

Over the last year, hundreds of thousands of people have died from coronavirus. Over the last year, millions more were hospitalized because of that virus. And a year later, thousands now test negative for the virus, but have continuing health problems because of the damage it did. And that was only the results of the pandemic. Over the last year, the many other afflictions of life that plague us in this world have not gone away. If we were not diagnosed with a disease in this last year, we certainly have a friend or family member in that boat. If we did not have ongoing health problems in this past year, we know people who have chronic ailments. And if we happen to have been blessed with a life that has been free of every kind of suffering in this past year, we certainly are friends with a Job or two. That is the reality of life in this fallen world.

But it is not the reality God wanted to exist when He said *“let there be light,”* nor how He intends things to remain forever. We see this fact in the same chapter of Genesis where God said *“let there be light.”* For God also said He made His creation *“good.”* And in Revelation, God said that He will one day restore His good creation, and *“wipe away every tear from our eyes.”* For now, however, we continue to live in an in between time in which God offers us healing from affliction, but does not always prevent affliction from coming upon us. This often leads us, with Paul, to say with the hope of faith that *“our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us,”* and with all of creation proclaim that we *“wait in eager expectation”* of what God will one day do to conquer our afflictions.

But all is not lost in the meantime. The good news of the gospel is that while God does not always prevent affliction from coming upon us, He still often does heal our afflictions. As we have moved through Lent, we have been looking at this reality using the topics of a book by Dudley Rutherford. It is titled God Has An App For That! and its topics are tied to the words of James in his epistle in the New Testament. Chapter by chapter, Rutherford lays out how in the book of James God offers us the grace we need to be delivered from difficulties that life in this fallen world brings about. On Ash Wednesday, for instance, we looked at how God offers us the grace we need to turn sorrow into joy. On Palm Sunday we looked at how God offers us the grace we need to restore a broken heart. And last night we looked at how God offers us the grace we need to invest in what really matters so we not only end up in heaven one day, but can experience the joy of kingdom life even in the midst of the afflictions of this fallen world.

As we arrive at the end of Lent in today’s Good Friday’s service, we heard Matthew tell us once again how Jesus died on the cross to deliver us from the sin and death that is ultimately the cause of all our earthly afflictions. But that deliverance from sin is not automatic. We must seek it with all our “heart, soul, mind, and strength.”

The same thing can be said for deliverance from the afflictions of life. We must turn to God, and follow His guidance, with all our “heart, soul, mind, and strength” in order to be freed from the difficulties of life in this fallen world. To take another step in doing that, I invite you to turn your thoughts to the wisdom of what I read from the book of James. For there we find the final topic in our Lenten series: downloading what Rutherford calls the modules of a spiritual app that can help us be “Healed of our Afflictions.”

The first module Rutherford says James lays out to help us be healed of our afflictions is this: We Must Buy Season Tickets. By this phrase, Rutherford is trying to help us see that we cannot just ask God for good times, and bypass what is painful or troubling. We must embrace ALL of life, with both its joys and its sorrows. That is because in this roller coaster process of ups and downs, God somehow brings about His work of redemption anyway, not just in us but also in those around us. One of the most prominent places we see this spoken about in the Bible is in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes. There, the writer tells us “*there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.*” The writer then goes on to say that there is “*a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build.*” And he says there is “*a time to weep . . . and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.*”

The reason the writer of Ecclesiastes says those things is that he has come to see - through experiencing affliction himself, that God uses His palate of light and dark colors as a Divine Artist to paint out His will not only IN us, but (if we are willing) FOR us, and THROUGH us. For in some mysterious way, the pain, the suffering, and the struggling are as important to the outcome as the joy, peace, and contentment we would prefer to always experience.

That the writer of Ecclesiastes came to this conclusion is especially worthy of our attention if it is true that the writer was Solomon (as tradition states). For this means that a man who had risen to the greatest levels of power, wealth, and honor in Israel had come to see that such things did not insulate him from affliction. Everyone, he says, is subject to affliction.

As a result, the only way we can make it through such a world is to take a long view or - as Rutherford puts it - buy season tickets! This means that we choose to take the good with the bad over the long haul of life. It means that we vow trust God even on dreary days. And it means that we continue to believe that Paul was right when he wrote that “*all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.*” For we can have faith that the sunny days will return. And we can have faith that one day all suffering will end, and God will as Revelation declares “*wipe away every tear from our eyes.*”

New York Giants fans saw what a difference approaching life in this way can make in the 2007 season. In 2007, the Giants had a mediocre year. They failed to win their division. And they only limped into the playoffs as a Wildcard team. But then they caught fire. They won four straight games. And the final win came over the undefeated New England Patriots in the Super Bowl. Fans who had not hung in with them all season, and had bailed out when things were bad, did not therefore have the same sense of deliverance from affliction that those who hung in there with them experienced on Super Bowl night.

The second module Rutherford says James lays out to help us be healed of our afflictions is this: We Must Call Upon the Cavalry. By this phrase, Rutherford is trying to help us see that God has not left us alone in our affliction. Instead, God has provided what John Wesley calls “the means of grace.” The means of grace include things like the sacraments, Bible reading, and prayer. But they also

include our interactions with other people within the Body of Christ in things like worship services, Bible studies, and fellowship events. This is because the Church's primary purpose is to be the principal means of grace by which God reaches out to us, walks with us, and transforms us into the beings He envisioned us being when He first created. And it seeks to do this by putting us in the very company of other people in whom He is doing the same thing. We see this in chapter 15 of Matthew. There we are told how Jesus fed the four thousand. In response to the ways people reacted, Jesus asked the disciples if THEY thought He was just a provider of bread or if they thought He was something more than that. When Peter responded that He was the Messiah, Jesus said "*on this rock,*" (that is, on Peter's confession), "*I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*" He said this because God does not intend our faith to be solitary, but to be practiced in a community relationship with others.

As a result, when we "call upon the cavalry" of the faith community, we are able to not only receive the grace we need to have our sins forgiven, but also to receive the support we need to be delivered from affliction. We see this in the passage from James. "*Is any one of you sick?*" he asks, "*He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.*" James writes that we should ask for prayer from those who are not elders as well, for "*the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.*" And James says we should "*confess our sins to each other and pray for each other so that we might be healed.*" From time to time, we have followed the guidance James gives by having someone come forward in worship, and gathering around them to anoint them with oil and pray for them. Each week, we have prayer groups that meet to lift up the needs of others to God. And multiple times a week, people in our church pray for needs that are brought before them through the prayer chain. And all of that is done so people might be delivered not only from their sins but also their afflictions.

The third module Rutherford says James lays out to help us be healed of our afflictions is this: We Must Turn to the One Who Holds the Keys. By this phrase, Rutherford is trying to help us see that it is not just "the elders of the Church" or even "the righteous" to whom we are turning when we ask someone to pray for us. It is to God to whom we are turning through those persons. This is because it is God alone who heals. It is God alone who produces miracles. It is God alone who gives life and overcomes death.

We see this in the verses that follows the discussion Jesus had with Peter in chapter 16 of Matthew. For after Jesus told Peter that "*I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it,*" Jesus went on to say "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

Keys provide the power to unlock things. So by using that imagery, Jesus was promising to give His followers the power to help Him unlock people's futures, the power to have a hand in helping others move from a future pointed toward Hell to a future pointed toward heaven, and - as we are speaking about today - the power to be healed of our afflictions. Not that we think the keys Jesus was speaking about are now our keys. The keys still belong to Jesus. We are just being given the

privilege of using them on His behalf. For He is the only one truly worthy of owning them, for He alone has the power to make them work. But when He places these keys in our hands, the keys which Revelation calls “*the keys of death and Hades*,” they unlock the doors that keep people bound not only by sin, but also by the physical and spiritual ailments that sin is ultimately responsible for causing.

As we think about these things on Good Friday, I would therefore remind you that God has promised that one day He shall do away with pain and sorrow, and suffering and death, and will “*wipe away every tear from our eyes*,” healing us from EVERYTHING that afflicts us. And I would remind you that while that day is not yet here it is coming. So, while we remain in this present fallen life, people may still get Cancer. In this present world, babies still may be born premature. And there may still be accidents, assaults, and all kinds of sufferings. And for some mysterious reason, God will chooses not to stop them from occurring.

But if we are willing to have faith by choosing to “buy season tickets,” and “call upon the cavalry,” and - most importantly - “turn to the One who holds the keys,” God can heal us of the afflictions that painful occurrences can cause. For Jesus, in dying on the cross, knows how much we need deliverance. And Jesus, having risen from the dead, now stands ready to offer as much deliverance as we are willing to receive - now and for all eternity. Let us then ask God to do just that as we sing our closing song, saying as a prayer of hope in particular the final verse: “*Abide with us, that so, this life of suffering over past, an Easter of unending joy we may attain at last.*”