

Suffering & Pain

A difficult subject but I felt the Lord wants me to share this message.

In our sinful and fallen world, suffering of some kind is inevitable. No one can escape from it. No one is exempted from it. In fact the more one loves, the more likely one is going to suffer pain and hurt. Everyone has encountered pain and sorrow. Still for many sufferings and pains caused them to earnestly ask “where is God in all this?”

Suffering plagues many Christians seeking God for healing. Why does God heal some Christians and not others? Why is it that one is healed miraculously and the next one is not? Why allow death when the Almighty could easily heal? Why isn't every believer healed, and healed immediately? Why does God allow the Christian to suffer?

When Jesus died on the cross he made atonement for us. That atonement is full and complete. Embedded in it is the provision for our healing and restoration. Healing is indeed the “children's bread”. The theology is sound yet for many Christians faith brings no relief whatsoever. Some sicknesses go on for years and others resulted in death. This is the mystery of healing failures.

It is only natural to ask “why?” when events are so hurting. It is only human that we do not fully comprehend what God is doing and how our suffering and disappointment fit into his plan. Whilst I will attempt to bring a coherent insight into the issue, it does not minimize or take away the pain, frustration and disappointment one experience with the suffering and the lost of a loved one.

1. Sickness and Death are not always the result of Sin

Often well meaning Christians conclude that sickness is the result of sin. Christian beliefs do affirm that suffering and death can be God's punishment for sin.

Paul alluded to this belief in 1 Corinthians 11:30: “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.” In other words, physical illness had come upon some, and some were taken home to

heaven. Because the Corinthians did not judge sin in their lives, God was required to take disciplinary action against them.

However this is not a “all or nothing” simplistic approach. There is a huge difference between the suffering most of us encounter and the suffering-as-punishment described in the Bible. Effective punishment requires a clear tie to behaviour as was the case in the scriptures. As such one questions whether the pains most of us feel are indeed punishments from God. The Bible contains some stories of people who suffered but definitely were not being punished by God.

Paul in Philippians 2:27 mentioned the sickness of Epaphroditus: “Indeed he was ill and almost died”. Here was a man sick because he had been faithful discharging his duties (verse 30: “he almost died for the work of Christ”). It was not the result of sin or the punishment for sin.

Another reason for sickness and death can be explained in the story of Job. He lost his children and suffered horrendously not because he sinned but precisely because he was a righteous man. The reality for Job was the ongoing battle in the heavenlies. He was involved in a heavenly warfare. Although the situation wearied him down to the point of wanting death (Job 14:13), Job did not curse or blame God. The poor man had no idea that he was a party to the conflict, a pawn in the game of giants, if you like. He was finally vindicated by God himself who spoke to him out of the storm (Job 38).

The truth is sickness and/or death may not be the result of sin. Still most of us find it hard to be objective when we loss a loved one. He could rescue. He could heal. He could save. But why don't he do it? This sense of abandonment is a terrible experience.

Rabbi Kushner in an attempt to comprehend such a situation (he lost his son to *progeria*¹) wrote a difficult conclusion in his bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He had opted for a God that is not all-powerful and in fact “had a hard time keeping chaos in check”.

But God is all-powerful and all knowing. He is in control. He knows the pains and sorrows in our heart. He does not condemn us for that. He does not

¹ *Progeria*: rapid aging disease

shame us nor lecture us in our moments of sorrow. This was clearly evident in the story of Lazarus.

2. Lack of Healing does not mean Lack of Faith

Some Christians find theological problem with the lack of healing. One often hears statement such as, “God did not heal you because you lack faith” or “If you have enough faith, God will heal you”.

Jesus could not do any miracles in his hometown of Nazareth due to unbelief (Mark 6:5-6 and Matthew 13:58). This lack of healing was due to the lack of faith. Clearly a general atmosphere of unbelief is not conducive to divine healing. Still, Jesus healed on many occasions where the question of faith or lack thereof was never an issue (a good example is found in Luke 22:50-51 – healing of the servant ears cut off by an over-anxious Peter).

Some sorrows and pains never heal in this life. This was the case with Paul the Apostle. In 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, Paul asked God to remove “the thorn in the flesh” in his life. Three times he pleaded with the Lord to remove it but God refused. Instead God said that his “grace is sufficient for you.... My power is made perfect in weakness”. God gives Paul grace to endure a difficult condition rather than heal it. It was not for the lack of faith as the Apostle was perhaps the greatest “healer” in the early church.

There is an interesting twist to this matter. A fierce and insistent demand for healing sometimes betrays a lack of faith rather than an abundance of it. In Matthew 25:34-36, Jesus taught that Christians should take care of each other and the poor. Visiting the sick appears to imply that there will always be sicknesses around to inflict pain and sorrow. Should we then be judgmental on a person’s lack of healing or should we focus on care and concern for the individual?

In fact our emphasis on healing can make us harden or insensitive to the gentleness, thoughtfulness and imaginative care we are meant to give to people who are sick. This lack can be a serious one in that there is no other way to “minister” to the Lord.

God sometimes heals when we least expect him to heal. Other times, we expect him to heal yet he does not. Which leads me to my third point - it appears then that healing is not automatic.

3. Healing is not “Automatic”

From Philippians chapter 2, we learn that it is not always God’s will to heal instantly and miraculously. Healing is God’s prerogative. Epaphroditus’ recovery appears prolonged and gradual. He had no instant healing. In 2 Timothy 4:20, we see Paul mentioning a sick Trophimus being left behind in Miletus.

The story of the man paralyzed for thirty-eight years in John Chapter 5:1-15 is equally instructive. This man was lying at the pool of Bethesda when Jesus met him. The tradition was that an angel of the Lord would stir the waters and the first one in would be healed; hence there were many sick there. However, that day Jesus only healed one person. The Gospels recorded many occasions where Jesus healed the multitude (Matthew 8:16; 12:15 and Luke 6:19), yet on that day, he healed only one at the pool. Why did he not heal the rest of the sick people around? It appears that even Jesus could not heal at will. Jesus provided the answer to this lack of automatic healing in John 5:19: “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing”. The point is that God heals in his will.

Timothy was exhorted to “use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23). Thus it also appears that the Apostle could not heal at will.

Death is a mystery and it is inevitable (Hebrews 9:27). It will come sooner or later. For some death comes earlier and in an untimely fashion. Others wish for it to come sooner as they age into a difficult and painful existence. If Jesus cares when our loved ones die, how does he show it? It is not necessarily by stopping our loved ones from dying. One can safely assume that the Lord is not going to heal everybody and letting them live on and on. One can be healed of one ailment, but that brings about neither perfect health nor everlasting life without going through death. The fact is, Lazarus was raised from the dead but eventually he too had to die again.

God’s value system is different to ours. We tend to focus on the temporal whilst his focus is eternal. Eternal life through Jesus Christ is the Christian’s highest hope. Philip Yancey has a great conclusion when he said that, “in any discussion of disappointment with God, heaven is the last word, the

most important word of all. Only heaven will finally solve the problem of God's hiddenness".²

The heroes of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 from verses 35 onwards understand the value system of God. They see no deliverance from their afflictions but were "commended for their faith" (verse 39). From the story of Epaphroditus, we also learn that healing is a mercy from God and not something Christians can demand from God as a birthright. Having said that, death always leaves loved ones troubled and in anguish often leading them to question; "Is God unfair?".

4. Is God unfair?

God hates suffering and death. Jesus wept as he stood with Mary and Martha before the tomb of Lazarus. The tears of Jesus are a powerful reminder of the compassion of God as we, like Lazarus will suffer and die.

God does allow evil. God does let man suffer. We may not understand why someone had to suffer and die and why there should be so much evil in this life. Yet we must continue to trust and love God because his "thoughts are far greater than our thoughts and his ways are greater than our ways" (Isaiah 55:8-9). Yet God is in control. We must "let God be God". God does not need to explain himself to mankind. God's purpose and plan are different to ours. He is infinitely just and his timing is always right. Events will always work to our ultimate good.

The story of the three Hebrew children in Daniel chapter 3 is a splendid example of "Let God be God". They told the King that God will deliver them from the fiery furnace but if not, he is still God and they would trust in his ultimate wisdom (Daniel 3:17-18).

God did not create evil, and he too, hates the way it has disfigured his handiwork. However God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil at all. Hence, the death of his Son, Jesus Christ on the cross takes on a new meaning for Christians. He understands our pains and sorrows because he has been through that. God "did not spare his own Son" (Romans 8:32).

² Yancey, P. *Disappointment with God*, 244

God understands the pain and hurt when a loved one suffers and dies. Our sense of loss and sorrow when someone dies is in direct proportion to how much we love them. Our heartache would cease if we cared nothing for anyone and regarded everyone with detachment. Jesus showed his deep sense of love and loss when he wept for Lazarus. He also reacted to life's unfairness much like anybody else. When he faced suffering, he recoiled from it, asking three times if there was any other way (Matthew 26:37-43). God lives in the present with us. Although God knows the future, a better future, he still lives in the exact present with us because he knows how we feel.

The fact of suffering appears neutral. The important thing is what we make of it, both in terms of how we understand it and how we allow it to affect us. God is far beyond our human thought and imagination. A God who is fully comprehensible is no God. Can humans expect to understand his mind as if we are greater than he is? God is not unfair. Paul's example indicates that God's compelling purpose drives the life of the Christian to enable him or her to fulfill his or her destiny.

5. There is Redemptive Value in Suffering

Often pain and suffering can be a doorway for God to enter the Christian lives. C.S. Lewis suggests that "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience but shouts in our pains; it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world".³ God works through healing and the lack of healing. He works through our success and our failures. He also works through our sorrow and joy.

Suffering has meaning only because Jesus suffered. The Christian theology introduces a new reality to suffering by turning it into an arena of meaning and hope. This is built upon the example of Christ who "learned obedience through suffering" (Philippians 2:8). Paul spoke of the redemptive quality of suffering in Romans 5:3-4. He states that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope".

But for many the whole concept of God allowing suffering in order to mold his people or as in the case of Job to win a wager is totally unacceptable. What kind of a God is this?

³ Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*, (London, Fontana), 1940, 81

Rabbi Kushner is one who held this questioning view. He contends that this line of reasoning is simply to defend God but really does nothing to help the sufferer or to explain his suffering.

However, human quest and endeavors are seldom free from the potential of suffering. Even the process of a child growing up is saddled with degrees of pain and suffering. Parents know that the discipline of a child is not without pain. In many instances one has to be good by not being kind. One has to allow a child to stumble and fall in order that the child will grow in maturity and independence. It is at least possible then, that God is wise enough to foresee that we need some pain for reasons which we may not understand but which he foresees as being necessary to some eventual good.

Sorrows and pains can drive us to God and make us a better person. Many who did merged with a spiritual depth and maturity that has brought inspiration to millions.

The sorrows of death are never easy to handle nor can it be fully understood. Whilst death is unavoidable, the hope we have in Jesus Christ is the value we derive from it. Paul said, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” 1 Corinthians 15:19

Conclusion

The pain and mystery of healing failures are never easy to comprehend. After the death of his wife to bone cancer, C.S. Lewis wrote, “you never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you”.⁴ Still, Paul’s exhortation in Romans 5:3-4 clearly helps us to understand that it is not what happens to us that is most important but what we allow it to make of us.

The Christian has a great hope in having eternal life through Jesus Christ’s death on the cross. This eternal hope must put all things in perspective for believers. It allows the Christian to see with eyes of faith the invisible - the hope of glory. Heaven is no illusion.

⁴ Lewis, C.S. in Yancey, P. *Where is God When it Hurts?* , 20

Should we sorrow over the demise of a loved one? Indeed. Jesus sorrowed for Lazarus. Should we draw hope from our painful experience? Indeed. Just as our suffering on earth is real, so are the promises of God and the hope of eternal life.