

How Do We Face Suffering?

One of the most obvious facts of human existence is suffering. Daily it touches our lives in one form or another. Whether we want to or not, we cannot push it aside. The world is overflowing with it. Earthquakes claim hundreds of lives, volcanic eruptions tear down houses and bury communities. None of our days pass without some news of a massacre somewhere. Epidemic diseases and natural disasters remain a common part of life. All these tragedies do not differentiate between sinner and saint. There is also a great inequality in suffering. One person lives a long and healthy life with a happy family and a successful career. Another one faces debilitating illness, the loss of a child, and the collapse of his career. A ruthless criminal evades the law and enjoys a healthy life in luxurious surroundings, while a beggar knocks on his door in vain for help. In the Bible there is no greater contrast between the rich and the poor than the excruciating poverty of Lazarus eating the crumbs of the rich man's table. And if one could look behind the mask of individual faces which most people wear, one discovers sorrow or inward pain no one else knows. With some people, suffering can be seen on their faces. Others bear a burden in silence. To the onlooker, it seems a cruel and unjust world, where justice has no bearing on what really happens.

Many ask, "If God is all-loving why does He tolerate the appalling suffering that is so evident? If God is almighty, why does He not do anything about it? The Bible does not offer lengthy explanations on the whys and wherefores of suffering. The Christian faith does not depend on explanations either of the origin of suffering or the existence of evil in connection with a God who is believed to be both almighty and loving.

Our Heavenly Father

Our response to suffering is the realization that the holy and almighty God is not "a stranger" but our Heavenly Father. In spite of man's rebellion, God has not abandoned humanity. He has reached into this world with a mercy which no one deserves. It is only when we have turned from our sins in repentance to seek the Lord and have been reconciled to God, that we can turn to the Judge of all the earth and call Him "Father". Our heavenly Father cares for His children, guides them, protects them. Even in the darkness of pain and sorrow, His care remains the same. "A child may not be able to see his father as they walk along the dark road but he hears his voice and feels his hand," observes Herbert M. Carson. "Indeed he may be far more aware of his father's nearness in the dark than when he scampers ahead on a sunny afternoon. So the Christian needs to remind himself that his Father is still with him and, although he cannot see the Lord, the Lord can still see him."

Jesus and Suffering

When we turn to the Gospels for an answer to suffering, it is perhaps surprising that there is virtually no discussion why suffering should exist. The Gospels relate the ways in which Jesus responded in both word and deed to the facts of suffering. But He does

not offer a philosophical explanation. The keynote to the response of suffering in the Bible is the suffering of Jesus Christ. He was the man of sorrows and familiar with suffering (Isa. 53:3-4). He willingly accepted His own innocent suffering.

But His death on the cross was not His defeat. It is a matter of plain knowledge and fact that Christ has already won the victory over death and hell through His resurrection and ascension.

What does His life and death mean for suffering believers? We have a sympathetic Saviour who fully understands our pains, and so is able to meet us in our time of need. Because He lived a full human life, He does not view us from some detached position but rather from the stand-point of a fellow sufferer. He sees our suffering but not as an outsider. He understands it because He was one of us. "For we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

No Exemption

To believe that fame and success validates the Gospel is rejecting the great host of faithful witnesses who suffered for the sake of the Gospel (Heb. 11:31-39). Christians are not exempt from suffering. In fact, they should expect suffering and persecution as a norm rather than an exception. This expectation is in keeping with the warning of Jesus: "You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me" (Matt. 24:9). In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10). Suffering is a part of identification with the suffering and victory of Christ and is the foundation of our practical response to suffering. Our Lord calls us to take up the cross daily and follow Him (Luke 9:23). Our Lord even said, "And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). In other words, if cross bearing is not our way of life – rejected and slain daily – we are not truly the Lord's disciples.

Paul and Suffering

We are called to share in Christ's suffering, "becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10). In Paul's experience discipleship of Christ involves suffering. Although His victory is total and complete, it still has to be asserted and realized in individual believers. Paul testified of hardships experienced in his ministry (2 Cor. 6:8-10). The cross is at the very heart of his teaching. In his day the cross was the worst form of execution. Polite people would not mention a death on the cross in public. It was too gruesome. Yet Paul exclaimed, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world was crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14). Yet in all suffering and hardships the apostle Paul experienced the effective power of Christ. "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

Our Suffering

What meaning can we find in our own suffering? God can bring good out of our suffering. He can use it as a means of preparing us for the life to come. He can guarantee us that no Christian suffers in vain. Pain is, according to C.S. Lewis, God's "megaphone to rouse a deaf world." It is a means by which God shatters our illusion of self-sufficiency and prevents us from being satisfied with our own moral imperfections. For Lewis, pain is also one of the essential means by which God perfects "fortitude, patience, pity and forgiveness" in His children. Beyond all of that, one person's suffering can have a dramatic impact upon the character of others, arousing compassion and encouraging acts of mercy. In all the misery and sorrows of our time, we discover Him, Who is the Resurrection and the Life. Christ is real and present. He is with us. He stands behind us. He goes ahead of us, and will give us strength and encouragement as we seek to help those in need.

Suffering Neighbours

Compassion in the relief of suffering is the mark of discipleship. Especially as Christians, we never get used to the suffering in whatever form it takes. The Bible is realistic and concrete. People may call us foolish for spending time and energy on caring even for strangers, the prisoners, the poor, the slum dwellers. We cannot take the suffering of the whole world on our shoulders, but we can make a difference where we are. When we open our eyes to the needs right around us, we will be busy enough. Each person is our fellow human being, our neighbour. We cannot pass by a victim of an evil act as the Priest and the Levite did in the parable of the Good Samaritan. We show solidarity with the suffering as we are created in the image of God.

As Christians in particular, we are responsible to carry each other's burden. When one suffers, all suffer. Jesus calls His followers to live a life where we might get our hands and feet dirty and our egos deflated, but where life is much more real and exciting. Heaven-bound Christians are called to practical activity in the relief of suffering in the here and now. It is of interest that one of the few sayings directly quoted in Acts, which is in fact not recorded in the Gospels, emphasizes clearly that point: "I showed you that it is your duty to help the weak in this way, by hard work, and that we should keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus, who himself said, 'Happiness lies more in giving than receiving'" (Acts 20:35).

The Christian faith, then, is a faith of consolation and hope, both of which rest upon the believer's confidence in the Lord; the confidence that, however bewildering our present sufferings, God will fulfill His loving purpose for us in the end (Rom. 8:37-39).

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April, 2006