

Truth for Today

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The Problem with Pain - in a Wounded world

In Revelation 21:1-7 the apostle John writes: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

You may tell me that this portion of scripture speaks of the opposite of our subject today. After all, we are supposed to be looking at "The Problem of Pain in a Wounded World". Yet, in the verses quoted, we find one of the amazing purposes of God, namely, to take sinful and rebellious people and change them into a new people suited for His own presence.

It was ever the purpose of God to dwell with human beings and to have communion with them. He walked with Adam in the garden. He dwelt among His chosen people, Israel. Today, He dwells in Christians by the power of His Spirit. So much so, that Christians form the church, the House of God. In a day to come, He will bring the glory of His presence into the millennial temple. Finally, during the ages of eternity, He will dwell with men.

However, our wounded world is indeed a vale of tears. It is marked by death, sorrow, crying and pain. Each of these things relates to the judgement of God and takes us back to the early chapters of Genesis where we find that Adam was under one command from God – he was not to eat of the forbidden tree or he would die. Eve, whom God had given him as a helper, had been deceived by the serpent (the devil) and had eaten the fruit. Adam loved her more than he loved God and also ate of the fruit. So sin and death entered into this world.

We then find these three were also judged individually by God. The woman's ability to conceive was increased and so was the "painful labour" that accompanied childbirth. Adam's judgement included a bitter curse upon the ground. Adam would have to "painfully labour" in order for it to produce food. This toil was to be seen by the sweat of his face. As for his physical body, that was to go back into the soil from which it was taken in the first place. So the once perfect bodies of Adam and Eve were to be subjected to an ageing process that included pain, sorrow and death.

God in all His loving kindness and power created all things so that mankind could be blessed. But man rebelled; sin entered the world; and death came in through sin. Did God want this? No! He wanted the company of people. We can see how God felt when we look at the graveside of Lazarus in the New Testament. Arriving at the graveside, Jesus, the Son of God, groaned in Himself. He identified fully with all the sorrow that death had brought in. This is God's heart. It is no small wonder that it is written, "The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy." This shows us that judgement is His "strange work" (Isaiah 28:21).

It was prophetically written of the Lord Jesus, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows..." (Isaiah 53:4). We have a God who judges righteously, yet He Himself is prepared to bear our burdens. But He has done more than this! Do you remember the judgement upon the serpent listed in Genesis 3:14-15: "And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this...I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."

Here we find Satan found in the term "thy seed" and the Lord Jesus Christ is found in the term "her seed". Satan would be allowed to bruise the heel of Christ. However, Christ would be victorious and bruise the head of Satan. That is to say, when Jesus dealt with God's arch-enemy, Satan, He Himself would have to suffer. In order to do this, He had to become man. We read in Hebrews 2:14-15: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." Yes, through the suffering of His own Son, God Himself has also experienced suffering.

Furthermore, it is written of the Lord Jesus, "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). As a dependent man here on earth, the Lord Jesus learned the cost of obedience to God.

Today, Christians know that obedience to God means that they will suffer under the hands of people who are godless. It is written in 2 Timothy 3:12: "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." So believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are not excused from suffering. In fact, for those living lives that glorify God, suffering is increased. If you are considering becoming a Christian, then weigh up the cost! It means that you could well become a laughing stock, a point of derision. It may also mean a loss of family and friends. It will make you a target for people's hatred. On the other hand, it brings you honour from God and His people. It means that you are a member of God's family with numerous, like-minded friends. It means that you are the object of the perfect love of God and the love of all who belong to Him.

Furthermore, we find in Hebrews 2:10: "For it became God...in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings..." From God's point of view, His Son would not have been complete as a man without having suffered. Now, as our Great High Priest on high, He can fully empathise with us in all our sorrow and sufferings. In so doing, He can pray and care for us accordingly. But in the same way, God wants us to be complete - so we suffer for a little while here, but we will be blessed with glory that is eternal in a day to come (1 Peter 5:10). So suffering under the hand of God shapes us into the likeness of Jesus.

As Christians, we are to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and meekness (1 Timothy 6:11). We often fail and sin instead. If our sin is not confessed and judged then God steps in to chasten us. Why? Because He loves us and wants us to live the best of lives! His chastening is threefold: first, it prevents us from going the wrong way; second, it promotes us to go the right way and be like Christ and, third, it punishes us for disobedience. In Hebrews 12 we read: "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." The result of chastening is found in verse 11 of the same chapter: "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

Just as pain and suffering form part of the learning process for a Christian, so they are for those who do not believe in God. It is very often the case that people who hardly give God a thought in their normal lives will consider Him when suffering touches them. How frequently, we hear people who are normally atheistic blame God for the suffering that grips them and others known to them. Suffering ought to be seen by them as simply part of the course of nature. In their view, it is, in the end, pointless. However, when God is placed into the picture, we can see that pain and suffering have an underlying purpose. The Christian can say, with the apostle Paul, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Being compassionate, God would teach us (and others) how to care for those less fortunate than ourselves. This is expressed in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 where the God who brought us comfort in our trials expects us to comfort others in similar circumstances in the same manner.

The ways of God are right and good. The consequences of disobeying God are seen in suffering. For example, if we abuse our bodies by smoking or by drinking excessive amounts of alcohol then disease will most likely follow. The same is true if we lend our bodies to promiscuity. Hence, this kind of suffering is self-inflicted and serves to demonstrate that we should obey God's revealed word. The Bible, which we believe to be His word, has been increasingly disregarded over the last fifty years in this country. Our National Health Service is unable to cope with the consequences. Other kinds of self-inflicted suffering are a result of man's inhumanity to his fellow man.

I know a Christian lady who was phoned by her doctor one evening. She was told, as gently as possible, that she had cancer. With sobbing, she knelt before God her Father and thanked Him for it. Can you believe it! Yet, in this way, she was defeating the enemy of God. What do I mean? Well, if we look into the book of Job, we find that Satan is often working behind the scenes and promoting pain and suffering. He is determined to undermine God and His purposes. This results in the people of God being a target for his mischief. In Job 1, Satan comes before God and Job is considered. Satan reasoned that Job was only a faithful believer because God sheltered him and blessed him in other ways. Satan said to God, "Put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face." We can immediately see how things that happen on earth can influence decisions in heaven. The rest of the angels who were present at the time were about to learn something about God.

The Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord to try the faith of Job through suffering. Satan used the Sabaeans and Chaldeans to rob Job and kill his servants. He used fire from heaven to kill his sheep and the shepherds. He used a great wind to blow down the building in which Job's sons and daughters feasted which resulted in their deaths.

How would you have reacted to these calamities? Job's response is found in verses 21 and 22. He fell down before God and said, "...The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." So it is written, "In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly."

Satan was not pleased with this result. He again approached God and proposed that Job himself should suffer. He reasoned that Job would then curse God. So, Satan was allowed, by God, to cause Job physical suffering; but was not permitted to take his life. The result was that Job was covered from head to toe with inflamed ulcers. His own wife told him to curse God and die. His so-called friends came with their own thoughts and accusations and added to his anguish. But Job would not deny God. The manner in which he dealt with suffering must have been amazing to those who witnessed it. Therefore, dear Christian, remember that unbelievers and believers are looking upon you in your suffering. May your faith stand firm. 1 Peter 1:7 gives us some encouragement telling us that "the trial of our faith will result in praise, honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." Christ suffered; but glory followed. It will be the same for us. However, as the story of Job continues, we find that this believer had a flaw - a pride in his own righteousness.

In Job 38, the Lord begins to reveal Himself to Job as the Creator. After which, Job declared himself to be vile rather than righteous. The Lord's servant then prayed for those who had tried to comfort him. It was then that God blessed him by doubling what he had lost previously.

Satan had looked upon these events as a means of dishonouring God and causing Job to fail. Instead, the trial of faith brought blessing to Job and honour to God. So, in His purposes, God allows suffering to teach us lessons about ourselves and about Himself. At the same time, other beings in heaven learn the wonder of His ways.

So we have seen that Satan is able to use people, sickness and natural calamities as a means to his wicked ends. However, the God who allows it all has the final responsibility; therefore, suffering must work out for blessing in the long term because God is love.

What of the lady with cancer? It turned out to be very aggressive and had spread to her bones and to other organs of her body. She has since suffered severe pain because of the illness and even through the treatment given. She has suffered the anguish that comes with the thought of leaving her family even though the embrace of the Lord is before her. In moments that overwhelmed her, she even doubted that God was in control and wondered why He didn't heal her as He healed those of old. At one point, the thought of euthanasia flashed across her mind; and was as quickly dismissed. Yet, she knows that the Lord passes through all this with her. He has promised never to leave her or forsake her. He assures her that all things work together for good for those who love God. Nonetheless, it has to be said that a message like this one today, doesn't really help much when pain is pounding the body and tormenting the mind.

In Matthew 24:5-9, we read the words of Jesus telling us of a future day that includes: wars and rumours of wars, famines, pestilences and earthquakes. He then speaks of the suffering and murder of those who trust in Him. Yet, He tells them not to be troubled! These things are all signs of a bigger picture. They will immediately precede the appearing of Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. As we see shadows of them unfolding around us today, we know that, one day, the judgement of God will be poured out upon this world that rejected His only begotten Son. In fact, the man, Christ Jesus, who suffered at the hands of wicked men and rose from among the dead, is the One chosen to judge this world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).

We have seen how pain is suffered by the woman in childbirth. Yet, God has, in a way, used this very suffering to introduce His own Son into the world in order to be its Saviour. That which had come under the judgement of God, He has been pleased to use as a blessing.

Again, with the coming of disease into the world, the accompanying pain served also to help diagnose the problem and promote its treatment. It is interesting that the creation itself provides so many remedies in this modern day – even though the ground was cursed. Without the pain to signal our illness, then further damage to our bodies would go unchecked and our lives would be cut short. So, in this way, pain is a benefit.

However, death takes us all! This ought to cause us to consider God and the possibility of eternal blessing. After all, God intervened in this world about two thousand years ago. His own Son became a man and suffered as a man even though there was no sin in Him. He did this voluntarily. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we find Him in agony of soul. We hear his prayer: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." As a man, He did not want to drink God's cup of judgement. Yet, He submitted Himself to the will of His Father. Without this submission, there would have been no eternal blessing for us.

He went on to be beaten by soldiers. His beard was pulled from His cheeks. His head was pierced with a crown of thorns. His back was ripped apart with the Roman scourge. He was then nailed to the cross and suffered the kind of death that involved the most excruciating physical pain. Prophetically, it is written of Him: "...His visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men" (Isaiah 52:14).

Yet, this was not His greatest pain because His soul also was made an offering for sin. Not only was He forsaken of men, but He was also forsaken of God. The full force of God's judgement against sin fell upon Him. God righteously dealt with sin in the death of the sinless One. Now, I, as a Christian, can say, "He bore my sins in His own body on the tree." That is to say, the punishment for my sins was taken by Jesus on the cross. If, by faith, I believe that Jesus has been punished in my place, then I can never be punished for those same sins.

In Acts 2:23 we read: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain..." The people thought they were doing this after the counsel of the Sanhedrin and other jealous Jewish rulers; but they reckoned without the foreknowledge and the counsel of God. God always had a plan for the life of Jesus. He also has a plan for each one of us. That plan may involve suffering.

The Lord Jesus Himself said that the greatest act of human love was to lay down one's life for his friends. The Bible tells us that Christ died for us when we were His enemies. This kind of love is divine and may be defined as that which always seeks the best for the good of its object. This was proved at the cross from which all our blessing flows.

How often we grieve when a loved one is passing through pain and suffering! God also is grieved by suffering and pain. Consider how God the Father must have grieved for His own Son as He suffered, bled and died! Then think how much the Lord Jesus grieves as Christians suffer in this world – they do indeed have fellowship in His sufferings (Philippians 3:10)!

God was also grieved at heart by the violence and wickedness He found in this world in Noah's day. He knew He would have to judge the world. The result was Noah, preached for a hundred and twenty years warning the people of coming judgement. The only ones who believed the message were those of his own family. At the same time, God had given the plans for the ark that could save them. How Noah and his family must have been ridiculed as they built that vessel! How long-suffering God was towards the people! Yet, to no avail. The judgement fell in accordance to God's word and only eight people were saved.

I recall a conversation with another Christian whose life has been racked with the pain from rheumatoid arthritis. The question "Why?" came up. This is a question that is very personal to her and to those close to her. It's a question that may not have a full answer until she is glorified; but we do have some consolation in the example of Christ. He, from His deepest agony, cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!" If the Jesus could seek an answer to His suffering, then surely we can! Let us never avoid the question; but look to God (who can do no wrong) for the answer.

We finish with the words of William Cowper who himself suffered a great deal of mental distress in his life:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.*

*Ye, fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

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