

SERMON

**NEVER FORGOTTEN,
NEVER FORSAKEN**

June 21, 2020



SCRIPTURE READING

Genesis 21:8-21



“8 And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

9 ¶ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing.

10 So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.””

Genesis 21:8-21 (ESV)



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“11 And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son.

12 But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

13 And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.””

Genesis 21:8-21 (ESV)



“14 ¶ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes.

Genesis 21:8-21 (ESV)



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16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, **“Let me not look on the death of the child.”** And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.”

“And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, **“What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.”**

Genesis 21:8-21 (ESV)



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“18 Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”

19 Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

20 And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow.”

Genesis 21:8-21 (ESV)



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“He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.” (Ge 21:21 ESV)

Genesis 21:8-21 (ESV)



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THESE ARE THE INSPIRED WORD OF GOD

THANK YOU FOR BEING WITH US IN OUR
SUFFERINGS

AMEN

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God's word is very rich. It is like a diamond with so many facets to consider. Diamonds have four sides. Most diamonds have 58 facets. Wikipedia tells us the following:

"Marcel Tolkowsky (25 December 1899 – 10 February 1991),[1] an engineer by education, was a Belgian member of a Jewish family of diamond cutters from Poland. He is generally acknowledged as the father of the modern round brilliant diamond cut."

To this day, in North America, diamonds are cut according to his discovery. This is called the American Standard also known as the ideal American cut.

The word of God is like that. The more we study it the more riches and brilliance we can see, enjoy and marvel at. This is because of the author, God, who has inspired these words through the pens of human beings. (Next slide)



• From Google images



Today, we will consider God's involvement in our suffering, one facet of the diamond we can glean from the today's scripture reading.

As we read the story of Abraham, of Sarah and Hagar we are also reminded of our story in walking with God.

God had a relationship with all three.

- Abraham was called God's friend.
- God worked with Sarah during her lifetime.
- He appeared to Hagar twice.

He spoke to her the first time when she was fleeing Sarah's harsh treatment. Hagar had not yet given birth but she was pregnant. Although Sarah had encouraged Abraham to take Hagar as his wife, when Hagar became pregnant, Sarah's character towards Hagar changed. Sarah's cruelty caused Hagar to run away. She ran away from Sarah but she could not run away from God.

“7 ¶ The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, ‘Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?’ She said, ‘I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.’ 9 The angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Return to your mistress and submit to her.’ 10 ¶ The angel of the LORD also said to her, ‘I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.’” (Ge 16:7-10 ESV)

God met her in her troubles. He told her that the son she would birth would be named Ishmael. God also reassured her that he would multiply her offspring ‘s descendants so much so that they could not be numbered for multitude.

God asked her a very difficult act. He asked her to go back to Sarah who had been very unkind and cruel toward her.

Meeting God gave Hagar much courage to obey.

The following is what she said,

“13 So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” (Ge 16:13 ESV)



God did not tell her why she would have to face Sarah again. He just told her to go and she went. Meeting God was sufficient for her to obey.



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Can we imagine the suffering involved when Abraham had to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham obviously loved Ishmael. By this time, Ishmael would have been a teenager. Abraham had ample time to develop a relationship with him and vice versa. We read in verse 11 that Abraham was very displeased when Sarah asked him to cast out both Hagar and Ishmael. When Sarah asked him to send Hagar away, I cannot imagine that at the time Abraham would have thought that God would have told him to listen to his wife. But that is exactly what God did!

Abraham was not told exactly why God told him to obey his wife Sarah. He did obey because God told him to do so. He did not go by his feelings. He did not go by his own thoughts. He went by the instruction of God, as hard as he found those instructions to be.

One thing both Abraham and Sarah had in common when Abraham took Hagar as his second wife is that they had in their minds that they were helping God fulfil his promises that he would give them a son. Both thought at their age that the pregnancy of Sarah was impossible. In their human thinking, they thought they would give God a hand. Their decision not to fully trust God at that time brought about many problems.

Ishmael was not the son of the promise. Their decisions caused much pain. As we read the stories of the lives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, we don't see God condemning them. We see God continuing to work with them to fulfil his covenant of grace and to prepare the coming of Jesus.

Abraham had given provision to send Hagar and Ishmael on their way but it was not enough. They ran out of water. Hagar thought for sure that her beloved son Ishmael would die. She went at the distance from him, far enough that she would not see him die.

The Bible tells us that she lifted up her voice and wept. She probably also heard the voice of Ishmael as he lay there, suffering. Everything appeared so hopeless. God heard the voice of the boy and he went to reassure Hagar that she was not left alone in her suffering.

He told her not to fear. He gave them water to drink. He repeated his promise that Ishmael would be a great nation. Can we imagine the joy Hagar felt when she went to her son to lift him up and give him water! Her tears and sorrow turned to joy as they hugged. I am sure they talked of the goodness and mercy of God as they discussed his intervention in their life!

God did not forget Hagar in her suffering.

GOD MAKES NO PROMISES THAT THE LIFE OF HIS PEOPLE WOULD BE WITHOUT PAIN

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When we stop to think about it, our human bodies are made to experience both pleasure and pain. We are wonderfully made, as David wrote.

Pain can be very protective. Imagine the leprous people who have no feelings in their limbs. They can burn themselves, walk on a nail without ever realizing what has happened.

If a speck of dust falls in my eye, I have to stop and take it out because it is so uncomfortable. That is a gift. It saves my precious eye. On the other hand, if a speck of dust falls on the back of my hand, it does not bother me. Why? Because it doesn't need to alert me of such events. God designed that way!

Our bodies are so very complex. God created us that way.

From (<https://learning-center.homesciencetools.com/>) **Our skin acts as the protective barrier between our internal body systems and the outside world. It's not only the body's largest sensory organ, but it's also the largest organ—period! The skin's "sense of touch" is what gives our brains a wealth of information about the natural environment, including temperature, humidity, and air pressure.**

Most importantly, this sense of touch lets us feel physical pain—a necessity for avoiding injury, disease, and danger.

It is truly amazing how much information we receive about the world through our sense of touch, and although we still don't know all the ins and outs of how the skin perceives touch, what we do know is interesting.

In that way, pain is a gift from God. Here, I am referring to how God has made our bodies. This is not in reference to evil which is the absence of good.

When we stop and think, we would be in danger if we did not experience bodily pain such as the prick of a needle, burning ourselves on a hot stove, walking on a nail, etc...

Because we live in a broken world and death exists, there is pain that is extreme. Before the fall of man, that type of pain did not exist.

We live in the very broken world and suffering is to be expected. Sometimes pain and suffering is random and sometimes we bring it on ourselves. Humanity has chosen to live apart from God and consequently, suffering and pain entered into it.

Suffering and pain is difficult to understand. Why does one person suffer from cancer and the other does not?

Sometimes we can bring suffering on ourselves. If I get drunk at the wheel of my car and drive 160 km an hour in a 50 km speed zone, I may very well get into an accident, kill somebody or kill myself.

If I practice gluttony where my diet is mostly made of fat food, soft drinks and greasy take outs, there are chances that I am going to encounter problems such as diabetes, heart problems and other health-related issues.

On the other hand, I may suffer from a heart attack or from diabetes all the while being careful of my food intake.

People have a tendency to blame God for the wrong that is in this world.

In the Old Testament, in his covenant of grace with Israel, God told them clearly that if they would stay faithful to him as their God they would be blessed. If they departed from him, they would experience pain and suffering.

They did.

It was not God's will that they suffer. God repeatedly send prophets to tell them to repent and turn to him. In the little periods that they stayed faithful to the old covenant laws, they were blessed in so many ways.

We clearly see God's attitude toward suffering in Jesus.

(Next slide)

JESUS AND SUFFERING

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When Jesus came to the earth, he healed untold numbers of people. You will notice that when he healed people, he did not ask them if it was their fault or not.

What Jesus focused on was the need to repent and turn to God. (Next slide – Luke 13)

Lu 13:1-5 ESV)“1 ¶ There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

2 And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?”

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3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

4 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Lu 13:1-5 ESV)

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As we read this, Jesus did not assign any particular wrongdoings to either group. One group was not more serious sinners than the other. He did not discuss the reason why it happened. He talked to them about their reaction. They needed to repent, change their minds about God and turn to him.

When we look at the story of Job, God never tells Job why he suffered. Job never knew the real reasons behind his suffering as we read in chapter 1 of that book. He simply showed Job that he was the Creator of this great and complex universe. When Job realized God's greatness, he repented. The following is his response:

“5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; 6 therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:5-6 ESV)

Jesus came to earth in our flesh. He lived on the same earth and in the same brokenness as we do.

Here is what Philip Yancey says in his book, **“WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS? A Comforting Healing Guide for Coping with Hard Times** page 82, **Jesus never gave a poor or suffering person a speech about “accepting your lot in life”, or “taking the**

medicine that God has given you." He seemed unusually sensitive to the groans of suffering people, and set about remedying them. And he uses supernatural powers to heal, never to punish."

Jesus did many signs miracles while on earth. The following is why he did these.

“30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (Joh 20:30-31 ESV)

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What is important when we suffer is not to primarily ask why but to turn to God in faith. That is what is important.

Dr. Paul Brand worked with leprosy patients in India and the United States. He is convinced that pain truly is one of God's great gifts to us. He worked with those patients for 50 years.

When ask about how believers responded to pain, he said the following, (next slide).

Once Dr. Paul Brand and I were discussing individual Christians who had undergone great suffering. After he had related several personal stories, I asked whether the pain had turned those people toward God or away from God. He thought at length, and concluded that there was no common response. Some grew closer to God, some drifted bitterly away.

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The main difference seemed to lie in their focus of attention. Those obsessed with question about the cause (“What did I do to deserve this? What is God trying to tell me? Am I being punished?”) often turned against God. In contrast, the triumphant sufferers took individual responsibility for their own responses and trusted God despite the discomfort. (Idem pages 109–110)

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Suffering and pain is a complex subject and cannot be fully covered in one short sermon. Countless books have been written on the topic.

What is important is how we respond to pain. We have wonderful examples in our midst of people we know very well, dear brethren in the faith, who have suffered all of their life or a major part of their life who are staying faithful and are growing in the grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus.

I would like to share with you, in conclusion, a very dramatic story of a young man who stayed faithful to Christ in spite of his enormous suffering.

Brian Sternberg

RECORD-BREAKING POLE VAULTER



Before

Lived from :
June 21, 1943 –
May 23, 2013



From
<https://www.wikiwand.com/>

after



I am sharing his story because it shows how God can work and does work in the most desperate situation. You can read his story in various places either on the internet but in more detailed in books.

Brian was voted the greatest athlete in North America in 1963. He was a pole vault jumper who jumped 16 feet and 8 inches or 5.08 meters breaking all world records at the time. He was also a gymnast. He was a superb athlete with rippling muscles. He was to go to the Olympics in Tokyo in 1964. He appeared unbeatable.

On July 2, 1963, he went for a training session on a trampoline. He described what happened next, *"If ever there is a frightening moment in trampolining, it is just as you leave the trampoline bed, on your way up. At that moment, even the most experienced gymnast sometimes gets a sensation of panic, for no good reason... It hit me as I took off. I got lost in midair and though I was going to land on my hands and feet, as I had done several times before when panic came. Instead I landed on my head.*

I heard a crack in my neck, then everything was gone. My arms and legs were bounding in front of my eyes, but I couldn't feel them moving. I was yelling, "I'm paralyzed" ... I had practically no lung power. The paralysis was affecting my

breathing. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't move... Real anguish hit me a couple of times while we waited for the doctor... I was thinking only about the future. I had not begun to think about the possibility of never walking again.' (from <http://www.reallifestories.org/stories/brian-sternberg-worlds-best-pole-vaulter/>)

His parents were Christians and extremely supportive. I will not go through to all the details of what happened for lack of time. His parents were believers and extremely faithful, longsuffering, patient and faithful. They never gave up the hope that Brian would be healed, if not in this life than at the resurrection. They supported him through this very, very painful trial.

Brian never walked again. He was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He was quadriplegic (*which is s paralysis caused by illness or injury that results in the partial or total loss of use of all four limbs and torso - Google search for definition of word*).

After his accident, he went through all kinds of severe emotions from depression to anxiety too night terrors. The physical pain he was experiencing and continued to experience was excruciating and agonizing.

After his accident, a young girl had a profound influence on him. She had known Brian since elementary school. She asked him about his faith. Brian lashed out at her and said, 'I have none!'

This young girl did not give up. She went to see him every day. She asked him why she never saw him smile. She challenged him about putting God first in his life. She stopped visiting for a while. Brian had a lot of time on his hands to think about things.

After a few weeks, she returned to see Brian. He was smiling. He accepted her advice and accepted God was first in his life. He wanted to share his faith. He became part of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA).

Five years after his accident, Brian shared his story with about a thousand people during a conference. The conference began by showing a movie about Brian's prowess as a vault jumper. He was 6'3" or 1.9 meters. His body was very trim and muscular. Everyone applauded him.

When the curtains through back, there was an empty chair. A football player named Wes Wilmer move from the left of the stage to the centre carrying Brian in his arm. This former champion look like a rag doll with arms and legs hanging limp and his

head swaying from side to side. West, the football player, sat him down on the chair, prop them up with pillows to make sure he did not fall over. He placed a microphone” to his mouth.

Brian began to tell an impressive story of his athletic achievements. Over his short time as an athlete, he had accomplished more than the average athlete in a lifetime. However, it was when Brian got to the central point of his talk that a hush fell on his audience. He said,

“I never felt like a winner until I put God in the centre of my life.”

Brian shared the story of how he came to know Jesus Christ. He shared about the pain of a vibrant young athlete becoming a quadriplegic and then he closed his eyes and said a prayer from deep within his heart. Despite all that had happened, his career cut short, the horror of being trapped inside his own immovable body, Brian said that putting Christ first was the best thing that ever happened to him!

It’s half a century since the tragic accident that ended Brian’s career as a world-class athlete. On his walls at home, he kept treasures from the past. There are dozens of letters and photographs from fellow athletes, plaques, awards, and a very special get well wish from President John F Kennedy just before he was assassinated. But Brian said the greatest treasure in his was the gift of forgiveness and life eternal that he received from God just a few months after the most devastating tragedy an athlete can suffer. Brian lost a lifetime of fame, wealth, and adulation, but he gained something far more precious.

Brian passed into eternity on 23rd May, 2013. Just one month short of seventy, and 50 years almost to the day after he set his first world pole vault record. He lived an unusually long life for a paraplegic. Medical staff attributed his longevity partly to his athletic training, but more to his positive attitude brought about by his deep faith in Jesus Christ. (Idem.)

Brian died in the faith. If you ever want to read more about his story, you can find it in Philip Yancey’s book, WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS? A Comforting, Healing Guide for Coping with Hard Times, chapter 9)

Instead of asking why this tragedy and misfortune happened to him, he turned his life towards God and trusted God to walk with and in him through his physically tragic life.

Last week, as I was reading the Bible, I came across a verse that inspired me very much and I hope it does you as well. Even if humans abandon us, God does not. (next slide)

13 ¶ Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! for the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.

14 But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.”

15 “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

16 Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.” (Isa 49:13-16 ESV)



Suffering is a vast subject. So much more could be said. The important lesson about suffering is that even if we do not know of the “whys” and know the causes of why we suffer, what is important is our focus. Our focus is keeping our eyes on our Heavenly Father and Jesus with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Let us praise our great God for his love, patience, mercy and perseverance with us no matter what may befall us! God does not and will not forget us!