

GOD TREATS BELIEVERS WITH EMPATHY- FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

Today's Text: Hebrews Chaps. 4

Extracts:

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need [Heb. 4: 14-16]

On Wednesday, June 14, 2017, in Alexandria, Virginia, USA, a gunman opened fire on several Republican members of the US Congress who were practising for the annual Congressional Baseball Game for charity, scheduled for the following day.¹ Steve Scalise, the House Majority Whip, from the State of Louisiana, was critically injured and had to be rushed for surgery in a hospital in nearby Washington, DC. Goodwill messages poured in from President Trump and other well-wishers but the one that drew the most attention came from Gabrielle Giffords, a Democrat, who was herself shot at a political function in her constituency in 2011. She survived and has since resigned from Congress. In her statement, she said, "I am heartbroken for the pain of Congressman Scalise, the other victims, and their families, friends and colleagues who survived... I also know the courage it takes to recover from a shooting like this, and I know Steve and everyone there this morning have such courage in great supply."

The best summary of Giffords' words is "I have been there and I know how it feels." That is speaking from empathy, not mere sympathy. In other words, you cannot understand why others behave the way they do until you put yourself in their place, that is, to look at their situation from their perspective before you judge them. In today's Bible verses, the author of the book of Hebrews has drawn our attention to God's patience with our waywardness because of the experience of Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, who came in flesh and paid a dear price for our sins. Let us find out more from today's interesting study.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: "2017 baseball shooting," from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Congressional_baseball_shooting and Paige Lavender, "Gabrielle Giffords Responds To Congressional Baseball Shooting," *POLITICS*, 06/14/2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/gabby-giffords-congressional-shooting_us_59412878e4b09ad4fbe47452

1. Background: Is the “ONE-WAY” road sign for pedestrians?

Imagine yourself, a motorist, driving on a congested dual-carriage highway, running north-south. You notice that all the vehicles on your side of the road are driving north, just as all the vehicles on the other side of the road are driving south. But look at the pedestrians on both sides of the road. Those on your side of the road are going both ways, north and south, just like those on the other side of the road. They are always on the move because they have no traffic jam problem. What does that suggest? It is that the ONE-WAY rule is not meant for pedestrians! They do not obey it. Therefore, if you were to bring up before such pedestrians the issue of the heavy traffic jams on that road, they would not appreciate what you were talking about because they would look at the matter from their own perspective. I remember one of my younger brothers jokingly said some years back, “There is no traffic jam in Lagos (Nigeria) until I buy my own car!” *The pedestrian is thus looking at the motorists’ traffic problems from his/her own perspective. That is sympathy in action.*

Compare that story with the reaction of Jesus when He came to the grave of Lazarus who had been dead for four days. The purpose of His coming was to raise Lazarus from the dead. But when He saw his sisters weeping and the Jews around them were also weeping, we are told, “Jesus wept.” The onlookers said, “See how He loved him!” [Jn 11: 33-36]. *The Lord put Himself in the place of the bereaved family to appreciate their grief. He wept because He met them weeping. That is empathy in action.*

The Psalmist writes [Ps. 103: 10, 13-14]:

[The LORD] has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities ...As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him for He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.

To appreciate such show of mercy, let us take a cursory look at the history of the relationship between God and man over time. At creation, God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” [Gen. 1: 26]. He gave our first parents, Adam and Eve, free will to know the difference between good and evil [Gen. 2: 16-17]. Now, see how God reacted to sin from then to the coming of Jesus in human form. A few examples will suffice:

- When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they were expelled *permanently* from the Garden of Eden and became subject to natural death [Gen. 3: 19-24].
- As wickedness grew among our early ancestors, God brought a deluge which destroyed ALL humans and animals except the family of righteous Noah and the animals in the Ark [Gen. Chaps 6-7].

- For sexual immorality, of the class we now call same-sex marriage/sexual relations, Sodom and Gomorrah were razed with fire [**Gen. 19: 12-29**].
- For offering profane fire before the LORD, the sons of Aaron the priest, Nadab and Abihu, were struck dead *on the spot* [**Lev. 10: 1-3**].
- For striking the rock when God commanded him to speak to it, God prevented Moses from entering the Promised Land [**Num. 20: 8-12**]. Even when he pleaded for forgiveness and to be allowed to enter, God replied, “Enough of that! Speak no more to Me on this matter” [**Deut. 3: 23-26**].

That is the same God who allowed Peter (after repenting) to remain the head of the apostles even after denying Jesus three times! That is the same God who has not rained fire and brimstones on modern countries that have legalised same-sex marriage or congregations led by gay bishops. That is the same God who is now “longsuffering towards us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” [**2 Pet. 3: 9**]. What has made God to now look at us with so much empathy instead of sympathy?

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews has given us a most plausible explanation. The Word that was spoken at creation, that was with God, and is God “became flesh and dwelt amongst us... *full of grace and truth*” [**Jn 1: 1-14**]. What has that revealed about man? Let us pay attention to the following extract from Chapter 4 of the book of Hebrews [**vv. 14-16**]:

*Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, **Jesus the Son of God**, let us hold fast our confession. **For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.** Let us **therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need***

“Sympathize” as used here actually means “empathize.” Here is what Jesus Christ has done to win believers empathy from His Father:

a) *Jesus the Son of God took human form*

In the Garden of Eden, God told Satan (in the form of the serpent) that He would put enmity between him and the woman, between his seed and her Seed [**Gen. 3: 15**]. A woman has eggs not seeds which come from her husband. Indeed, the woman turned out to be Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, and her Seed turned out to be Jesus [**Matt. 1: 18-25, Lk 1: 26-35**]. He was born in the lowest human circumstances. He was born in a manger because there was no place for Him in the inns. He was raised by a foster father, Joseph, who was a poor carpenter.

With such a harsh and hard upbringing, what human situation do you think He will not understand? You may be poor and dejected, regretting the

circumstances of your birth. You used to be rich but you are now bankrupt and a beggar. You are homeless and now living in a shelter or under the city bridge. Jesus had seen it all! For example, when somebody asked where He lived, He said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” [Matt. 8: 19-20]. The creator of all things gave up His dignity, pomp and pageantry to take human form so as to understand you better and carry your load for you. That is why He *can* empathise with you.

b) Jesus died for sins He did not commit

Having appreciated that man could not save himself, Jesus chose to die in our place. He was tried on framed-up charges. He was arrested on Thursday night and by 9.00 a.m. on Friday, He was already crucified on the cross [Mk 15: 25]! What a kangaroo court! Even Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor that tried Him, knew that He was innocent [Jn 18: 38]. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him. By His stripes, we have been healed [Is. 53: 5]. “It is finished,” Jesus cried as He gave up the ghost [Jn 19:30].

So, what have you suffered that can compare with what Jesus had had to bear for you? You have been cheated out of your rights by virtue of your family, gender, age or race. Others have been given credit for your efforts and achievements. What are those compared to what Christ had had to bear to make you more than conquerors [Rom. 8: 37]? When you cry to God, He can empathise with you because He has seen His Own Son pass through a worse situation!

c) Now, God has become more patient with us!

We are told, “[Jesus] was in all points tempted as we are, *yet without sin*. Let us therefore come boldly before the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” [Heb. 4:16]. Paul reinforces this point in his first letter to the Corinthians where he states that God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, but with the temptation, He will also make us the way of escape, that we may be able to bear it [1 Cor. 10: 13]. The experience of the Son of God in human form has enabled God to appreciate our limitations. That is why He is now “longsuffering towards us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” [2 Pet. 3: 9].

From the forgoing, it is clear that we are a very lucky generation, compared to believers in the Old Testament. For example, God called most people of faith then “My servant” [Job 1: 8] and only Abraham His friend [Is. 41: 8; 2 Chron. 20: 7]. Yet, Jesus has said to us through His disciples, “You are My friends if you do

whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” [Jn 15: 15]. How lucky can you get? Would you want to miss such a privilege? What lessons can we learn therefrom to benefit maximally from God’s empathy?

2. Lessons for us

The following key lessons should be noted:

a) *Learn to also empathise with God!*

One good turn, they say, deserves another. If God now treats us with empathy, can we not reciprocate by also empathizing with Him? At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” [Matt. 5: 48]. Peter put it this way, “[As] He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct because it is written, ‘Be holy for I am holy’” [1 Pet. 1: 15-16]. How can we do that?

God has said, “Come now, and *let us reason together*...If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land” [Is. 1: 18-19]. Since God does not see as man sees [1 Sam. 16: 7], how can you reason with Him? ***You will have to upgrade to how He reasons!*** A good way to understand that is the way you communicated with your children when they were babies. Did you speak their language or your adult language? If you wanted to say, “Open your mouth!” did you say, “M-m-m-p-p-p”? You spoke to them as you would with adults! So, to reason with God, you are the one to upgrade to His level of reasoning! He has said that obedience is better than sacrifice [1 Sam. 15: 22]. Yet, we bombard Him with religion instead of obedience [Is. 1: 10-17].² ***You cannot empathise with God unless and until you can willingly obey Him.***

b) *Empathise also with your neighbours*

The word of God says, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” [1 Jn 4: 20]. Your brother is anyone that you interact with- ***family, neighbour, colleagues at work, fellow worshippers and total strangers.*** They will offend you, deliberately or carelessly. They will irritate you for no just cause. But how should you react?

First, God expects you to ***forgive and forget*** for “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” [Matt. 6:14]. Therefore, ***empathy requires you to put yourself in the place of the other party each time you take decisions that will affect them.*** As one popular

² http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_13/Goddesiresarelationshipnotreligion.pdf

saying goes, do not take away the ladder with which you have climbed up because you may need it on your way back! So, if you cannot empathise with others, ask a simple question, “What would Jesus do if He were in my position?” When the woman caught in adultery was brought before Him, He challenged those of her accusers who were innocent to cast the first stone. None was worthy! After she was left alone with the Lord, Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” [**Jn 8: 1-11**].

In sum, are you ready to behave like a true believer? Can you love God and humans without hypocrisy? Can you abhor what is evil and cling to what is good? Can you bless those who persecute you? Can you rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep [Rom. 12: 9-19]? God has invited you to come reason together with Him. He so loved you that He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus, to die for you [Jn 3: 16]. Now He can empathise with your weaknesses. He has not dealt with you according to your sins, nor punished you according to your iniquities. Instead, He now pities you as a father pities his children [Ps. 103: 10, 13-14]. That is the message for us in today’s study

3. Conclusion: Are you willing for His empathy?

Cornelius was a Roman military officer posted to Caesarea. He desired to know God in truth and in spirit. God led him to send for Peter. We are told, “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word... Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone forbid water, that they should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” [**Acts 10: 1-48**].

God is more interested in your salvation than you can imagine. Nevertheless, He will NEVER force you to get saved. You must be willing [**Is. 1: 19**].

God treats believers with empathy- for Christ’s sake! Are you willing to receive it?