

The Christian Perception of Suffering

The message the media is constantly invading our minds with is we should desire to go through life with the maximum amount of pleasure and the minimum amount of pain.

All suffering must be shunned.

Desensitise yourself with a few drinks.

When in pain, pop a pill.

Parents are led to believe that they are not good parents unless they can keep their children perpetually happy.

Over and above all these dreams and delusions stands the loving but lonely figure of Jesus Christ. Behind Him, casting a long shadow, is a tall cross, a symbol of extreme suffering.

To most people this symbol of suffering is a madness to be avoided.

In contrast Jesus tells us that suffering is part of the Christian way of life.

Romans 8:17 [NIV] *“Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, **if indeed we share in his sufferings** in order that we may also share in his glory.”*

Luke 14:27 [NIV] *“And anyone who does not **carry his cross** and follow me cannot be my disciple.”*

Discipleship of Christ involves suffering.

Many find it difficult to reconcile suffering with the existence of a loving God.

I do not have the answers to all the questions that arise from this perception of a loving God who allows suffering, but there are some insights in scripture that help us to have a correct Christian perception of suffering.

Suffering asks us to live with and love a God Whom we cannot fully understand.

Suffering asks us to, in faith, trust Him at the centre of our pain.

Sometimes we can, in hindsight, acknowledge that our suffering turns out to be for our own good.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 [NIV] *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me **a thorn in my flesh**, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. **Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.** But he said to me, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

Paul eventually understood the reason for his “*thorn in my flesh*” whatever that suffering was.

Ephesians 2:10 [NIV] *“For we are **God’s workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

God is working out a plan for our lives, and suffering is part of His creative work in our lives.

However we humans with our freewill foil God's plans and God has to bring good out of our evil and straighten what we by sin make crooked.

We can even hurt one another by the misuse of our freedom to choose and bring on them unintended suffering.

Job 3:20-26 [NIV] *“Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure, who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave? Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? For sighing comes to me instead of food; my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.”*

The righteous Job asked God to give him reasons for his suffering.

The answer God gave was seemingly a strange one.

Job 38:1-3 [NIV] *“Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.”*

God's reply was in the form of a personal manifestation of his wisdom and infiniteness.

What was Job's reaction?

Job 42:2-6 [NIV] *“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. [You asked,] ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. [“You said,] ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”*

God seems to be saying to Job and all of us who demand complete and satisfactory answers, *“this is not yet the time for answers but a time for trust.”*

God said trust in the powers I have by looking at the stunning world I have created.

There is a proverb that says *“when the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.”*

We need to be patient; when we are ready God will give us the answers.

When we are in the centre of suffering it is difficult to think clearly, suffering is deafening and distracting, leaving us no peaceful and prayerful place.

Because of this we need to have a clear perception of suffering in our pain-free moments of peace that will help us in our times of suffering.

In answer to Job's questioning, God responds with His own questions.

Job 38:4-18 [NIV] *“Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone, while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? “Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt’? “Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it? The earth takes shape like clay under a seal; its features stand out like those of a garment. The wicked are denied their light, and their upraised arm is broken. “Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses*

of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this.”

The majesty and power of God who reaches out to us, especially in our moments of suffering, asking us for an act of trust in Him.

This must be our “*mindset*” before suffering distracts us from accepting it as a part of our moulding by God.

The astronauts were trained to function in the weightless atmosphere of space by practicing in a “*simulator*”.

In just this way we need to practice the attitude of trust in God and submission to His higher wisdom.

Such practice will make our response in the actual time of suffering much easier.

God could have created a world free from suffering, but it would have to be a world without personal choice. Without freedom to sin by making wrong decisions that bring suffering in their wake.

God knew all the implications of the world He chose to create before He created it, God is **not** surprised by the world He made.

Genesis 1:26 [NIV] *“Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”*

Part of the “*image*” that humans have is an ability to choose what we do in life.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20 [NIV] *“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”*

Our choices will bring joy or suffering, peace or oppression, good or evil. God has ordained the end result of our choices, but given us the freedom to choose.

Joshua 24:14-24 [NIV] *“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we travelled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.” Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.” But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.” Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.” “Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied. “Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”*

This declaration of our forefathers was made in a time of victory and blessings, but their future actions showed it was not a heart-centred promise, that endured in times of trial and suffering.

Why?

They did **not** have the intimate relationship with God that is available to us through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:18 [NIV] *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

A clear perception of who we are and what God desires to share with us in the future will be a great help in a time of suffering.

Do we trust God who presents Himself as a loving Father whose desire is for the welfare of His children?

1 John 4:8 [NIV] *“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”*

God is love and everything He does is a result of His loving nature.

God cannot act in any other way than with unconditional love for all humanity.

God is a Being we can trust at all times.

A doctor who worked for many years in a leper colony once philosophised, *“thank God for pain!”*

He explained this by saying that lepers often lose fingers, limbs or even features of the face not because of the disease but rather the inability to experience pain, because of an absence of sensation, a numbness of their body.

So thank God for pain. It is there to alert us to the presence of danger or harm.

Likewise the various discomforts we experience may well alert us to our distorted and crippling attitudes.

Such lessons of pain can only be learnt when the pupil is ready.

This means that we must be ready to enter into our pain seeking to learn from it.

Acts 14:22 [NIV] *“strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.”*

Do not run from suffering or give in to any inclination to drug ourselves into dullness so we don't feel anything.

It is important to realise that suffering is a signal.

Suffering, in any of its many forms, is very often underlining a failure to love, either ourselves, our neighbour or our God.

The pain is our teacher, if we as pupils are ready to listen.

Suffering motivates us to change.

The most constant advice I have heard given to the families and friends of alcoholics is absolutely and resolutely to avoid the role of *“enabler”*.

Never cover up for the drinker or clean up his or her mess.

Don't make it easy for the drinker to live with his or her addiction. Let them feel the pain of their addiction!

People only change when the pain gets bad enough!

Like the birth of every baby, the bringing forth of human insights almost always involves the experience of pain.

We must try to come to the clear understanding that happiness and fulfilment in life **only** comes to us as a product of love and a life motivated by outgoing love and compassion for other human beings.

Suffering at times puts us into contact with reality as nothing else can.

Sometimes, for example, we instinctively slap the face of a hysterical person, the surprise of pain is designed to recall that person from hysteria back into contact with reality.

Suffering demands the "*real me*" stand up and be seen.

Suffering can make us either better or bitter. It all depends, of course, on our attitude towards suffering.

Suffering can make us face up to our true self as nothing else can.

Of course it is always possible to refuse these lessons, to run away from rather than enter into the meaning and lesson of our suffering.

"When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear."