

Dear members and friends of St. John,

There seems to be a lot of confusion in the world about God's relationship with His people. We know that God is love, and that God loves us completely, without condition. And yet, wherever I turn I hear people explain that "God ***punished*** so-in-so for that [sin]" or "I wonder what old so-in-so did to deserve that [**punishment**]?" How does this work? God loves us and then beats us to a pulp whenever He gets angry with us?

To look at this correctly, we need to look at the *covenantal relationship* that God has with mankind. In the Old Testament, God gave man the law (ceremonial, civil and Mosaic law) and told His people that they were responsible for keeping the law, and in return, God would be their God (Exodus 24:3-8). We see this with Moses and the Hebrew nation. Almost before the 'ink dries' on the covenant or agreement between God and man, man messes-up badly. Remember Aaron and the others that waited for Moses to return from the mountain of the Lord? (Exodus 32:1-6). They made a golden calf or idol to worship, instead of God, breaking the agreement that they had with God. God told Moses, "*Let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them...*" (Exodus 32:10). Indeed, God's wrath was poured out on the people, and three thousand were cut down with the sword. And so goes the history of a wayward people called Israel, recorded in the Old Testament. God's anger kindled (although slowly and over time) against a people that continued to thumb their noses at their God. God pours out His wrath, but always keeps a remnant of people to carry out His promise to bring a 'savior' from among them that would redeem the nation, once and for all. The Old Testament covenant was an agreement based on Law (God's Law), and as anyone can attest, the breaking of law leads to ***punishment***. The very **definition of punishment** is "the suffering, pain or loss that serves as retribution" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Punishment is payment for a wrong that was committed.

But at just the right time, what God promised from the very cradle of mankind (Genesis 3:15) comes into being. A savior was born of a young virgin, in a little town in the middle of nowhere. This Redeemer of the world would live a perfect life (without sin). This would satisfy the requirements of the Old Testament covenant of law between God and man. He would take on the sins of the world and die to pay for the sins of all. He was receiving the **punishment that we deserved** - He alone would satisfy the wrath that God had for mankind's failure to "be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). Prior to Jesus' death, He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "*My Father, if it be possible, let this **cup** pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.*" That cup was the wrath of God's holy anger against mankind. Jesus was our scapegoat. And on that day, that Good Friday, almost two thousand years ago, **God's relationship with man changed – drastically.** The cross of Christ instituted **a new covenant** between man and God. Jesus himself introduced this covenant on Maundy Thursday: "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood*" (1 Cor. 11:25). No longer a cup of wrath, but a cup of grace, poured out for all. God would dwell in the hearts and minds of His people, and Holy Baptism would bring people into His kingdom.

We and all believers are part of His kingdom. From that day forward, God is **not** in the business of punishing His people. The law was fulfilled completely by Jesus on the cross, so we **must not** return

back to the old days of 'our sin, and God's punishment for that sin.' (see John 9:1-38) **Jesus paid the price - suffered our punishment.** Praise God!

So **why is there suffering in the world?** First, God's wrath is still seen in the punishment of those who reject the free gift of salvation in Christ. While Jesus' death was for them, as well as us, their refusal to accept this gift places them in a position that, unless they repent, and turn back to Jesus as their Savior, they will suffer punishment (Luke 13:1-5). Second, people suffer as a result of their own sinfulness. Bad habits, and poor judgment often lead to suffering. Thirdly, a sinful world can also cause suffering. Pollution, earthquakes, floods, famine, all come from a broken world that is in decay (Rom. 8:19-22). But **God is still in control!** God allows disease, famine, pestilence, human injustice and other natural disasters to occur in the world; but for specific reasons. Know this: good will come out of even the greatest evil.

So what about us, those who are part of His kingdom? We're told that God **disciplines** the ones He loves. The dictionary says that discipline is "training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character." The reason for discipline is therefore much different than the reason for punishment. God is in the business of molding us and shaping us to be more like His Son, Jesus Christ. We read in Hebrews 12: *"For the moment **all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it"*** (Heb. 12:11) and *"the Lord **disciplines** the one he loves..."* (Heb. 12:6). Discipline is an act of love – punishment is an act of law. God also uses suffering to bring the lost to repentance – to a condition that allows the heart to receive the gift of salvation – a heart that is receptive to the Gospel.

It's difficult for people to understand suffering today. We tend to lapse into thinking that God is hammering us for our bad behavior. But, in fact, a loving God is using the suffering we experience to change us and mold us. Only a God that loves us completely would be so actively involved in our everyday lives! So rejoice this day – we've moved beyond the covenant of law to the blessings that come from God's grace in Christ Jesus. God loves you so much that blessings even flow from the times that you must endure suffering.

Pastor Travis