

## MY RECENT EXPERIENCE IN HELL

Last week I had to endure what I consider to be hell for a nine-hour span. On the Tuesday I had to drive my mother-in-law to a hospital in the heart of downtown Toronto for a medical procedure. I always consider driving in Toronto hell, but to have to go right into the heart of the downtown makes it even worse. I know some people do not mind driving in Toronto, but I am not such a person. To make this experience of driving to Toronto even worse, I had to do it both ways in rush hour traffic. Google maps said it should take me 90 minutes to get to the hospital from my house. On the way there in the morning we experienced four major traffic delays that stretched the time of the drive to just over two hours. Coming home we experienced the same number of slow downs with traffic. Driving to and from Toronto is bad enough, but to have to do so in rush hour traffic makes it even worse.

Driving in Toronto was not my only experience with hell that day. It was also very hot and humid. I was not allowed in the hospital, and because the Province of Ontario was still in Step 2 of reopening, I could not go inside a McDonald's or a Tim Horton's to get a coffee, sit at a table, and do work. Instead, I had to find a bench outside the hospital and endure the heat and humidity from 10:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. It felt like hell waiting in the humidity that day, especially when my mother-in-law texted me to say they were running behind with day surgeries and her procedure would be about an hour or more later than scheduled.

I was not the only one experiencing my version of hell that day. Late in the morning I was approached by a man who was pushing a shopping cart. He started talking with me, and when he learned I was a minister he began to tell me his life story. He used to have a very successful contracting business in Toronto, but a few years ago fell on hard times. He currently lives in one of the shelters in downtown Toronto. He does get a disability pension to live on, but after he pays his monthly expenses to stay at the shelter it does not leave him with much. He then began to tell me some of the things that he sees and experiences on a daily basis. He talked about being surrounded by drug users, prostitutes, and violence. In fact, he told me just the day before somebody slapped him while he was sitting on a bench. He also spoke about the frustrations he has had dealing with various agencies and city councillors for help. He described his current experience as living in the hell of the end times. After hearing his story, I realized my experiences with hell that day in Toronto were nothing in comparison to what he was experiencing on a daily basis.

We all experience situations or times in our life when we feel like we are going through hell. Perhaps there have been some days through the pandemic when you have felt this very way. Other situations that arise in our lives can make us feel this way too. They are usually situations like I experienced that day in Toronto having to endure things that are uncomfortable, unpleasant, emotional, and difficult. Sitting on the bench outside the hospital that day I could see that the man I talked to and me were not the only ones experiencing hell. I saw the expressions on so many people's faces and knew that they too were experiencing the same thing that day: For instance:

- seeing the urgency on the part of paramedics trying to get patients out of the back of the ambulance as quickly as possible and rushing them inside to the ER,
- seeing family members outside the hospital worrying and anxious as they awaited updates on the status of their loved ones,
- seeing many other patients being brought in for procedures like my mother-in-law who were suffering at the moment,
- seeing various doctors and nurses come out for breaks and noticing the fatigue that being on the frontlines for 16 months has caused,
- seeing many homeless people come and go by where I was sitting,
- hearing siren after siren knowing an ambulance, a fire truck, or a police officer was rushing to help some person in distress.

A lot of people were having their own experiences of enduring hell that Tuesday in Toronto. As I said before, as unpleasant as my experience was, it was nothing in comparison to what all these other people were going through.

Two things helped me get through my experience of hell last Tuesday. First, was the gift of prayer and turning to God at so many points during the day. Any time I felt myself becoming stressed, impatient, or worried I just took a moment to pray and ask God for help. The second thing that helped me get through that day was knowing it would not always be like this. Yes, I had to endure the hell of driving to Toronto, and waiting outside in the humidity, but I knew it was for a short time. Once the procedure was over and I could start driving my mother-in-law back to Brantford, I knew that I would be leaving my experience of hell behind being in an air-conditioned car and heading home to where I am far more comfortable driving. Being Heaven-focused in the midst of our experiences of going through hell can be so helpful to us as it was for me.

One of the blessings we have as Christians is knowing that the suffering and hardships that cause hell for us on earth will not be present in Heaven. One of the passages in Scripture that reminds us of this truth is found in Revelation 21:3-4. When John saw the new heaven and new earth in his vision this is how he described it:

***I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God Himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.***

As Christians we can hold onto with certainty that the experiences that feel like hell for us now like sickness, suffering, death, loss and injustice will be, **no more in heaven**. Yes, we have to endure these things now being in a fallen world, but we do not have to experience these painful situations in heaven. We can also hold onto with certainty that knowledge that just as God will be present with us in eternity, He **is present with us now**. He is present with us when we cry, when we experience loss, or sorrow, or pain. He is comforting us and helping us through these moments.

It is this promise and reassurance that helped me as I went through my experience of hell in Toronto last Tuesday. I prayed as I drove there. I prayed once I arrived. I prayed many times as I sat on the bench waiting. I prayed again as I drove home. I prayed a lot of prayers that day, and each one helped reassure me of God's presence and help. This is what helped me to safely, calmly, and patiently endure my time going through hell that day. Being heaven focused as we go through our experiences of hell here on earth will help us get through these moments until we are in heaven for eternity.

We all have our share of experiences going through hell. Let us take the approach of being heaven-focused to help us get through them.

Keep safe and God bless

Pastor Dean

P.S. Nowhere in this message did I say being in a car with my mother-in-law for that period of time was hell also. How could I? My wife reads this too.

Thankfully, it wasn't!