

Moments for YOU

Volume 49, Number 4

Theme: Suffering



THE BLAME GAME

Did you catch the news today? If you did, you were no doubt confronted with suffering. Some days the reports may be of the suffering of a few people, but often the stories tell of catastrophes affecting hundreds, if not thousands of souls. The fact that disaster, disease, and death are a part of our world is not a surprise to anyone. But where do they come from? Who's to blame when we suffer?

When a terrorist strikes or crimes are committed, most people blame the terrorist or criminal. When a hurricane or earthquake ravages communities, the laying of blame is somewhat harder, though some try to fault the forecasters who were unable to pinpoint the devastation, the engineers whose structures failed, or the rescuers whose efforts are perceived to be misdirected, inefficient, or late. However, when relentless famine brings a country to the brink of starvation, or disease takes the life of a child, more people start to shift their focus away from this earth and target their blame directly at God.

Is God to blame for the suffering in this world? What does the Bible have to say about it? A lot. The Bible views suffering from several different perspectives, and gives us a great deal of insight into its sources. In just one chapter of the Bible, Luke 13, Jesus speaks about suffering from *four* distinct sources. They are:

SOURCE 1: EVIL

It has been calculated that at least 80% of the suffering in the world is due to evil in one form or another. From robberies, rapes, and murders to genocide and oppression, millions

upon millions of souls have suffered (and still suffer) as the result of the evil actions of others. In verses 1-3, Jesus is questioned about a group of Galileans who had been killed by Pilate while they were worshipping God. What a great evil to hunt down and brutally kill one's rivals—especially while they were worshipping! Did Jesus condemn Pilate for his evil deed, or incriminate the sufferers? No! He rather used the opportunity to remind his audience (and us) of the need for repentance: “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (v. 3).

SOURCE 2: THE COURSE OF LIFE

If a bridge is engineered improperly, or an airplane is not well-maintained, or a building collapses and people are injured or die, is God behind it? Did the people affected share a common fate because they deserved it in some way? When presented with the example of a tower that fell, killing eighteen people, Jesus said “No” (vv 4,5). There are just some things in life that are a given: the law of gravity and the vulnerability of our bodies have combined to bring suffering (in some degree) to all of us. Can God miraculously intervene to spare people from such disasters? Absolutely. In fact, I look forward to finding out some day how many times He has protected me from one danger or another.

SOURCE 3: SATAN

The people of Jesus' day were highly religious and saw the intervention of spiritual forces in many day-to-day events. Sometimes this led them to false conclusions, as witnessed in John 9. But other times it allowed them to be more insightful as to the root causes of things than we are today. The fact remains that the world is

MOMENTS FOR YOU Vol. 49, 4th Quarter, 2005. A quarterly publication sent free upon request as the Lord provides.

Publisher: Moments With The Book, PO Box 322, Bedford, PA 15522. A non-profit, tax-exempt corporation. Visit us online at www.mwtb.org/mfy **Senior Editor:** Tim Johnson **Editor:** T. Don Johnson



a battleground in the ongoing war between good and evil—between God and Satan. Therefore we shouldn't be surprised that when a woman came before Jesus who had suffered with a physical ailment for eighteen years, He not only healed her, but went on to declare that she had been “bound by Satan” (Luke 13:11-17). Does this mean that all disease is from Satanic attack or demonic possession? Of course not, but it's a good reminder that in this life “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12).

SOURCE 4: GOD HIMSELF

Yes, God is responsible for some of the suffering in the world. Don't forget that He once judged mankind with a worldwide flood, killing all but eight people on the earth (Genesis 6,7; 2 Peter 3:5,6). In Luke 13 (vv. 34,35) Jesus alludes to the fact that God would soon bring destruction upon the city of Jerusalem because of the Jews' rejection of Him. In fact, there are several occasions throughout the history of the children of Israel when God allowed them to be overtaken by plagues and enemies as a direct result of their behavior. Christians have a warning given to them, too, in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 that physical suffering and even death can result from continuing in wayward paths.

WHO'S TO BLAME?

So who's to blame when suffering enters our lives? That question is very often unanswerable. The sources given above are not a complete list, but serve to illustrate the fact that it is not an easy thing to pinpoint the cause of every sorrow in the world. However, if we're continuing in a path that we

know is contrary to God's will, let us confess that to Him and turn back to the right way. If we feel that some evil person or force is behind the suffering, let us follow the example of Jesus Christ, “Who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously” (1 Peter 2:23). Whether we can point to a reason for the suffering or not, we can, as Christians, live in the power of the Holy Spirit, who brings forth the fruit of longsuffering and faith.

PARADISE RESTORED

Remember that if you step back and take in the “big picture” of the Bible, it tells us of *paradise created* in the first two chapters (Genesis 1,2), and *paradise restored* in the last two (Revelation 21,22). Suffering was not a part of God's original creation, nor will it be a part of the new heavens and new earth. From either of those accounts, however, read the adjacent chapters (Genesis 3, Revelation 20) and you will find Satan spoiling God's perfect world and then God dealing the final blow in return. Everything you read in between bears the mark of the curse and spiritual struggle. The crux of the Bible's message, the work of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, is where the solution to the problem of suffering is to be found.

In this issue we trust with the Lord's help to move your thoughts beyond the mystery of suffering (the “blame game”) to a realization that suffering is a part of our world today and that God has provided for not only the ultimate victory over it, but also makes Himself available to help us through it when it enters our lives (2 Corinthians 1:3,4; Hebrews 4:14-16; Romans 8:26-28).

—T. Don Johnson

HEAVEN'S HELP FOR TROUBLED SOULS

"Let not your heart be troubled!" Jesus says, for He recognizes the severe trials which burden our souls. Those who give counsel for the distressed often do not understand the problems they promise to solve; Christ knows our every sorrow. He was born in a stable and understands the needs of the poor and the outcast. To save His life, He had to flee into a foreign country! He can measure the suffering of refugees, religious and political exiles. Jesus spent the greater part of His early existence in lowly work, and realizes what the laboring man requires. He suffered from hunger, thirst, weariness. Has anyone better insight into the deprivation endured by millions of the famished and undernourished? Christ was persecuted by those whom He had helped, and because He felt the pains of spurned devotion, He can sympathize with you who have been deserted by someone whom you loved. He was slandered and defamed, although He was absolutely innocent of wrongdoing. Whenever false accusations blacken your character or baseless rumors disturb your peace, confide in Christ and know that He felt, though in a far deeper degree, the cruelty inflicted on you. He was burdened above all by inner agony in that unfathomable torture of His soul when He cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34). If it ever seems that God has left you; if you begin to doubt whether there is any salvation for your soul with its sins; if you are on the verge of despair, then, what an understanding, compassionate Friend Jesus proves Himself to be!

Much more than sympathy, however, is found in Christ. He can say, *"Let not your heart be troubled,"* because He forever broke the power of sin and completely removed its curse! You and I were under its rule, and without Christ we die in its slavery. How did Jesus remove the believer's sins? Not by overlooking, forgetting, or simply canceling them, but by suffering for them, paying the price of every transgression, satisfying the demands of a just and holy God, giving Himself as the redemption for all iniquity; by shedding His holy blood; by laying down His life as the ransom price demanded for the sinner's liberation!

Believe God and this promise of His Word: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1)! When you trust Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, your sins are removed "as far as the East is from the West" (Psalm 103:12). You are restored to grace, reconciled with God, and re-born into a new, blessed existence. *"Let not your heart be troubled!"*, Jesus assures you, because the same love that removes your sins can make the hardest blow the tenderest caresses, and use the galling bitterness of affliction for purposes of sweet, bounteous mercy. By the same love for your soul Jesus promises, not that you will escape trouble and that life will be a round of unbroken pleasure, but that through faith, "sorrow is turned into joy" as "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Job 41:22; Romans 8:28).

—Walter A. Maier, condensed

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

ETERNAL OR NOT?

For the believer in Christ, there will be an end to suffering: “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” (Revelation 21:4).

However, the unbeliever’s sorrow will know no end: “But the ... unbelieving ... shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone” (Revelation 21:8; 14:11). ❏

THE CROSS OF VICTORY

Man’s main concern with the dark fact of suffering is not to find an explanation: it is to find a victory. It is not to elaborate a theory; it is to lay hold upon a power. Even if you possessed the answer to the riddle; even if you had it written down to the last detail and could say, “There is the full and final explanation of the problem of pain,” that would not be enough, would it? For the pain itself would have to be borne. And that is why God gave us Christ.

We are so apt to think of God as standing outside the sufferings of this world, apart and aloof in the untroubled serenity of heaven. But when I look upon the cross; when I grasp that the Sufferer hanging there is not just another martyr dying for his faith, but God incarnate, then my heart sees that God is not outside the tears and tragedy of life. In every pang that rends the heart of man, woman, or little child, God has a share. God is in it with you, and you are in it with God—that is the message of the cross on the mystery of suffering.

There was victory at the cross for Christ. Focus on the picture: what

do you see? It looks, at first glance, pathetically like defeat. But you do not see the cross aright at first glance. You have to gaze and gaze again. Those who do that make a marvellous discovery. They see, not Christ the pain-drenched Sufferer, but Christ the mighty Victor. They see the blackest tragedy of this earth becoming earth’s most dazzling triumph. Listen to His own words: “No man taketh [My life] from Me.... I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:18). Hark to the ringing shout that broke upon the darkness: “It is finished!” Is that defeat? Yes, it is; but not Christ’s defeat—certainly not that! But the defeat of suffering, the defeat of the mystery of evil and of all the dark tragic powers of life.

If evil at its overwhelming worst has already been met and mastered, as in Jesus Christ it has, are you to say that it cannot happen on the infinitely lesser scale of your own life, by union with Christ through faith? That is the only answer to the mystery of suffering, and the answer is a question—“Will you let God in to reign?” The answer is not a theory. It is a life. It is a dedicated spirit, a fully surrendered soul. May that answer be ours! —James S. Stewart, condensed

SEEING FOR HIMSELF

The fact that Jesus came to earth where He suffered and died does not remove pain from our lives. But it does show that God did not sit idly by and watch us suffer in isolation. He became one of us. Thus, in Jesus, God gives us an up-close and personal look at His response to human suffering.

How did God-on-earth respond to pain? When He met a person

with pain, He was deeply moved with compassion. Not once did He say, “Endure your hunger! Swallow your grief!” When Jesus’ friend Lazarus died, He wept. Very often He healed the pain. Sometimes He broke deep-rooted customs to do so, as when He touched a woman with a hemorrhage of blood, or when He touched outcasts, ignoring their cries of “Unclean!”

The pattern of Jesus’ response should convince us that God is not a God who enjoys seeing us suffer. I doubt that Jesus’ disciples tormented themselves with questions like, “Does God care?” They had visible evidence of His concern every day: they simply looked at Jesus’ face.

The record of Jesus’ life on earth should forever answer the question, “How does God feel about our pain?” God did not give us words or theories on the problem of pain. He gave us Himself. A philosophy may explain difficult things, but has no power to change them. The Gospel, the story of Jesus’ life, promises change. As Cornelius Plantiga, Jr., has said: “We do not refer each other to the cross of Christ to explain evil. It is not as if in pondering Calvary we will at last understand throat cancer. We rather lift our eyes to the cross, whence comes our help, in order to see that God shares our lot and can therefore be trusted.”

—Taken from “Where is God When it Hurts?” by Philip Yancey. Copyright © 1990 by Philip Yancey. Used by permission of Zondervan

Unbelief leads us to interpret God in the presence of the difficulty, instead of interpreting the difficulty in the presence of God. Faith, on the contrary, raises the soul above the difficulty, straight to God Himself. —C.H. Mackintosh

GOD’S ANSWER

God’s answer to the problem of suffering is that He came right down into it. Many Christians try to get God off the hook for suffering; God put Himself on the hook, so to speak—on the cross. And therefore the practical conclusion is that if we want to be with God, we have to be with suffering, we have to not avoid the cross, either in thought or fact.

And when He sends us the sunrises, we thank Him for the sunrises; when He sends us sunsets and deaths and sufferings and crosses, we thank Him for that. Any fairly mature Christian can look back on his or her life and identify some moment of suffering that made them much closer to God than they had ever thought possible. Before this happened, they would have said, “I don’t really see how this can accomplish any good at all,” but after they emerge from the suffering, they say, “That’s amazing. God, with His grace, gave me the strength for a moment.” If it weren’t for suffering, it wouldn’t have been possible.

The answer, then, to suffering is not an answer at all. It’s the Answerer. It’s Jesus Himself. It’s not a bunch of words, it’s the Word. It’s not a tightly-woven philosophical argument; it’s a person. The Person. The answer to suffering cannot just be an abstract idea, because this isn’t an abstract issue; it’s a personal issue. It requires a personal response. The answer must be someone, not just something. In the end, God has only given us partial explanations. But He knew Jesus was more than an explanation. He’s what we really need.

—Taken from “The Case for Faith” by Lee Strobel. Copyright © 2000 by Lee Strobel. Used by permission of Zondervan

QUESTION & ANSWER

QUESTION: What was the “thorn in the flesh” that was given to the apostle Paul, and how could this thorn also be a messenger of Satan? (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

ANSWER: We are not told what the thorn in the flesh was. Some have speculated that it had to do with Paul’s eyesight (see Galatians 4:13-15). Others have thought that it affected his appearance and his speech (see 2 Corinthians 10:10). I believe there is a good reason why God did not tell us the exact nature of this “thorn in the flesh.” If, for example, we knew that it was Paul’s poor eyesight, we might be likely to limit the lessons learned from it to just people with poor eyesight. However, these lessons can easily be applied to all who endure painful burdens.

Paul referred to his thorn in the flesh as “a messenger of Satan” because Satan was allowed by God to bring it to pass. Remember that Satan is a very powerful enemy whose desire is to keep the Christian from glorifying the Lord. One of the ways he does this is by seeking to bring plenty of trouble into the believer’s life. This trouble can take the form of physical pain or personal loss. We see both brought to pass in the life of Job, a righteous man who suffered the loss of all his possessions and children, and endured intense physical pain from boils that broke out over his entire body. Notice in reading Job chapter 1 that God had placed a protective “hedge” around Job and it was not until God gave permission to Satan that he could break through that hedge and afflict Job.

In the end, both Job’s affliction and Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” benefitted these faithful men and brought glory

to God. In Paul’s case, this trouble served to:

- Keep him from being “exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations” that were given to him (v. 7).
- Make him realize that God’s grace was sufficient for him to endure any trial (v. 9).
- Remind him of his weakness in order that God’s strength could be realized (vv. 9,10).

Many today erroneously say that a faithful Christian never needs to suffer. However, God’s message to Paul (an Apostle who penned at least 13 books of the Bible) was that the trial would remain and that God’s grace would give him strength to endure it. In addition to this thorn in the flesh, Paul’s life as a Christian was marked by an enormous amount of suffering, including: financial loss, hunger, thirst, exposure, attacks against his life, beatings, being assaulted with stones, at least three shipwrecks, false accusations, imprisonment in Roman jails, and eventually execution (see Philippians 3:8; Acts 9:24; 2 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Even through all of this, Paul had tasted deeply enough of God’s grace to confidently declare: “All things work together for good to them that love God” (Romans 8:28). By placing his sight upon the Saviour in glory and weighing this life against the promises of the life to come, all of the suffering in his life became nothing but a “light affliction, which is but for a moment” and which “worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

—John D. McNeil

“We live by promises, and not by explanations” —Adrian Rogers

THE MINISTRY OF SUFFERING

The ministry of suffering may be considered as threefold: as it affects ourselves; as it affects our relation to other sufferers; and last and most important of all, as it affects our relation to God.

IN RELATION TO OURSELVES

Let us read 1 Peter 5:10, "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, *make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.*"

Here we see the grace and glory of God brought together for the purpose of cheering and comforting a suffering people. It looks as if in some way the suffering which is for "a while" has something to do with their perfecting. We know that suffering does not perfect the body, therefore the perfecting must be by way of spiritual development. There are graces which need the soil of pain and grief in order that they may be brought forth in us. We can conceive of love, joy, and peace abounding amid a scene of perfect calm, but it is not possible that *longsuffering* could be perfected under such conditions. Patience is a Christian grace of rare quality and highly valued by God Himself, but patience can only grow in the soil of tribulation.

IN RELATION TO OTHERS

Suffering is given us in order that we may be able to bear the heavenly blessing of comfort to others who suffer. This is made plain in 2 Corinthians 1:3,4: "Blessed be ... the God of all comfort, who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

The Holy Spirit is the Comforter, but He operates through human instrumentality. It is indeed a blessed privilege to be able to touch with the hand of love and sympathy some suffering member of the body of Christ and to pour the healing balm of comfort into some crushed and grief-stricken heart. But in order to qualify for this Christ-like ministry we ourselves must have been comforted of God. The words spoken may be few, the deed of kindness done may be small in itself, but if the grace of consolation flows in word and deed, and heart blends with heart in sorrow, then the weary sufferer is rested and refreshed as in the embrace of love divine.

IN RELATION TO GOD

The highest end ever reached through suffering is a prepared *fitness and enlarged capacity for the enjoyment of fellowship with God.*

He is the God of all grace, the God of patience and consolation, the God of love and peace, a God full of compassion and gracious, longsuffering, plenteous in mercy and truth. These attributes and excellencies are all in God. The entrance of sin into the world has provided the opportunity for their display through the activities of love in the work of redemption.

When the morning of the eternal day has dawned and the cry of pain and sorrow shall be heard no more, then shall we know the full meaning of all the suffering which is meted out to saints of God today. The weight and measure of eternal glory which shall rest upon the redeemed shall proclaim to all the universe the perfect wisdom of God, and the true value of the life of faith, lived amid the sin and woe of this wicked world.

—Condensed from "The Mystery and Ministry of Suffering" by Robert McMurdo