

Introduction

I want to tell you about my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. I wake up, only to find bubble gum in my hair. Then I get out of bed, only to trip on my skateboard. Then I eat breakfast, only for my brothers to get a prize in their cereal box but for me to get nothing. Then I get into the car, only to sit in the middle seat. Then I head off to school, only for my teacher to not allow me to draw an invisible castle (just a blank piece of paper). Then I head off to recess, only to get told by my best friend that I am now only his third best friend. Then I have lunch, only to realize my mother never packed me a dessert. Then I go to the dentist after school, only to learn I have a cavity. Then I get pushed into a mud puddle, only to get called a cry baby. Then I pick up Dad from work, only to make such a mess in his office that he asks us to never pick him up again. Then we have dinner, only to hate the lima beans on my plate. Then I go to bed, only for my nightlight to burn out. You might laugh at how my day went, until you have your own terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day—then it's not a laughing matter anymore.

Although the book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* was published fifty years ago, it remains eminently current. After all, we all have terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. For school-aged children, you can relate to Alexander. For college students, you might bomb an exam, get into an argument with your roommate, and realize no one wants to date you. For young parents, your kids might get sick and overtired, throw a tantrum, and stretch bedtime routine two hours later than normal. For older parents, you might cart your kids to five million activities, get the silent treatment from your children, and see your teenagers spend ten times more time on their phones than with you. For retirees, you might suffer from body aches, head to endless doctor's visits, and just feel plain old. Now here's the important question: how do you react when you have a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day? Do you complain, or mope, or shut down? Or do you praise God? In today's First Reading about Job, we learn how to:

Praise God for Pain

I want to tell you about my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. It came out of nowhere. After all, I was the greatest man among all the people of the East. I was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and shunned evil. I even offered extra sacrifices for my children just in case they sinned and I didn't know about it. I was the father who bent over backward for your children, the church member who showed up to every single thing on the church calendar, the neighbor who gladly mowed people's lawns and picked up their mail when they were on vacation. I had no idea what was happening behind the scenes. No one ever told me that Satan was convinced I follow God so wholeheartedly just because he made my life so easy. No one ever told me that Satan was insinuating God has mixed motives—he just blesses people so he can get some obedience in return. No one ever told me that God let Satan loose, like a dog on a chain, to inflict pain on me. No one ever told me that I was being targeted, not because I was so bad, but because I was so good. No one ever told me that my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day was not this random tragedy but a cross I had to endure for my faith.

I will never forget this painful day for the rest of my life. Once four messengers come barging in, one right after the other, huffing and puffing, with this great look of concern on their faces, I immediately know something is terribly wrong. The first messenger comes in and shouts, "Job, all your cattle and donkeys and servants are gone! Sabeen raiders brandished their swords

and scared the living daylights out of me! I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!” My cattle and donkeys are how I acquired my wealth and my possessions. I mean, it would be like seeing your house get burned down! Then just like that, the second messenger comes in and shouts, “Job, all your sheep and servants are gone! Lightning fell from the sky and licked them up! I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!” My goats and sheep provided me with food and clothing. I mean, it would be like getting laid off from work with no way to provide for yourself. Then just like that, the third messenger comes in and shouts, “Job, all your camels and servants are gone! Chaldean soldiers formed three units and weren’t afraid to steal and kill! I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!” My camels were how I traveled and transported goods across deserts. I mean, it would be like having your car get stolen! Then just like that, the fourth messenger comes in and shouts, “Job, all your children are gone! They were having a good time at your oldest son’s house, when this mighty wind swept off the desert and collapsed his house! The EMTs couldn’t find any survivors! I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!” Possessions can be replaced through hard work, but you can never replace your children. Any hope of having a brighter future through them is now snuffed out. I mean, it would be like having the police show up on your doorstep to tell you that your children were killed in a car crash.

So what are you going to say to me on my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day? Are you going to give me a Hallmark sympathy card and sign it, “Our condolences. We’re sorry for your loss.”? Like that’s going to help! Are you going to quote me some trite passages from the Bible, like how God is going to work everything out for my good and at least my children are now in heaven? Easy for you to say when you have good days and your children are still living! Are you going to sugar coat things and say, “I know what you’re going through. Time will heal all wounds.”? No, actually, you don’t know what I’m going through! And no, the pain is never going away until the day I die!

All I can do is fall to the ground and cry. But in the midst of my tears, somehow I manage to say, ***“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.”*** You can’t tell me, “Well, Job, don’t worry. God will bless you with twice as much stuff by the time we’re all said and done,” because that hasn’t happened yet! You can’t tell me, “Well, Job, don’t worry. You’ll receive this outpouring of support from your friends. They will organize a meal train for you, set up this scholarship endowment in honor of your children, and come over to your house to be empathetic listeners for hours,” because actually, my friends are terrible counselors who are only accusing me of doing these horrendous sins that caused all this suffering! So how can I manage to praise God for pain? All this pain has taught me important truths of the Christian life that you can’t learn in a book or a class, but you can only learn by experiencing pain and suffering. All my possessions are simply gifts from God to be enjoyed for a certain time. Furthermore, my Lord is still in control, even when he takes things away. And most importantly, I am not God. God is God—not a vindictive Father who wants to kick me out of his house but a loving Father who sends pain into my life to refine me and make me grow. That’s why I can praise God for pain.

I want you to think of your terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. I want you to think about what it would be like to drive home from work, only to see smoke pouring out of your roof and firefighters telling you to get out of your car and stay away. Then your cell phone rings and you hear your boss let you go—but not tell you why, in order to protect the company from a potential lawsuit. Then you turn around to see some thief hop in your car while it’s still running and peel down the road. And to top it all off, then you hear sirens, and the police come rolling in to tell you your children were killed in a car accident. All in the course of a few minutes. Once

you got past the shock of that terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, how would you react? If someone would tell you in that moment, “Praise God for pain,” I’m sure you’d say, “That’s ridiculous!” Why would I praise God for my house burning down, and losing my job, and my car being stolen, and my children getting killed in a car crash? I wouldn’t wish this pain on anyone, so how can God wish this pain on me! He must be so unloving! What does God know about pain? Absolutely nothing!

I want to tell you about my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. It will prove to you that, actually, I know absolutely everything there is to know about pain. On the most painful day in the history of the world, I took up your pain, and the pain of every human who’s ever lived, when I suffered for you. I heard David speak for every believer when, in the midst of his pain, he said, in the words of today’s psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” I took up those words as my very own when I said the same thing from the cross. That is where I chose to reveal myself—not in the good days but in the bad, not in success but in sadness, not in progress but in humiliation. Right where it seems God has forsaken you is where I want to be found. What’s more, I redeemed you through pain and suffering. So I’m not asking you to bring about your redemption through your suffering, but I do use suffering to conform you to my likeness, to associate you with me. And to top it all off, if I use suffering to bring about the culmination of redemption, then I use suffering to lift your eyes to that day when you will be finally freed from all your suffering. I use suffering to refine your faith by leading you to focus on what is most important. That’s why you can praise God for pain.

I want to tell you about my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. I read an email from my dad. My mom was dying in the hospital from cancer, and I could only fall to the kitchen floor in tears. I was deliberating a call to Seattle, Washington, and I was carrying the weight of fatherly responsibility on my shoulders in trying to determine whether I should uproot my family and move them across the country. And to top it all off, it was right before Holy Week, the busiest time of the year for pastors, when I had three times the amount of services and three times the amount of work to prepare. I have preached on Job 1 twice before, but I could never have written this sermon the way I did, and I could never be teaching our Bible study on Job the way I am, if God did not send that terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day into my life. I could never stand up in front of you and tell you to praise God for pain, if God had not taught me that lesson, not from the school of our seminary, but from the school of experience. And he will teach you the same thing. When you can’t make any friends at school, praise God for pain, because he is bringing you closer to your greater friend Jesus. When you come home to an empty house and it’s abundantly clear you are single or divorced, praise God for pain, because you will know better than anyone else that God is your companion through life. When it seems nothing you do makes any difference at all, praise God for pain, because he is stripping you of your self-reliance that will disappoint sooner or later. When you get ignored once you mention controversial teachings in the Bible, praise God for the opportunity to know the sufferings of Christ in an experiential way. When you go to a funeral of your loved one, praise God for providing the ultimate solution to all our pain. No matter how it comes in your life, praise God for pain.

Conclusion

I want to tell you about my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. “Shortly after the school shooting in Nashville in March 2023, I was sitting outside with my daughters while they were playing, wrestling with this tragedy and the ongoing weight of it. I also pondered the memory of my cousin [who passed away from cancer sixteen year ago] and the pain her family

continues to carry.” That’s the inspiration that lead Kristyn Getty to write the hymn, “God of Every Grace,” which our choir just sung. She continues, “There are many things we experience in this life that will only find their resolution, their answer, their ultimate comfort when we are home with the Lord. What do we do when we have to continue to walk with the question, with the ache, with the limp? We know the Lord will ‘work all things to the good of those who love him,’ but what if that good is not known in this lifetime? There are some pains I don’t yet know and can’t imagine. ... The song ... spoke of God as the God of *every* grace, calling us to see even our trials as somehow, mysteriously, serving God’s good purposes according to his good plans. ... The line ‘all your children home together’ was a very moving thought for me as a mother—that desire for a family to be all together again. Only in Christ is this possible. We are all tempted at different times to give up, to give in, to let our circumstances steal our hope. This hymn is a prayer for his daily strength, for regular recalling of our hope, for faith to keep following, for rest in the truth that he knows, he sees, he counts the tears. We hope you can sing this prayer with us.”¹ Whether it’s Job, it’s me, or it’s Kristyn Getty, we know the ultimate answer to our pain can only be found in Christ’s pain. As one commentator on the book of Job says, “The real contents of the book of Job is the mystery of the Cross: the Cross of Golgotha is the solution of the enigma of every cross; and the book of Job is a prophecy of this final solution.”² That’s why, in a profound and moving way, you can praise God for pain. Amen.

¹ Accessed on 23 February 2024 from <https://www.gettymusic.com/godofeverygrace>.

² Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 261.