

SageTalk Episode 20: Suffering: Redemption Through Pain

Paul Lawler: Hi, this is Paul Lawler and I have the privilege of being with Al Henson. And this is Sage Talk.

Al Henson: And Paul, it's a joy to be here with you again today on Sage Talk. And as always, I like to say with Jesus, we're in him, he's in us, and he's with us. And a part of Sage Talk is for you and I to have a conversation with Jesus, with each other and let others be a part of that conversation.

Al Henson: We've been in a lot of our prior podcasts following this road, this thread, this rope of transformation. Why? Because Romans 8:29, the scriptures are very, very clear that God, even before the creation of mankind, knowing that he would, predetermined and desired and passionately that they would become like Christ. And so he, through salvation and the gospel, put Jesus in us that we could have within us the very nature of God and our nature could become one with his nature and we'd become a new creation.

Al Henson: And sometimes the way I say this, Paul, is that we possess Christ. Now, a lot of the Christian walking, is allowing Christ to possess us. Until we are formed more and more into his likeness in his image. That's transformation. That's spiritual maturity, that's growth. That's God's purpose. And a part of this that we're learning is that this is, when we're on this road, Christ is the way. It is a grace highway. We're no longer under the law but we're under grace and grace has provided for us unmerited Jesus himself. An Al Henson definition of grace is a grace is all that Jesus is, made available to all that you need, that I need, that we need. Whatever we need, you'll find it in Christ because Christ is all and in all, and then he can be through us all.

Al Henson: But today, some of our past ones, we've talked about confession and transformation, worship and transformation. Last week we begin to dev some in a conversation about suffering and the role in place of suffering in one's transformation. We spoke a lot about how do I move in suffering? How do I deal with suffering and some of the vulnerability that we have when we're suffering and we spoke about that we wanted to have an entire podcast where we could focus some upon the redemptive side of suffering that in the midst of this pain and difficulties and trials and diversity that we go through, there is out of that redeemed precious gold and stone. And so we're going to talk about that some today.

Al Henson: Three things. There's a redemptive side personally for you, for I and for each of us as a believer. There's a personal side. There is a kingdom, advancement, expansion side. And then there's the ultimate, if one and two right, if one is personally developing and transforming and kingdom is expand, then there is the glory to God. The expanding of his kingdom brings him glory. So let's jump into this. The redemptive side of suffering.

Paul Lawler: Yeah. And as we do, I'm going to reread a passage of scripture that we also, I believe, lifted up last week. And if you didn't listen to last week's broadcast, it would be very important to listen to what we shared last week, tethered with

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what we're sharing today, but it's out of Second Corinthians 4:17, for this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not at the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen for the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal. You know, Al, you mentioned the redemptive expression of some things we go through personally in suffering at times and I know this is true for both of us, many of our listeners, but when we walk through suffering, there are things that God is redeeming within us that have eternal purposes. And I know that one of the gifts, and I can only say this in retrospect, but one of the gifts that I had particularly as a young man in ministry was a red hot enemy. And in that circumstance, as I look back, there was a time where serving as a lead pastor, it didn't matter if I said up, he would say down, if I said left, he would say, right.

Al Henson: And all of us, in case someone's listening who isn't a pastor and I am too, and I've had my Judas Iscariot's in the ministry, but all of us have someone in our life, a relative, a family member, a boss, someone we're working with, and they feel like our enemy.

Paul Lawler: Yeah.

Al Henson: Go ahead, Paul.

Paul Lawler: As you validate that, we recognize that indeed everybody's story and experiences are different, but I would share, Al, in retrospect before God is one of the greatest gifts God ever allowed in my life because it taught me to trust in the Lord. It taught me that the fear of man is a snare and that the fear of God actually sets us free from earthly fear. And so as I share that, what comes to mind are a couple of biblical examples that I want to invite our listeners to think about. We are all aware of the famous story of David facing down Goliath, and it's a great story, but the question that we would ask at a deeper level, did God raise up David to deal with Goliath or did God allow and raise up a Goliath to develop David?

Paul Lawler: The same is true when David had a red hot enemy and he had a red hot enemy in Saul and the same question can be asked. As David is being developed to become a future leader of a theocracy, a man who is indeed after God's own heart, as the scripture says, did God raise up a David to deal with Saul? Or did God allow and raise up a Saul to develop David? And I believe if we look at it circumspectly that the answer is the latter. That God allowed these things to develop what needed to be developed in the heart of his servant. Now all of our suffering doesn't necessarily look like that and I realize suffering goes beyond the category of persecution and having a red hot enemy. But what it illustrates that in the sovereignty of God that suffering can indeed have redemptive purposes in how we are developed in depending on God, crying out to God, growing in understanding and experiencing resurrection power in our weakness.

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- Al Henson: I actually believe that all suffering for the follower of Christ, now a lot of people are suffering and it's not redemptive but it can be redemptive if we can take a posture of faith in God and in essence the word I'd use, embracing the suffering. See, a lot of people are rejecting it, but embracing it, not in, "God, I'm really glad I'm suffering," kind of way, but in a sense, "Okay God, you have allowed this or brought this into my life," or even if it's an enemy, as you're saying, that has sinned against you or sinning against God. That you need to, you must embrace that. Even a text comes to mind when he's talking about with relationships, all that is within you, to live peaceably with all men and Paul, I'm smiling when I'm saying this, but people see me as a kind, gentle shepherd but I have my enemies and Jesus was perfect and he had his enemies.
- Al Henson: But then later on it goes on and says, make a place for wrath. And what God is saying there is even in relationships, if someone hates you or they are functioning like an enemy, don't push it away. Be wise but make a place for that conflict into your life because in essence, it can transform you. That's the reason why in the scriptures you have illustrations of the gold is purified in the fire. You have these kinds of pictures all through the Bible. Even in Jeremiah, in chapter 18 you have the Potter and the pot. And in that illustration, the Potter is trying to take this old rugged pot and make something beautiful and special out of it but he must mar the pot so that it becomes pliable. And what I find in people's lives is that no one should look for suffering and we don't pray for suffering, but if it comes, then embrace it as a gift on God.
- Paul Lawler: I just think it's important that we stop and note what you just said in that, we realize the spirit in which you're saying it, but rather than running from it, but to embrace it in the sovereignty of God.
- Al Henson: And often I've said this, if you're resisting suffering, you're resisting God.
- Paul Lawler: Yeah.
- Al Henson: Now that takes some faith.
- Paul Lawler: And understanding.
- Al Henson: And understanding. But for example, if a child is tragically killed in an accident, to push that pain and loss away is to resist what God has allowed to occur. But to embrace it is to say, "Okay, God, I would have never wanted this but it has happened. And we may not understand all of the why's until we get into eternity. But how can I take this pain and the suffering and let you use it to mold and make my heart and my soul more with your grace and the work of your spirit and your truth, more transformed into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ?" And so when we talk about the redemptive side of suffering, there is a personal redemptive side to suffering.

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- Paul Lawler: Absolutely. And so as we look at this dimension of the personal side and how we're developed through suffering and we talked about, or you referenced, how the Bible refers to being refined as gold by fire. I want to validate that Jesus, Paul, Peter, all validate, all teach, that there are moments of suffering that do enter our lives. The scriptures, they don't sugar coat this in any way.
- Al Henson: You know, A. W. Tozer says that he's never seen a man and woman that has significantly been used by God, that first was not a marred by God or crushed by God. Now I remember hearing that in my mid 20s and thinking, a loving good God? Tozer, this older man, wise, spiritual man would say that he was crushed by God? And now I understand it may have been not directly by God but God is sovereign and in control. And it could have been many reasons, many things, but God uses those in the believer's life. And so I say to people in faith, don't waste suffering. God doesn't want you to waste suffering. What mother or father would would want their child to suffer unless there is something of greater and eternal value to gain through that suffering and that's what our heavenly father-
- Paul Lawler: Yeah. That's so wise. Well, we're also mindful that a part of the redemption or redemptive threat of suffering is that the kingdom often advances through suffering.
- Al Henson: And Paul, I've seen that walking among the persecuted in the persecuted church, just hundreds and hundreds of stories of how through the suffering of a brother and sister, the kingdom has been expanded. Just going back to the personal, when you are being transformed yourself, obviously you become a greater instrument and tool in the hands of God. Can I take a moment and tell a story?
- Paul Lawler: Please do. Please do.
- Al Henson: There was this brother in a specific province, he was the first believer and it was in a communist country. And when he came to Christ, he'd come out of darkness and he had light and he was rejoicing and he wanted everybody to know about this light that he'd gotten of the gospel of Christ. So he started sharing and people started listening and the local police and all became concerned about this. And so they threatened him. "You need to stop." And his wife wondered if he was crazy and he had a few younger children, they wondered too and please just stop, you know? But he wouldn't, he said, "Oh no, I've got to tell others about this." And he was put in prison for a day or two and let out and he'd keep communicating. And finally they just decided to take him. And he ended up in prison for 15 years. And while he was in prison for 15 years, all of his children grew up. So, he missed the growing up of his children and stories that I can tell about being in stocks and being beaten and electrically shocked and starved and treated like a cruel animal. Like you'd cruelly treat an animal.

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Al Henson: Many of the things that he went through but through that process, just before he'd gone in, his wife became a believer. And this was when I met them. He had just gone in and I'd heard the story. And so I went up to encourage his wife and others and we began to disciple her and she began to grow in the Lord and he was in prison. And there's many stories behind this but she would slip in versus a scripture in the rice, in the sticky rice, so that the guards could, eventually, when they said that she could go see her husband, it was like four or five years before anybody was allowed to visit him. But he began to share Christ in the prisons and he would win them and then they would be released and he would say, "Go see my wife and she will help you to grow in the Lord." So after the 15 years was over with and he was finally released, in that area now, were 60 something churches and 4,000 believers.

Paul Lawler: Wow.

Al Henson: And one of the things that I have just come to observe, one of the things that authenticates Christianity, not only in persecution, but even in America, if you have a suffering, the Saint that suffers with faith and joy, it authenticates and affirms something must be real. They can't fake that.

Paul Lawler: So good.

Al Henson: And even with this man, why is he willing to go through such persecution? What is this that causes him to do that? And they would be able to, well, it's Jesus and the love of God and the potential of eternal life and all the wonderful blessings, the unsearchable riches that come in around Christ. And so we see all over the world. It's always been said that it's anytime you see the blood of the saints, the martyrs, then the church will grow out of the blood of the martyrs.

Paul Lawler: Al, we share these anecdotes and examples of the redemptive threads of suffering personally as well as the advancement of the kingdom. I think about Jesus' words and I have a question I want to ask following this, but Jesus said, blessed are the persecuted. Now again, that's counterintuitive to us in a natural lens. So, my question is, because I'm thinking about the person who may be listening who perhaps may be suffering in the lens of being persecuted, misunderstood, as a follower of Jesus. When Jesus said that, is the blessing all for this life or is he speaking in regard to our eternal reward? Or is the answer yes?

Al Henson: The answer is yes and yes. You know, Peter was suffering a lot after the Ascension of Christ and he says, "I rejoice even the others, I rejoice that we've had the privilege of suffering for Christ." So, part of that is blessed. He suffered for us. If it's necessary that we suffer for the expansion of the kingdom, what a way to say, "God, we love you. We're thankful, thank God." You know? But another, the blessings, is that if he's a true follower of Christ, he's beginning to get the passion of his own heart. And that is that not only is he fruitful but he is being transformed into the image of Christ. Every circumstance in life is the classroom for transformation and for growth and maturity. And so that's what

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Jesus meant. Happy as the man. And the other thing is when you're suffering and you embrace the suffering and trust God, you'll experience deep presence of God and intimacy with God and in his presence is the fullness of joy.

Paul Lawler: Yes. That's transformative and it's the blessing of Christ in suffering.

Al Henson: Let's transition to that third one.

Paul Lawler: Sure.

Al Henson: The glory of God, the redemptive side, the glory of God. Can I speak to that?

Paul Lawler: Please.

Al Henson: I've heard so much about through the books and everything that I've read, this matter of God's glory and surely what we do is for the glory of God. And I kept asking, what does that mean? And I've talked with a lot of believers through the years and I never felt everything I was hearing was good but I never felt ... And so I will give you my insight that God has given me to his glory. The actual God is glorious. And the word glory means essence. And God is glorious because in his very essence, he's beautiful. He's magnificent. In reality, no man has ever seen God. And we can't understand what I'm about to say but the reason why no human eyes have seen God is to actually see God, we would probably burn up.

Al Henson: His beauty and the holiness of his beauty, his very essence would consume us and consume the wickedness of this world. So glory is essence and everything that we do can bring God glory. If it has his essence in that. And an illustration, sometimes we think of bringing God glory is this great preacher preaching to the thousands and certainly that can and should, or this great singer singing, or this beautiful song and all of that can. But for a person taking the time to wash the feet, to serve the least of these, or taking a child that's hurting and trying to embrace them and encourage and find a way, that brings God glory because it expresses the essence of the love of God.

Paul Lawler: That's good.

Al Henson: And that's the reason why I said allow the children to come unto me. One of the things behind that is that child can't give you anything in return. There's nothing to gain in helping that child except the joy of helping that child and that expresses the essence. One of the followers of Christ through the decades is Mother Teresa and the world admired her and should. And understand the essence of God when it is actually seen, even the lost can see that. The wicked can see that and the lost and the wicked admired Mother Theresa. Why? Because her labors were labors of love and they expressed, everyone needed, this expresses the essence of God's kind of love. And you can't deny that. And this is what it means when we embrace suffering and we're transformed.

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Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: And then that is the redemptive side, personally, and then the kingdom is expanded. That's the redemptive side. Those two combined together bring God glory because they express in the purest form, I've helped, again, the widow of a martyr and that she's suffering. And yet it's the purest of form, it seems, of what brings God glory because it's a matter of faith and love and hope and her response to the death of her husband, his blood being shed, was full of faith, full of love, and full of hope. And that brought glory to a glorious God.

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: Essence.

Paul Lawler: Al, as we suffer personally, we really have opportunity to experience his essence when we depend upon him and as the kingdom advances, as well. But as you're sharing, I'm thinking about King David actually before he was King and he is suffering. Some scholars say in the setting in Psalm 23, that's written in the context of Saul pursuing him. Some scholars say it's when his own son Absalom was pursuing him, but we can only imagine, I mean, he's in a pickle, he's in a difficult circumstance. He's suffering. But what comes out of his heart is this essence of glorifying God. The Lord is my shepherd. That's all I want. I transliterated the text, but that's what I want. And the picture that we see is David was being developed in suffering so that he would be equipped to manifest his essence, his glory, when he was in the place of position and spiritual authority that God would entrust to him at some point.

Al Henson: And this is why, Paul, that you hear godly saints talk about the things like the gift of suffering.

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: Or precious suffering. And just to speak more as a prophet for a moment, if you're listening, this is why this prosperity doctrine that has swept across our nation and has swept across now the world, it is so false. It's false. Everything that the enemy brings up or carnal has essences of truth in it but it is false because it teaches people if you love God and walk with God, health and wealth and all of these things are going to be added to you and it's just not biblical. It's not biblical. And now there is a biblical doctrine of prosperity for even Psalm one. If we delight in the law of the Lord and meditate there in day and night, then all that he does, all that he does, shall prosper. Moses, God promised that to Joshua, that wherever you go, you shall prosper.

Al Henson: So, that doctrine is in the Bible. What does it mean? We must properly define prosperity. Prosperity is what we're talking about. Prosperity is being conformed into the image of Jesus. Prosperity is seeing the kingdom of God expanded

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around us. Prosperity is becoming a creature, a new creation that can express the essence of the very nature of God and be light and soft. This is prosperity.

Paul Lawler: Yes. So good.

Al Henson: And prosperity is being formed in such a manner that beyond this lifetime, when we enter into eternity, we are qualified. We're qualified to reign with him.

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: He says, Peter says, if we suffer with him, we shall reign with him. Now this is prosperity.

Paul Lawler: That's good.

Al Henson: And this is value in the right things. And so these ones who teach this prosperity, wealth, health and the kind of doctrine, are robbing the people of God and are damaging the kingdom. And if you're listening, if you're under that kind of minister or preacher, get out.

Paul Lawler: Yeah. It's that important.

Al Henson: Yeah, it really is. It's that important.

Paul Lawler: Yeah.

Al Henson: But I wanted to say that. I'll back back down.

Paul Lawler: It is important, what you said, because you are actually circumventing the movement of God in your own life, your own development. If you are under the deception that suffering does not have a redemptive purpose in God through Christ.

Al Henson: That's Sage Points. Sage Points, suffering is to be embraced and treasured because it has redemptive purposes.

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: Redemptive purpose one, personal.

Paul Lawler: It is personal.

Al Henson: Redemptive purpose two, is-

Paul Lawler: Advances the kingdom.

Al Henson: And thirdly-

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Paul Lawler: It glorifies God by manifesting his essence.

Al Henson: And so finally then, embrace this truth, this beautiful, wonderful truth of scripture and by faith embrace the trials and difficulties and adversity that come into your life and in our first podcast, Christ is with you. Others are with you. His grace is with you and there's a lot of hope and beauty and glory that comes out of suffering. Jesus, thank you now for this beautiful plan that you had in our lives that even in the midst of a fallen world where suffering would take place, we would not have to suffer in vain, that all of the suffering and trials that we would go through, there would be redemptive purposes and eternal purposes and you'd have in them wonderful, beautiful, eternal plans. I pray you'd help my brother and sister that's listening, open their eyes and in seeing they may see. Their ears that in hearing, they may hear. In their hearts that they might truly receive the words and truths of God in this matter of suffering. In Jesus' name, amen.

Paul Lawler: Amen.