



Issues, Etc.TM

Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio

TRANSCRIPT

Rev. Todd Wilken, Host

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"The Promises of God During Suffering"

Guest:

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Wednesday, June 11, 2014

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WILKEN: Welcome to *Issues, Etc.*; I'm Todd Wilken. On this Wednesday afternoon, June the 11th, we're going to be talking about the promises of God during suffering. There is a very popular kind of Christianity – it's Christian-ish; I don't know if it's Christianity, per se. It flies under the banner of Christianity that says, "Sure, suffering is a possibility for Christians. There are Christians who could deny that there are Christians who suffer say, persecution, the attacks of the devil; all of those things can and do happen to Christians. But if you are really walking with the Lord, if you're really

stepping out of faith, if you're really taking hold of all that God has promised and holding God to His promises, well, you might expect less suffering. And, you know, the proponents of this kind of Christianity seem to live it pretty well. They have a lot of money, they have a lot of followers, they seem to be deliriously happy all the time. Think about Joel Osteen. The last time that I read one of his books, one of his bestsellers, there was very little mention of suffering. If there was suffering, it was usually because you weren't trying hard

enough. You weren't holding God to His promises. You had the wrong attitude.

Well, is that the way it works? Suffering is the result of perhaps just falling a little bit short of the wrong attitude toward God?

Joining us to talk about the promises of God in the midst of suffering: Pastor Bill Cwirla. He's pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Hacienda Heights, California, and co-host of the weekly radio show called "The God Whisperers."

Bill, welcome back.

CWIRLA: Good to be back, Todd.

WILKEN: There is that brand of Christianity, or at least it calls itself Christianity – oh, it's championed by the likes of Joel Osteen, but he's not the only one who essentially says, "Look at me. I'm actually clinging to the promises of God. I'm holding God to His promises; I'm living every day in a life that is at a higher level. Victorious Christians do suffer, that's true, but there's a reason for that – but I'm showing you that it doesn't have to be that way. You can have a life that is like mine – pretty free of suffering." What's your response to that?

CWIRLA: Yeah. We hear this a lot. Interestingly, this is precisely the theology of Job's three friends in the book of Job. The book of Job is sort of the handbook of suffering in the Bible, and what I find interesting about the book of Job, other than it's very ancient Hebrew – some scholars consider it the earliest written book, in that the Hebrew is very, very old; difficult to translate. But it's a wonderful story in its narrative, because Job suffers and he doesn't know why. We know why. If we read chapter one, we know why – God and Satan are having a little bet over whether Job just loves God because God's good to him. So it's kind of like – does Job hold a kind of Joel Osteen theology? Is he good to God

because God is giving him favors? This kind of transactional thing. So the real question in the whole book of Job is – is Job going to stick with God? Is he going to trust God even when God is acting as though He were his enemy? And along come his three friends to bring him comfort, and they sit with him for a week and don't say anything, and that's the best thing they did! But when they open their mouths, the bulk of the book of Job is these discourses. Each of the friends has kind of a whack at Job and Job responds. They literally theologize and torment the man, with the basic message that says, "Look, Job, clearly you're not right with God. Because if you were right with God, this wouldn't be happening to you. So take this as a sign. You're not right with God; you're suffering. God's trying to tell you something, Job." And of course, they can't figure out what it is, but surely Job knows. He knows what's wrong in his life, and he's got to have to straighten this out, because God's sending him a clear message here. And they just go on and on and on for chapter after chapter of this, and Job continues to insist that God will vindicate him, that he has an advocate – that's the famous "I know that my Redeemer lives." "Even if worms destroy this body, my flesh, I'm going to see God." He's standing firm against this theology you summarized, and it's a transactional theology that tries to connect the dots in reverse. It says that suffering is bad, and therefore suffering is a result of bad, and so we've got to figure out what caused the suffering and get rid of the cause, and the suffering will go away. Really, when you get down to the end of the book of Job, God offers no explanation. It's very unresolved at the end of the book of Job. Some people even find some sort of comfort in the ending – he gets it all back, he gets new sons and daughters and all of that, but it still doesn't have that satisfying feel of what we would call a "decent explanation." Why should anybody have to go through all of that in the first place? So the Scriptures really run completely counter

to this notion that you can use suffering as a barometer for how you're doing with God – and how your walk with the Lord is going. So clearly, if you're suffering, then something is going wrong and you have to fix it and the suffering will go away.

WILKEN: Another Christian-ish response to suffering is a little Buddhist, if you ask me: to deny the reality of it. "This looks bad, but it's really good. This cancer, yeah, it's tearing my body apart, or my wife's body apart. But this can't be bad, because we're Christians. It has to be good. There must be some sort of upside to this." Bill, you've been a pastor as long as I have; you've watched people die. I've never seen someone dying of an illness like cancer where they say, "You know, the good thing about cancer is..." This doesn't happen. It's not realistic. How do we respond to someone who essentially lives in denial of the reality of suffering?

CWIRLA: I'm reminded of Luther's famous quote in his Heidelberg disputational theses of 1518, where he describes the theologian of the cross as one who "calls a thing what it is." And this is bad – I've never attended the death of a Christian, no matter how great a Christian they were, where when the person dies, you all look up and say, "That was great!" No, this is bad; this is really bad! You're right; there is kind of a pretend or a denial or a sugarcoating, or the scene at the end of "Life of Brian," where he's on the cross singing "Always look on the bright side of life!" That's really contrary. It is very Buddhist, because the very idea in Buddhism is just to become very passionless, to basically deny all feeling, everything that's associated with body, and to become literally without feeling and disconnected, if you will. That's completely contrary to our humanity and the incarnation of Christ Himself, who experienced real human pain in His own flesh. His thirst was a real thirst, and His pain was a genuine pain. So to deny this, to sugarcoat it, is

really to deny the cross. I would say that it's because of the cross that the Christian has a lens, through which to view suffering and not deny it, but to come to a deeper understanding and a deeper faith-understanding of suffering, not in the way of explanation, but in the way of the God who suffers with His people; the God who knows suffering in the flesh; the God who does not willingly afflict His children. And indeed, then, the God who trumps our suffering, and indeed our death, by the death of His Son. This is the God who gets involved, but in a unique way – in a way that we don't expect. I think what we expect, what you and I expect, what pretty much everybody expects – if they believe in God, they believe in a God who's powerful enough to intervene. And so the idea is that we're looking for an interventionist God who's going to make it go away. Like the small child coming to the parent: "Make the hurt stop! Make the suffering go away! Take this away from me!" And we don't get that with God. We get something else – we get a God who doesn't intervene that way, but it's not like He's not involved. He gets involved in a different way. He's Emmanuel – He's "God with us" in this suffering, and that's a radically different perspective.

WILKEN: Does that, because we can't talk about suffering without talking about the philosophical conundrum that eventually really does confront everybody – it may turn some into atheists, frankly, and that is: look, suffering is incompatible with the existence of a God who is both all-powerful and all-loving. Just down the street, the suffering is almost unbearable, not to mention the cumulative affect of all human suffering. It's incompatible with the kind of God Christianity espouses. What do we do with that?

CWIRLA: It's a reminder of what we call "theodicy," which I might paraphrase as the attempt to explain these things, or explain God or defend God, or explain suffering. It's

always going to go down a dead end. It's always going to take you on a bad, bad track. And you hear this with well-intentioned Christians comforting others – “God did this because...” And I think if you ever catch yourself starting a sentence like that, just staple your lips together. Don't try to complete that sentence, because as the book of Job teaches us, how dare you explain God! God is unexplainable. You trust God; you don't explain Him. And so there's this kind of rational thing: that if God is merciful, if He's just, and if He has all this power, if He's omnipotent, then surely He would do something. That's the interventionist God. That's the God of our expectations. I'd add that logically, it doesn't prove the non-existence of God or disprove His existence. It just proves you don't like God and the way He operates. That's all. He's not living up to your expectation.

I'd like to point out that there's a good parable for this in the movie “Bruce Almighty.” There are a couple of scenes there that really speak to this. The one is where Bruce takes over for God while God takes a little bit of a long weekend, because He's kind of burned out – that's the premise of the movie. And so Bruce is getting all these prayers, worldwide, via the internet by email. His email box is flooded with requests, personal requests all over the place. And in despair, he just answers default “Yes” to all the prayers, and proceeds to create world chaos. The stock market crashes, tidal waves, everything just goes nuts. And then he tells God later, “I just tried answering yes to all the prayers.” And Morgan Freeman, who plays God, says, “Yeah, that doesn't work.” But that's our expectation, I think. “I'm in a bad way. I've got cancer; we're gonna pray, get a lot of people to pray, have prayer vigils, do all kinds of things. The more the merrier, stoke up the prayers,” with the idea that God will intervene. And that is precisely not the Biblical way for us to be looking at this. Certainly, we pray, because prayer is that

conversation – look at the psalmists when they pray in their suffering. The psalmists are theologians of the cross. They say, “This is bad! Why are you doing this to me? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Now, there's an interesting prayer! The psalmist is experiencing God-forsakenness, and yet he prays! That makes no sense, logically – God has forsaken him; then He's not listening! So why are you talking to Him? And then if you follow Psalm 22, there's more conversation going on to the God who has forsaken him. And so that's where the Biblical view of all of this really departs from this reasonable view that we have of God, that somehow He should use all of that infinite power that brings all things into existence to bear for our own particular favor, to basically grant us a favor and give us a little detour around suffering. And He doesn't. Instead, He provides the only meaningful route through suffering: that is, the suffering and death of His Son, Jesus.

WILKEN: This passage, so oft-quoted when there's suffering about, “We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose,” you're saying that doesn't mean that God's going to explain Himself to you?

CWIRLA: [*chuckles*] No explanations forthcoming here; this is why I did this. Let me go down a brief rabbit trail. I had a neighbor who, at a rather young age, in her late 30s, developed a very, very aggressive form of breast cancer and eventually died of it. She was a member of one of these churches that tries to explain God. I was her neighbor; not her pastor, just her neighbor, but as a neighbor who is a pastor, who knows a thing or two about the Scriptures, I spent a lot of time with her. And one of the things she was told by members of her own church, and her own pastor, was “God did this to get your attention.” And even at her funeral, Pastor said, “Sometimes the Good

Shepherd, with a wayward sheep, has to break the sheep's legs to teach the sheep to trust."

I'll tell you, Todd, if there's ever a moment where – I'm not big into disrupting services, because I have my own service – but if there was ever a moment where I rose up and was about to (and my wife's holding me back), but I was furious. Here's a completely unwarranted explanation, that "God gave this woman cancer because, like a wayward sheep, He needed to get her attention. He needed to break her legs. He needed to make her utterly dependent upon Him." And my only question to that guy was, "By what authority do you say this? What revelation did you have? When did God speak to you and tell you in very clear and uncertain terms, that this is what He was doing?" And that's, I think, the way we try to backfill these things. We try to defend God by saying "He did this because..." and "Oh, see, this and that." If I'm listening to this in a group of peers, I'm thinking I don't want anything to do with the God who busts the legs of His sheep! Not a bone of His was broken, by the way. So it's just no good.

Now back to Romans 8. God works – I should really call this up. I want to find it in Greek, because the Greek is actually a little bit more transparent than the English on this. But it's not that God makes good out of everything, that's not it. But it's through all these things – where is that? Give me a verse here.

WILKEN: It's Romans 8:28.

CWIRLA: 8:28. There it is. The floors of hospitals are littered with this verse! "We know that for those who love God, all things He works for good." And there's the key phrase there – "all things," *panta* [in Greek]. "He works/is working" – it's present tense; He's doing this for Good, or into Good – the goal is Good. God can't do anything but Good. It's just His nature; when He creates, it's good, and very good. When God works,

it's good. So He takes all things – and it's got to be inclusive here – and He works all things toward the goal of good, "for those who love Him, whom He has called according to His purpose." So the believer, the baptized believer in Christ, can take this whole bundle of his or her life, the good, the bad, the ugly, and in faith say that in the death of Jesus, which reconciles all things to the Father, God is going to work good from this. This is going to be raw material from which He works ultimate, final good.

WILKEN: Real quickly, with about a minute before our break, you have used the phrase here – and I've heard you use it before – the cross and death of Jesus as God's trump card over all evil. Is that what you're talking about – how this is a mystery, but the death of Jesus really will bring good from all the suffering, all the evil?

CWIRLA: Yeah, I like the idea of a trump card being the card you lay on any hand and it changes the whole nature of the hand. It doesn't make the bad cards better. It turns the entirety of the hand into a winner. And so, 1 Corinthians 5: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting men's trespasses against them." *Cosmos*, the world, it's the cosmic reconciliation of all things in the death of the Christ. So what was God up to on Good Friday? Reconciling the world, reconciling all things. And so the death of Jesus is an all-reconciling death that, when that is laid upon the worst of things that happen in this world, God makes good. He works good. He doesn't turn bad things into good, that thing becomes the raw material *for* good. The cross itself is that very thing: it's injustice, it's cruelty, it's the most barbarous act of humanity against a fellow man to crucify a man on the cross, and yet God takes this thing and He makes it the very good of our salvation.

WILKEN: Pastor Bill Cwirla is our guest. We're talking about the promises of God

during suffering. He'll be with us on the other side of the break.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. We're talking about God's promises in the midst of suffering. Pastor Bill Cwirla is our guest. He's pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Hacienda Heights, California; co-host of a weekly radio show called "The God Whisperers."

Okay, we were in the middle of talking about that Romans 8:28 passage, that God is, through the cross, taking the raw material of the bad, the evil, the suffering, the genuine stuff where we should look it in the eye and say "This is not good," but He works this toward good. Do we know what the shape of that good is? How do we know what it is when we see it, I guess is what I'm asking, Bill.

CWIRLA: We know as much of the shape of that good as we know of what, say, eternal life with God looks like or feels like. These are matters of faith, not of sight. If we could see the outcome, and we could say, "Oh! Okay, this is it" – and people do that sometimes: "You know, I look back on that and I see how God really worked out of the thing." That's not quite what we're talking about here. We're talking more in the way of Hebrews, where those who trusted in the promise of God never saw the outcome of that promise in their life. But they trust it. There's Job: Job does not see a way through this, but his faith in the promise of God, the faithfulness of God, is the only way through this. So I hesitate to even speculate on that, lest I fall into the same trap of explaining or describing that which I myself have not seen!

WILKEN: So, it's like you mentioned Job before – how there's some restitution, some reimbursement, so to speak. He sets things right at the end, at least materially.

CWIRLA: Sort of evens the account a little bit, but still Job doesn't see any of that ahead of time. He doesn't get a word from God saying, "Don't worry, you'll get it all back! This is just a temporary state of affairs, Job."

WILKEN: And Job knows no more of that restitution, the why of the restitution, than he does of the why of the suffering. He's just left scratching his head, saying, "What were you doing all this time?!"

CWIRLA: Yeah, and he knows no more of the final outcome than we know for ourselves the final outcome. He can't anticipate it. There's no calculus that's going to allow him to add up what he's lost and what he will gain. He simply has to trust that God, who has all of these things under His control in a sort of non-interventionist kind of way, is good. And think about it – this is the ultimate thing that you could pull on the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh – is not micromanage suffering and evil and all of this stuff, but instead bundling it up, nailing it to the cross, say "It is finished," and trust that. And in that last day that the whole creation is groaning for – go up a few verses in Romans 8 – this whole creation is in labor pains, "the groanings of the new creation." And so in the last day, when finally the new creation springs forth and the resurrection of the dead, it's this grand and glorious consummation of "Ah!" That's Job in the last chapter of Job – that's kind of a foretaste picture of the resurrection, really. And then it's "Aha!" So then explanations aren't needed anymore, because you actually see the good that this all was bundled and worked toward. But not a day sooner – you're gonna see that. And that's why this is a matter of faith in Christ. That's why I call the cross of Christ the lens through which one must, in this life, look at suffering.

WILKEN: Why do we want a reason? It seems to me that we want to be able to

balance the books ourselves, or see them balanced in a way that makes sense to us, and that's why we're always asking in the face of suffering, "Why?"

CWIRLA: Yeah, we like to connect the dots. I think we have a penchant for doing this. You remember the man born blind, and the first question from the disciples' lips to Jesus was, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" because they see a hard connection, a cause and effect. They understand this much, that sin is the cause of suffering. So obviously, this man's born blind; something went wrong, so who sinned? And the surprising answer is "None." No explanation offered there, either. "He's just blind so the glory of God can be shown in him." Okay! Then you know how the rest goes. He becomes a parable of faith itself, not seeing and yet seeing, and those who see are actually blind to who Jesus is, and it's a great commentary on "I am the light of the world." But this man had no clue that that was what God was going to do with his blindness – nor did the disciples. The disciples were busy speculating. We like to connect the dots; I think we presume that there is some kind of mathematics that will help us understand what appears to be, to our eyes, rather capricious and arbitrary. The other facet of it is our Old Adam, who likes to gain control of the situation. And understanding it is the first part of control. So if we understand how this works, then that's the first step to a) avoiding suffering, and b) diagnosing it in others. We become like Job's friends, because we've got the way to decode this and find meaning. We are actively looking for meaning in these things. And there is, but it's not in the direction that we think it is. It's a combination of, I think, our own rational minds that like to find the pattern, and our sin-corrupted Old Adam, who really wants to control this and then hold God accountable for what He's doing or not doing.

WILKEN: Okay. Let's look at Genesis 50, the bow on the end of the whole story of Joseph in the Old Testament, who is, well, not entirely deserving of everything he gets from his brothers, but certainly not deserving what he does get from them. After all is said and done, and he's kind of sitting in the cat-bird seat, with his entire family, he says to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive as they are today." That's his – I wouldn't call it an explanation; he seems to be echoing what Paul has said in Romans 8, in advance. What's going on there?

CWIRLA: Yeah, that's one of the great sentences in the Old Testament. Here's Joseph, who really is kind of a Christ figure. If you look at Joseph, it wasn't *totally* unjustly; he was kind of parading his father's favor around before his brothers with the fancy coat and everything, but he's led into captivity and slavery in Egypt, he ends up in Pharaoh's prison, unjustly. So he literally goes to the death, for all intents and purposes. And then he rises; he gets out of prison. Not only that, he's highly exalted as Pharaoh's right hand, in charge of the grainery of Egypt. And as a result, he rescues his brothers, who wanted him dead – if not dead, then just out of the way – ends up rescuing them from a severe famine in the homeland in Israel, essentially preserving the nation Israel for the fullness of time when God would bring them out of Egypt in the Exodus. So there's this big good that God's working, i.e. the salvation of the world, and it's done by means of, and utilizing, a great evil done by Joseph's brothers against him. Now, does Joseph know that? No, he just trusts that this is God's mode of operation. And what he sees before his eyes is that he's rescued his brothers. They wanted to kill him, and in so doing they have provided for their own rescue. He is now in a position to rescue them. What a great parallel with Christ – the

world wants to get Christ out of the way, the world wants to crucify Christ, the world *succeeds* in crucifying Christ, and this crucifixion becomes the world's salvation.

WILKEN: So is that the way – is there an indication in that parallel to Christ that shows us how we ought to fundamentally view suffering? Not seeking explanation, not looking for silver linings, not denying the bad of it, because Joseph doesn't seem to do any of those things.

CWIRLA: No, it's very bad; it was a very bad thing to do.

WILKEN: It's evil.

CWIRLA: And they knew it – boy, the brothers knew it, too. They were afraid of Joseph, and Joseph has to duck behind the curtains a couple times because he's weeping. The whole scene is emotionally charged; I love the whole scene. But ultimately, finally, he can't be God. Only God can adjudicate this kind of stuff. And I think this is why Paul says, "Don't take revenge. Bless those who curse you. Do good to those who hate you. Leave vengeance to the Lord, because only He gets the right to this vengeance thing. We don't. And instead, flip it around the other way – the sins that others have done against you, trust that God will work good out of it. Not only for you, but for them too." That kind of disarms all revenge, I think. There's no place anymore for revenge.

WILKEN: There seems to be something where Joseph is recognizing there that he didn't coordinate the situation. He was, in fact, prince of Egypt; he could have tried to. But he didn't. God delivers his brothers to him right there on his doorsteps. He could have gone up and had them seized and brought down from Canaan, to get exactly the same result, but it sounds like Joseph is saying, "I didn't work this one out. God did."

CWIRLA: Yeah, and I think that goes back to what I was talking about from the movie "Bruce Almighty," or the book of Job; same thing – Yahweh's soliloquy near the end of Job, where finally, Yahweh appears on the scene and gives answer but doesn't give answer; just goes on this soliloquy of "there are too many variables and you can't hold them all in your head. If I explain to you, you wouldn't be satisfied with the explanation because you wouldn't understand." There's this trust here, that there are too many variables at stake, and instead what God has done, rather than reorder the variables to spare Joseph his suffering, or to spare you yours, is that He has brought all things to bear on His Son. His Son becomes the focal point of all human suffering. This is why you can't say, "Where was God when...?" "Where was God when 9-11 happened? Where was God when the car ran over the infant or when I got cancer? Where was God?" And the answer, from the Christian perspective, the Christ-centered answer, is "He was there, in the person of His Son nailed to the cross. That suffering, that injustice, that piece of dumb luck, whatever it was, that was nailed to the cross in the suffering flesh of Jesus, and in that flesh God has made ultimate good for you. God has reconciled all these things, and now He's bidding you to trust that reconciliation and to live in it."

WILKEN: So do we underestimate not only the magnitude of Christ's suffering, but also do we underestimate how pivotal that is to God dealing with every shred of human suffering that ever has been?

CWIRLA: Absolutely. I'm glad you said it that way too, Todd, because I think too often – it's well-intentioned, but I think it's short-sighted – that we as Christians view the suffering of Christ as an example. Not to short-shrift it; we dogmatically understand that it's for the forgiveness of our sins. But when we try to apply it to our own suffering, it's kind of like, "Well, Jesus suffered, so

don't be surprised if you do, too," looking at it as an example and being like Jesus in suffering. But failing to see that He has, like a dry sponge, He has absorbed all of human suffering, all injustice, everything, He's taken them all up into Himself. Again, 1 Corinthians 5: "He became sin for us, who knew no sin." Not just simply bore our sins, but He became sin, the very cursed thing that has cursed our humanity, he became that. I think you have a sense of that as Jesus is doing His earthly ministry, and He's healing. These healings are not just little tricks, but He's absorbing what's broken in the world, in our humanity, and He's taking it into Himself, and taking it to the cross in Himself. His flesh is literally the sponge that absorbs all of human suffering. He's the second Adam, and so as humanity's second Adam, He in our flesh takes up everything that has gone wrong in our flesh, dies with it, rises, glorifies it. You see the trajectory. So this present suffering does not compare with the glory that will be revealed in us, Paul says in Romans 8. And he could say that by looking at the flesh of Christ. The suffering of the flesh of Christ leads to burial, to triumph and victory, to resurrection, to ascension and glory and we are already glorified in His flesh.

WILKEN: Pastor Bill Cwirla is our guest. We'll have about another ten minutes with him on this Wednesday afternoon, June the 11th. We're talking about the promises of God in the midst of suffering. Stay tuned.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. Pastor Bill Cwirla is our guest on this Wednesday afternoon. We're talking about the promises of God during suffering.

One other passage that I wanted you to deal with was Romans 5, where Paul says that suffering is the source, or at least, suffering has something to do with rejoicing. He says, "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

endurance character, character hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God love had been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." What in the world is Paul saying there?

CWIRLA: Yeah, you notice where the section begins. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Christ, we obtain access to this grace, and we rejoice in the hope of sharing the glory of God." So these are the outcomes enumerated for our being justified before God. But then there's more. If you stop there, it would just be kind of a future hope, sort of the old "pie in the sky, by and by, it's gonna get better when we go to heaven." But Paul has some temporal consequences, good consequences that come of this, too. He'll say that we rejoice in our sufferings, which are present – of course, there are no sufferings post-resurrection – so we're rejoicing in our sufferings now, knowing that suffering produces, first of all, patient endurance. *Hupomone* [in Greek] is one of the chief characters of faith, "patient endurance." I always warn people, don't pray for patience, because God doesn't grant patience, He grants suffering! That's how it works. Suffering is the crucible in which patient endurance is forged, and that's one of the temporal aspects of faith. When we trust in the promises of God, we endure everything with patience, because we know that this is not the outcome. We know the outcome: the outcome is good. And that patient endurance, then, forges character, like the parable of the fourfold soil that Jesus talked about, where the Word is implanted deeply and produces fruit. It's the shallow soil that cannot endure suffering and persecution and the noonday sun. And so it's a little bit like God's Rototiller, digging deep so that the Word can take root deeply. Finally, this character produces a hope that is unfading. Hope is something where you're looking forward to

something you don't yet have, but you live in the expectation, the excitement, the anticipation of that thing coming to its fulfillment.

This is, at least, a sneak preview of what God does when He works all things together for good, is that He is working in us, a kind of a faithfulness, a patient endurance, depth of character, and an unwavering hope.

WILKEN: We don't want to be like Job's friends, so let's turn the tables a little bit, so to speak, and that is from "when I suffer" to "when I find my neighbor suffering, my loved one suffering." Job's friends, as you said before, they pretty much torture him with their theology. What do we say to someone who is in the middle of this kind of suffering?

CWIRLA: I think, ultimately, it's got to go to that practical level – "What do we say?" One thing we don't say is we don't try to explain. Like my neighbor's pastor and her Christian friends tried to do for her, or Job's friends tried to do for him. And we acknowledge, as good theologians of the cross, this is bad. I think it's important when somebody comes and says, "I have cancer," the first words I say as a pastor are "This is very bad," because that's how it feels to the person, and this is not good. God does not cause cancer. He may permit it, He may not intervene in it, that's all true, but this is not a good thing. This is something gone wrong. And then I think, most importantly of all, is to, in prayer and in solidarity with that person, to say, "Look. There's a great promise in the death of Christ, which is yours." I'm assuming we're talking about a fellow Christian here; if not, then urge people to baptism, to faith in Christ. But say, "Look, in Christ, you are already glorified and resurrected. You already have this perfect healing that you seek. And so this time is, I think, a deeply spiritual time. It's a time where God is going to work good out of this bad. And we're going to pray with you, we're going to hurt with you, and we're

going to laugh and cry with you, but the one thing we won't do is try to rationalize, explain, or diminish your suffering, because that doesn't do justice to what's going on with you." I think it's that kind of conversation that we need to have with our fellow sufferers.

WILKEN: Finally, with only about thirty seconds here, bring it all together for us, if you would, Bill.

CWIRLA: First I need to get a plug in, Todd.

WILKEN: Sure.

CWIRLA: Greg Schultz has a great little book. Now, this is a man who has known personal suffering: the death of two children, one as a teenager, one as a young child. It's called *The Problem of Suffering*, and I don't have the publication info in front of me, but Gregory Schultz, *The Problem of Suffering*. He does a beautiful job, from the writings of Luther, from his own personal experiences, and from the Scriptures that we've talked about, avoiding the errors of explaining God, embracing the sufferings of Christ, and viewing the sufferings of Christ as a lens through which we can find the only way through. As Christians, we're not granted a way around suffering and death. We are given the way through. The Good Shepherd has gone ahead of us and He will make good.

WILKEN: Could it be that on the last day, when we all anticipate that He's going to explain everything to us, it will be a little bit like the end of Job, but with real resolution – where we will see, in the crucified and risen flesh of Jesus Himself at the resurrection, the understanding?

CWIRLA: I don't expect explanations. It's a tired analogy, every preacher uses it, but I think it's a good one. We're staring at the tapestry, the knotted rug from below – we see knots and dangling ends. We see ugliness, and then all of a sudden that same

tapestry, without a change in anything, is flipped over, and we see the beautiful picture as it's viewed from above. All you can say is, "Oh, wow." And for some wonderful reason that's beyond our comprehension, every knot and piece of ugliness from below has a place and integral role, and makes perfectly and beautifully good sense when viewed from above. I'm looking forward to that "from above" perspective.

WILKEN: Pastor Bill Cwirla is pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Hacienda Heights, California, cohost of a weekly radio show called "The God Whisperers. Bill, thank you.

CWIRLA: Good to be with you, Todd.

WILKEN: I'm Todd Wilken. This is *Issues, Etc.*

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