

The Cross and Suffering

(0800 - Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, fires, suffering.)

Why such suffering?

And what of the sufferings closer to home today, the sufferings of the diseased, of the handicapped, of the redundant, of the deserted, of the lonely, of the depressed, and of those who experience pain in their bodies?

Why doesn't God do something? (SP)

That has been the question with which men like Job in the Old Testament had been wrestling, long before The Lord Jesus walked this earth, and with which they still do wrestle. Job's friends thought he was being punished by God for doing wrong, but it was they who were wrong.

Yes, we have found answers about suffering in some cases.

Some suffering is due to human sinfulness. The greedy, the lazy, the reckless driver, the smoker, the heavy drinker, the licentious, and others, may bring trouble on themselves, and on other people.

The troubles of Syria, of Afghanistan, and so on are also due to human sinfulness; though often the relatively innocent suffer most.

The Lord Jesus warned us against concluding that those who suffer are worse sinners than others. Rather he said that their suffering must be a warning to us. He twice said "Unless you repent, you too will all perish". (Luke 13. 3, 5).

An answer to some suffering is that pain is a warning. Pain warns us not to damage our bodies or minds further.

But there seem to be no satisfactory answers to the questions of natural disasters, like earthquakes, or of the apparent inequality of so much suffering, like accidents or redundancy.

What the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, does give us however, is a number of answers about the value of suffering, particularly as we consider the Cross of Christ, in this last sermon in our sermon series on the Cross. Christians seek to follow the one who suffered for them.

In John Stott's book 'The Cross of Christ', he surveys six different ways in which we can learn from the Cross when we suffer. In what follows I have used his main points, and some of his Bible references, and I have added more of my own.

Firstly, we see in Jesus an example of patient endurance, indeed the supreme example of patient endurance. You are welcome to write these six headings down – you are unlikely to remember them all. The Apostle Peter wrote in his first letter in the New Testament about this: "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." Then Peter quoted from Isaiah 53.9 - "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." Peter went on "When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly". (1 Pet. 2.19-23).

Perhaps, like my deafness, you have to live with a physical handicap which is no fault of yours, or you have either to put up with a difficult boss or lose your job. Or a difficult neighbour from whom you cannot move, or a difficult relation, or physical pain.

We are called, in the words of the letter to the Hebrews, in the New Testament, to “Fix our eyes on Jesus ... who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”. (Heb.12.2-3). So firstly, in your suffering, remember Jesus’ suffering, and do not “grow weary and lose heart”. Patiently endure.

Secondly, suffering leads to maturity. The writer to the Hebrews had earlier written this about Jesus “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God ... should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering”. (Heb.2.10). The author of our salvation, to which he refers, is Jesus. But wasn’t Jesus always perfect?

Yes, Jesus was always perfect in being sinless. The same writer wrote later – “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.” (Heb. 4.15).

The writer is however saying that Jesus grew in his experience through suffering and temptation. His experience was made perfect through suffering.

And so can our experience be enhanced through suffering.

As James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote in his letter in the New Testament “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (Jas. 1.2-4).

In a similar way the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome “We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Rom. 5.3-4). Suffering develops us.

Now we may well weep when trouble comes our way, rather than rejoicing. But think back for a moment about earlier problems you have overcome.

Have there been times in your life which have been difficult – yet you have grown, matured, through passing through them? – exam failures, disappointments, being passed over for promotion, a broken friendship, a serious illness?

All these difficult times can lead to greater maturity. For those who have had quite a bit to endure, John Stott wrote: “There is always an indefinable something about people who have suffered considerably. They have a fragrance that others lack”.

Grow in maturity.

Thirdly, suffering can lead to fruitfulness. Thinking of his coming death, the Lord Jesus said “I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12.24). He was saying that the way of self-sacrifice will be the way of fruitfulness. The way of ease achieves little. The Cross of Christ is the supreme example of utter self-sacrifice, far beyond what any of us will probably be called to endure.

But what is Jesus calling you and me to suffer or to give up in order to serve him more fruitfully? Or in order to have more to give to God's work? Or in order to respond to his call to serve him in a different way, for less money, here or elsewhere?

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Suffering can lead to fruitfulness.

Fourthly, suffering can be made more bearable by thinking of what is to come. Look ahead to heaven. As we heard, the writer to the Hebrews wrote - "Jesus ... for the joy set before him, endured the Cross" (Heb. 12.2). When suffering comes, we need to look beyond it – to heaven. This was the context of some of the New Testament writing about heaven. Peter, in his first letter, wrote of suffering which he saw coming, but before writing of that suffering he wrote "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed at the last time." (1 Pet. 1.3-5).

In a similar way the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome – "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom.8.18).

So when suffering comes, we must try to "Fix our eyes on Jesus". We must try to take our eyes off our problems and look up to Jesus. For when we look at our problems in the light of eternity with Jesus, we see them in the right perspective.

When some part of my body ceases to work as well as it used to work, and when I have to stop doing something, I see it as one step nearer heaven. One step nearer heaven. Look ahead to heaven.

Fifthly, the Cross of Christ reminds us that God cares for us, and that he will provide all we need. Remember God's love for us.

Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome "He who did not spare his only Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom.8.32). The Father gave the Son for us. If you have turned to Christ, God is not going to reject you. Yes, at times he may seem far away, but that is a test to be endured.

Listen to what Paul goes on to say. We may know these words but we may not have stopped to think about them. Here are some things Paul says Christians may experience (Rom. 8.35) –

Trouble – that word can cover all sorts of things.

Hardship – financial hardship, no luxuries, the struggle to get by, difficult journeys.

Persecution – subtle forms of persecution can happen even in Britain.

Famine – some Christians in other parts of the world experience it.

Nakedness – we are a long way from that, but again some of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world may be experiencing it.

Danger – sometimes we may be necessarily exposed to it.

Sword – yes, death, in some countries some Christians are being murdered for their faith.

Paul writes that nothing, absolutely nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ our Lord." (Rom.8.39). In his love God will give us all we need.

A person who is not a Christian thinks just of this life. His or her mind is focused on what happens here. When a person turns to Christ it usually takes time for them to see things differently. But as Peter wrote in his first letter, the Christian is a foreigner in this world (1 Pet.2.11) – we have been made citizens of heaven. We need to adopt the viewpoint of heaven.

Rather than looking suffering of one kind or another as something to be avoided at all costs, or something to be ended as quickly as possible, though that is understandable, we need to see that from God's viewpoint it is something he has allowed, but it will not separate us from him, because he loves us, and will provide for our needs when we are suffering. Remember that God loves us. (P)

And sixthly and finally, the cross of Christ helps us in our suffering, because it reminds us that God suffers too. Recall Christ's sufferings.

The Old Testament prophets tell us at various times of how the sins of God's people gave God the Father grief and pain. The New Testament tells us that our sins grieve God the Holy Spirit (Eph.4.30).

But supremely it was on the Cross that God the Son suffered. He suffered the ultimate anguish of feeling forsaken by his Father: "My God my God, why have you forsaken me" he cried. (Matt.27.46). He is our God who has suffered for us – the suffering servant. He does not call us to endure anything like as much as he has endured for us.

So to sum up, when we suffer the Cross of Christ helps us to –

Endure patiently.

Grow in maturity.

Be fruitful.

Look ahead to heaven.

Remember God's love.

Recall Christ's sufferings.

Let us pray.

Silent reflection.

Prayer.