACT THAT WE EACH HAD A PLACE THERE. MY DAD, MY MOM AND MY TWO BROTHERS EACH HAD A PLACE. MY PLACE AT THE TIME WAS PROBABLY A HIGH CHAIR. IF SOMEONE SAT IN SOMEONE ELSE'S PLACE, IT SEEMED STRANGE. WE EACH HAD A PLACE AT THE TABLE. EACH OF US HAS A PLACE AT GOD'S TABLE. AND IT'S A PLACE WHERE WE AREN'T IN COMPETITION WITH ONE ANOTHER. CHRIST HAS SOMETHING FOR EACH OF US TO DO. IN THE OUTSIDE WORLD, THERE IS COMPETITION, MISTRUST AND FEAR. BUT IN THE FAMILY OF FAITH, WE ARE HOME. PAUL BEGINS THIS MORNING'S READING BY SAYING:

“THEREFORE, SINCE WE ARE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. THROUGH WHOM WE HAVE OBTAINED ACCESS TO THIS GRACE IN WHICH WE STAND; AND WE BOAST IN OUR HOPE OF SHARING THE GLORY OF GOD.”

THERE ARE MANY WAYS THAT PEOPLE HAVE ENVISIONED THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. PAUL TRIED SO HARD TO BE JUSTIFIED IN GOD'S SIGHT BY KEEPING THE LAW THAT IT TOOK A DAMASCUS ROAD EXPERIENCE FOR HIM TO TRULY REALIZE THE TRUTH IN THIS PASSAGE. WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD THROUGH CHRIST -- NOT BY TRYING TO MEASURE UP TO GOD, BUT SIMPLY BY TRUSTING IN GOD'S GRACE AND LOVE FOR US. THIS IS WHAT LIVING IN GOD'S FAMILY IS ALL ABOUT. IT ISN'T THAT THERE ARE NO REQUIREMENTS OF US. IT'S SIMPLY THAT THE REASON WE SEEK TO OBEY IS BECAUSE WE ARE LOVED BY GOD AND, AS A RESULT, WE LOVE IN RETURN.

A TYRANNICAL HUSBAND DEMANDED THAT HIS WIFE CONFORM TO RIGID STANDARDS OF HIS CHOOSING. SHE WAS TO DO CERTAIN THINGS FOR HIM AS A WIFE, MOTHER AND HOMEMAKER. IN TIME, SHE CAME TO HATE HER HUSBAND AS MUCH AS SHE HATED HIS LIST OF RULES AND REGULATIONS. THEN ONE DAY HE DIED. SHE HAD A HARD TIME FEELING GRIEF FOR THE MAN. SOMETIME LATER SHE FELL IN LOVE WITH ANOTHER MAN AND MARRIED HIM. SHE AND HER NEW HUSBAND SHARED A VERY LOVING REELATIONSHIP. JOYFULLY, THEY BOTH DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO THE HAPPINESS AND

WELFARE OF THE OTHER. ONE DAY SHE RAN ACROSS ONE OF THE SHEETS OF DO'S AND DON'TS HER FIRST HUSBAND HAD WRITTEN FOR HER. TO HER AMAZEMENT, SHE FOUND THAT SHE WAS DOING FOR HER SECOND HUSBAND ALL THE THINGS HER FIRST HUSBAND HAD DEMANDED OF HER, EVEN THOUGH HER NEW HUSBAND HAD NEVER ONCE SUGGESTED THEM. SHE DID THEM AS AN EXPRESSION OF HER LOVE FOR HIM AND HER DESIRE TO PLEASE HIM. HE ALSO SOUGHT TO PLEASE HER AND SUPPORT HER.

FAITH IN GOD MEANS TRUST IN GOD. WE TRUST IN THE FACT THAT GOD LOVES US, AND WE LIVE OUR LIVES IN THIS STATE OF TRUST. A CHILD WHO LIVES IN AN ABUSIVE HOME CANNOT EASILY GROW INTO A WELL-ADJUSTED ADULT. IF A CHILD CANNOT LOOK TO HIS OR HER PARENTS FOR CONSISTENCY, IT IS HARD FOR THEM TO TRUST IN ANYONE ELSE EITHER. FAITH IN GOD LIKEWISE MEANS TRUST IN GOD – TRUST THAT GOD'S LOVE FOR US IS GREATER THAN ANYTHING ELSE THE WORLD COULD SAY ABOUT GOD. THE AUTHOR OF 1 JOHN SAYS:

“THERE IS NO FEAR IN LOVE, BUT PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR.”

WHEN JESUS TALKS ABOUT PRAYING ABBA FATHER. THE MODERN EQUIVALENT OF THAT WOULD BE A SMALL CHILD SAYING “DADDY”. THIS IS HOW GOD IS TO THE FAMILY OF FAITH. GOD IS DADDY OR MOMMY, AND THAT IS WHAT TRUST IS ABOUT. THE TEACHER IN PROVERBS SAYS:

TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND DO NOT RELY
ON YOUR OWN INSIGHT.

IN ALL YOUR WAYS, ACKNOWLEDGE HIM. AND HE WILL MAKE
STRAIGHT YOUR PATHS.

DO NOT BE WISE IN YOUR OWN EYES; FEAR THE LORD, AND
TURN AWAY FROM EVIL.

IT WILL BE A HEALING FOR YOUR FLESH AND A REFRESHMENT
FOR YOUR BODY.

THE TRUST WE HAVE IN GOD LEADS US TO ACKNOWLEDGE
GOD IN EVERY ASPECT OF OUR LIVES. ALL OF US HAVE LIVES
THAT ARE DISTINCT FROM OUR PARENTS, AND YET EVERY
ASPECT OF OUR PHYSICAL LIVES AND MANY OF THE INNER
ASPECTS OF OUR LIVES ARE DERIVED FROM THEIR INFLUENCE
IN OUR LIVES.

I REMEMBER ONCE GOING BACK TO MY DAD'S HOME TOWN
AND SOMEONE HE KNEW A LONG TIME AGO SAW ME AND
CALLED OUT, "HEY BILL" HE GOT THE WRONG JOHNSON, BUT I
WAS PROUD HE MADE THE MISTAKE. IN THE FAMILY OF GOD,
AS WE YIELD EVERY ASPECT OF OUR LIVES TO GOD'S CARE AND
GOD'S LOVE, WE TOO GROW TO REFLECT AND RESEMBLE GOD.
THIS IS NEVER A PERFECT REFLECTION. JUST AS WE ARE NEVER
EXACTLY LIKE OUR PARENTS, BUT AS WE GROW AND TRUST
AND COMMIT ALL OUR WAYS TO GOD, THE RESEMBLANCE
BECOMES GREATER. PAUL CONTINUES:

“AND NOT ONLY THAT, BUT WE ALSO BOAST IN OUR SUFFERINGS, KNOWING THAT SUFFERING PRODUCES ENDURANCE AND ENDURANCE PRODUCES CHARACTER. AND CHARACTER PRODUCES HOPE. AND HOPE DOES NOT DISAPPOINT US. BECAUSE GOD'S LOVE HAS BEEN POURED INTO OUR HEARTS THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT HAS BEEN GIVEN TO US. “

MANY YEARS AGO, THERE WAS A CUSTOM IN AN AREA OF THE SOUTH KNOWN AS THE SOUTH MOUNTAINS TO HOLD RELIGIOUS MEETINGS AT WHICH THE OLDEST MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION WERE CALLED UPON TO STAND UP AND PUBLICLY TESTIFY TO THEIR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES. ON ONE OCCASION THEY WERE HOLDING SUCH A MEETING IN ONE OF THE CHURCHES AND OLD UNCLE EPHRIAM SWINK , A MAN WHOSE BODY WAS ALL BENT AND DISTORTED WITH ARTHRITIS, WAS PRESENT. ALL THE OTHER ELDERS OF THE CONGREGATION EXCEPT UNCLE EPHRAIM ROSE AND GAVE TESTIMONY TO THEIR FAITH. UNCLE EPHRIAM KEPT HIS SEAT. THEREUPON, THE MODERATOR SAID, “BROTHER EPHRAIM, SUPPOSE YOU TELL US WHAT THE LORD HAS DONE FOR YOU.” UNCLE EPHRAIM ROSE WITH HIS BENT AND DISTORTED BODY AND SAID, “BROTHER, HE'S MIGHTY NIGH RUINT ME.”

THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING IS SOMETHING THAT MYSTIFIES ANY SINCERE PERSON SEEKING TO WALK WITH GOD. THE BIBLE GIVES ELOQUENT TESTIMONY AS WELL AS ASKING SOUL WRENCHING QUESTIONS ON THIS SUBJECT. THE BOOK OF JOB

RAISES THE QUESTION OF WHY THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER AS DO SOME OF THE PSALMS. BUT IT IS AN IMPOSSIBLE QUESTION TO ANSWER. ULTIMATELY, IN THE FAMILY OF FAITH WE DEAL WITH SUFFERING NOT IN TERMS OF FINDING AN ANSWER TO THE WHY. BUT RATHER IN TERMS OF RESPONSE TO IT THROUGH THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING.

THROUGH THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, SUFFERING AND TRIAL CAN BE A MEANS THROUGH WHICH WE GROW CLOSE TO GOD. IT CAN ALSO BE YET ANOTHER WAY THAT WE EXPERIENCE GOD THROUGH THE PRESENCE OF OUR FAITH FAMILY.

SUFFERING AND TRIAL ARE NOT PROBLEMS WHICH CONTAIN ANSWERS IN THE SAME SENSE AS IF SOMEONE ASKED, "WHO IS THE MOTHER OF JESUS?" IT'S NOT AN ACADEMIC ISSUE. RATHER, THE QUESTIONS WE ASK IN SUFFERING ELICIT RESPONSES IN THE CONTEXT OF OUR FAITH. WE CAN KNOW THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN SUFFERING THROUGH THE PRESENCE OF CONCERNED FRIENDS AND FAMILY. OUR FAITH CAN HELP US TO FEEL GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH OUR FAITH FAMILY. THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE WE HAVE OF BAD THINGS HAPPENING TO A GOOD PERSON IS JESUS.

"FOR WHILE WE WERE STILL WEAK , AT THE RIGHT TIME CHRIST DIED FOR THE UNGODLY. INDEED, RARELY WILL ANYONE DIE FOR A RIGHTEOUS PERSON. THOUGH PERHAPS FOR A GOOD PERSON, SOMEONE MIGHT ACTUALLY DARE TO DIE. BUT GOD PROVES HIS LOVE FOR US IN THAT WHILE WE STILL WERE SINNERS, CHRIST DIED FOR US.

OVER THE CENTURIES SINCE JESUS LIVED AND DIED AND ROSE, MUCH HAS BEEN SAID AND WRITTEN ABOUT HIS SUFFERING AND DEATH. AS WE GROW AND SEEK TO REFLECT GOD WITHIN OUR LIVES THE FIGURE OF CHRIST DYING, THE JUST FOR THE UNJUST, GIVES US A MOVING EXAMPLE OF HOW GOD IS PRESENT WITH US IN TIMES OF SUFFERING, NOT AS ONE WHO WILL TAKE AWAY EVERY BURDEN WE EXPERIENCE, BUT AS ONE WHO SUFFERS WITH US AND LOVES US IN THE MIDST OF TRIAL. IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FAMILY OF FAITH. THIS IS THE VALUE OF BEING WITH ONE WHO SUFFERS. WE OFTEN WISH WE COULD SAY SOMETHING THAT WOULD MAKE EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT, BUT OFTEN THERE IS NOTHING TO BE SAID BEYOND OUR LOVE AND PRESENCE.

WE ARE PART OF THIS FAMILY OF FAITH AND GOD HAS CALLED US OUT TO BE A CONSECRATED PEOPLE DOING CHRIST'S MINISTRY OF HEALING, TEACHING AND LOVING. IN A BROKEN WORLD WE MAY KNOW THAT WE ARE LOVED. GOD'S LOVE RADIATES THROUGH THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST, AS WELL AS THROUGH OTHER CHRISTIANS. WHEN JESUS SAW HOW THE PEOPLE WHO FOLLOWED HIM WERE LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD, HE SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES:

“THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL. BUT THE LABORERS ARE FEW;
THEREFORE ASK THE LORD OF THE HARVEST TO SEND OUT
LABORERS...”

HE THEN CHOSE HIS 12 DISCIPLES TO AID IN HIS MINISTRY TO THE WORLD. HE STILL IS CHOOSING LABORERS AND SENDING THEM OUT TO LOVE, TO TEACH AND TO DO JUSTICE. WE ARE THOSE LABORERS GOING FORTH FROM HIS LOVING FAMILY AND EMBRACING A HURTING WORLD.

“THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL, BUT THE LABORERS ARE FEW...”

LET US GO FORTH... AMEN.