

Can the Crosses in Our Lives Actually Be Good or Beautiful?

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Hi, Hi, friends, welcome back. I'm Ryan O'Hara, Catholic speaker from St. Paul, Minnesota, and I'm excited to continue this journey of exploring where is God in the midst of our suffering? That was the first talk. The second, we're looking at this question, can the crosses that God gives to us actually be something beautiful? Let's pray.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God, we give you this question. Can the crosses of our life actually be beautiful? It's easy for us, perhaps, to think your cross was beautiful because of the great love that you demonstrated on the cross. But help us to understand that perhaps the crosses you've entrusted to us are beautiful as well. Lord, show us how that might be. Help us to discover a new way of looking at our lives and these pains and difficulties that we experience.

Lord, we know that you are with us, that you're compassionate, that you're deeply moved in the midst of suffering, to love us and to care for us. Would you also today transform the image of the crosses that we carry, that image in our mind, that you actually have always good things for us? We love you. We trust you. We desire to know more of this great question and this great mystery as we pray in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Expectation Vs. Reality

Every one of us have experienced the gap between our expectations and the reality of our lives. For most of our life growing up, our expectations and reality generally match. But when we start to get into high school and we get into college, and then we start thinking about career and marriage, or vocation to priesthood and religious life, and our first job, and how is it going to go with kids? And then now the kids are, you know, going through puberty, and your parents are aging, and there's all of these things. The stakes get higher and higher and higher that we go. And the further that we go along in life, the more possibility that that gap widens between what we're expecting from life and what we actually really experience.

And so often, if we're honest, and I'll just try to be honest in my life, what I experience of that gap, that gap from our expectations to reality is often experienced as pain. That gap is painful. And so then what do we, you know, do with that gap? And this is a bit of what I want us to reflect on. For me, that gap was its widest in my life during the first year of married life. My wife and I were so excited to be married. We were so excited to start a family. We were practicing NFP, I guess. We were just, we were Mr. and Mrs., and we wanted to be Mom and Dad. And so we were really eager to have kids. And six months goes by and we checked the pregnancy tests, and nothing. Another six months goes by, nothing.

And I decided to get a physical, and my wife did as well. We were going to be going on a mission trip. And it was discovered through that and the lab tests that we did that undeniably, infertility was going to be a part of our married life. Talk about a painful gap between our expectations and the thud of reality. It sunk in pretty hard. And it was quite devastating to experience, to hear that diagnosis with almost absolute certainty that this would be the cross that Jesus was entrusting to us right at the beginning of our married life.

Where Is God?

So I don't know, you know, where that gap is for you between expectations and reality, but we've all experienced it. Disappointments, sin, brokenness, tragedy, all of these things where we expected a certain pleasure, we get pain. Where we expected delight and joy, we get difficulty. And all of these things sort of paint a picture that we don't think is going to befall us, and yet there it is. And so what do we do with that pain?

For many people, they medicate. That's what anybody does when they're in pain. And so we find all sorts of other distractions. It could be Netflix. It could be scrolling. It could be shopping. It could be gambling. It could be, you know, drugs and alcohol. I don't know. I don't know. Different people medicate in different ways. And in the midst of this pain and difficulty, we have this question again, where is God? And what is God doing?

We know that God is compassionate. We know that God is gracious. We know He's slow to anger. We know He's full of kindness and steadfast love. But how can He then transform these crosses into something that we just don't resent, and we don't just then turn away from God because it doesn't feel like we're experiencing quite this love and compassion and this closeness. Well, for me, as I mentioned, we experienced this cross of infertility. And one of the first redemptive moments is that we remembered the vision that the church has for married life. And on our wedding day, if you're married in the Catholic church, you made a similar promise. You promised that you came freely. You promised that you would be faithful until death do you part. But you also promised that you would be open and welcoming to children as a part of married love. And while we weren't able to have kids naturally, we felt a certain duty, if you will, I guess that's maybe one way to put it, to at least pursue the possibility of adoption.

And we looked far and wide, and we looked at private adoption here in the United States. We looked at international adoption. But we've been Catholic missionaries from day one and didn't have a lot of extra money. But the one place where they didn't charge you thousands of dollars and there was an incredible need was foster care. And thankfully, my wife's parents were also foster parents for a number of kids as she was growing up. And so we had a good experience of what that might look like. And so, you know, we raised our hand and said, "Let's do that."

And if you've had any experience with adoption or foster care, or adopting kids that have experienced the foster care system, you know that there's a lot of trauma that's centered around that experience. It makes sense. Abuse and neglect and other traumatic events is what always then brings kids into foster care. And then if they're not able to return to their birth family, then as they are adopted into other families, that's a major challenge, a major trauma, if you will, as well, as loving and as kind and as wonderful and offering as it is for a family to

open their home. And so for us, we went from zero to four kids that we adopted in the span of about two years.

We had 13 kids come through our home, four stuck around forever, and all happened within a span of about two years. It was a wild season of growing our family. And again, we were like so many families who have adopted through foster care, is that there's a lot of adjustments. There's a lot of challenges. And parenting kids who have experienced trauma is not like parenting kids who have not. And it wasn't going to be enough to just parent our boys in the same way that my wife and I experienced parenting when we were growing up. And so we tried everything, and it felt like everything failed. So here you are, infertility.

A Father's Day Memory

I mentioned in my first video, I grew up without a dad. And so this... And I was working then with kids who had lost, you know, their mom and dad as well. And so a certain abandonment and fatherlessness and infertility, it was all sort of conspiring to be this perfect storm of pain in my life. And all of it came to a head in a particular way on Father's Day a few years into this journey. When my kids were somewhere between the ages, I had four of them, adopted four of them, between the ages of four, you know, kinda five and 10.

We were celebrating Father's Day one year. And breakfast was always a bit rambunctious and crazy, but it was amped up this particular Father's Day. And I was just thinking, you know, "Guys, come on. Just if one day we could just sort of chill out, couldn't it be Father's Day?" Well, that seemed to sort of raise the bar even further. And so I decided what would be best for them and best for me is that I just needed to step away from the table. And as I mentioned, all of this pain was under the surface. And I took that pain right into the bedroom, we didn't have a very big house, and I just started to cry. I started to weep, in fact, quite loudly. And we didn't have a very big house, and I knew my kids could hear me, but I didn't care. And this first word that came out of those tears, the first word that came to my mind was regret.

Do I regret doing this? Foster care, adoption, all of this. And then the next word that replaced that one was the word gift. And of course, the first thought to my mind was, yeah, you know, and I felt like it was the Lord speaking. "Yes, Lord, I know, you know, we've been such a gift to these boys, you know, where would they be without my wife and I?" And in the gentle, loving way that God's voice always is, He said, "No, I'm not talking about you as a gift to them. I'm talking about how much of a gift they are to you." Oh boy.

And in a flash, I could see. I could begin to see the beauty of the cross that God had entrusted to me, that it was going to be a cross just like Jesus'. It was going to be heavy. It was going to be full of splinters. It was going to be rough around the edges. It was going to be hard to carry. But in the end, there would be redemption. There would be healing. There would be wholeness.

I began to think, how else would a man prone to anxiety work through so many opportunities to find peace? How would a man, that's an anxious man, that's what I'm describing, a man who worries, how else would an angry dad ultimately find peace? How else would a prideful dad find humility? How else would a broken man be confronted with his sin, find healing and hope? It was through day after day after day of experiencing the transformative effect of life

not quite like you plan it, and the way in which God uses every last bit of our lives and those crosses that He entrusts to us, He uses it to heal us and to make us whole, just like the cross that He carried, and just like the cross that He laid upon for the salvation, the healing, the wholeness of all of humanity. That was the day that I realized, really for the first time if I'm honest, that our crosses can be quite beautiful.

So I don't know. I'm not sure what your cross looks like. But I wonder if you might look at it through the eyes of faith, that you might look at it through God's perspective, that you might even ask for that grace and for that gift. I do think it's important to say, in total transparency, that this moment of seeing my life in a new light with the eyes of faith, it wasn't magic as though, you know, at the snap of a finger, everything was different. It was actually the beginning of seeing my life from a new perspective.

Psalm 16

And so over the course of the last 15 plus years, I've had to keep coming back to the same truth, that all of this difficulty, pain, and suffering, there was another beautiful side to it of what God was doing in and through me through these experiences. And so this was another turning point. And it was around that same season that I had a chance to reflect on Psalm 16. And I would say this verse really has become kind of my life verse, that I'm looking at my life in a totally new perspective. And it goes like this. Let me read Psalm 16 for you, verses five and six. It says,

"Oh Lord, it is you who are my portion and cup. It is you yourself who are my prize."

That's the first verse, verse five. Now I don't know about you, but so often I think that God is the one who rewards us. And my expectation is that He would reward me with good things, with ease, with delight, with comfort, with joy, and that He would remove all of these difficult obstacles and crosses from my life. But part of what God is saying here through the psalmist is that God is our portion and cup. And it says that He Himself is our prize, that God is the prize. God doesn't simply reward us. He is the reward. And that, as it says in St. Paul's letter to the Romans chapter eight, that nothing can separate us from that prize. And so this is a gift. God is the gift. And wow, you know, when you start realizing that God doesn't simply reward us as though God is a means to an end, to some different end, that we begin to see the truth that God is the end, that God is the goal, that God is the prize, that He Himself is the prize.

Thanking Him For The Gap

So that verse started to shift some of my thinking because so often we think of God in a instrumental way, that He's there to get us to a new place instead of simply giving us Himself as a, not as a means. He's a means to certain ends, but ultimately, He is the great end, the great goal, the great prize. The verse continues in verse six.

"The lot marked out for me is my delight. Welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me."

What I hear here, what I hear in this verse is, *"The lot marked out for me is my delight. Welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me."* This to me sounds a whole lot like gratitude, like if the psalmist experienced the gap between expectations and reality, he filled that gap not with medication because of the pain, but he filled that gap with gratitude. *"The lot marked out for me is my delight. Welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me."*

I wonder if you've ever thanked God for the gap, if you've thanked God for that distance between expectations and reality. I wonder if you've taken the time to thank God for the difficulties, the pain, the crosses, the suffering. There's something beautiful, I think, on the other side of that exercise of faith.

And we know that St. Paul says very clearly in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, *"Give thanks in all circumstances."* And I think this is a bit of it. I think for us, not only are we called to simply accept difficulty and that gap in our lives, but actually what seems like it's more of an embracing. And gratitude, I think, helps to get us there.

And so that's the exercise I want to invite you into. When you get a minute later today, would you think about the thing that is most difficult in your life right now, the pain that may be most poignant. And if, perhaps for the first time, that you would express gratitude, even if it's just in the words that you say. Maybe you don't feel like it, or maybe you're not even ready to, but you want to be ready to, perhaps asking God, "Help me to be ready to say thank you for this difficulty in my life."

I'm not sure where you're at, but either praying that you'd be ready to or actually in faith thanking God for that difficulty. And sit with that. Put it in as honest words of gratitude as you can and see what it looks like on the other side. And I invite you into that process in a regular way, just like St. Paul says, to thank God in all circumstances. I know that has been healing for me. And this verse, Psalm 16 5-6 really points us in that beautiful direction, that the crosses, the difficulties, that gap between expectations and reality, the pain and suffering that all of us experience, that even in the midst of it all, there's something that we can still be so grateful for. And I invite you into that new way of looking at your life and those difficulties that come. Let's pray.

Closing Prayer

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God, we give you thanks, even for the hardest things in our life. We turn our attention to you and to say that we trust you, that you are our great end. And what that means is that the great end of our life is love. And Lord, lead us, guide us, and draw us closer to yourself in and through this experience. We pray all of this in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit.