

# A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON SUFFERING

Sin and death, as well as all human ills, are the result of the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:1-14). While we are not guilty of their sin, we do suffer its consequence (Ezek. 18:19-24). As a result death is here with all the necessary conditions of sickness and tragedy that bring it about. In addition, we live in an altered world, a world which is burdened with God's curse. We also live in an altered environment. The sinless environment originally experienced by Adam and Eve will never exist again in this world. Consequently, sin is modeled by all those we see (even our parents) from the moment of our birth.

There are many factors which contribute to the difficulties that we must face in life. The misuse of free will leads to choices that complicate our lives and usually the lives of those around us. We are affected by the way others use their freedom of choice. Suffering comes when we violate natural law, and it even comes when we violate man's laws. Our lot is complicated by natural disasters such as floods, fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, and such like. For the most part, these are things we cannot change. Therefore, how we see them and how we deal with them becomes very important.

While it is only hypothetical to ask, if we had the possibility of doing away with all pain and suffering in this imperfect world, would we do it? Since a great deal of human hurts come from the evil use or the unwise use of human freedom of choice, would we like it if freedom of choice were taken away? If God were subject to our beck and call and had to do everything that we asked Him to do, would we like that? I know that I have asked him to do things that He declined to do, and later I was glad that He refused my request. How much would we enjoy living in this fallen world without the benefit of the discipline and learning that come through adversity?

There are occasionally people who lose their ability to feel pain, at least in some portion of their bodies. As a result, they find themselves robbed of all the safeguards that that ability provides. No longer sensitive to pain, they may burn or cut themselves without knowing it. They may allow minor ailments to develop into grievous ones due to their loss of feeling. Although it hurts to feel pain, we are very thankful that we have that ability. By the same token, it is good to think of adversity as a way in which we receive signals which help us in the development and health of our spiritual lives.

It is uniquely the Christian who can in all things give thanks (1 Thes. 5:18), because God has promised He will never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6). He has promised to intervene before the trials we face become more than we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). He has given His word that He will bring blessing out of every situation (Rom. 8:28). Notice that He does not promise to deliver us from grief and suffering, but that He will through them bring blessing. Let us notice some of the forms that His blessings take.

Suffering and death help us understand the transient nature of life, and make it easier to realize life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions (Luke 12:15-21). It is adversity which helps us lay up treasures in heaven and helps us keep our hearts centered on heaven (Matt. 6:19-21). Both human history and the Bible demonstrate that we deal with adversity much better than we deal with plenty. The whole biblical history of the people of God is a repeated cycle of falling away during well being, and of turning back to God during times of tragedy and distress.

God uses the trials of life as instruments through which our faith is strengthened, and our walk becomes more steadfast (James 1:2-5). Notice that if we lack the ability to understand how this could be, we are instructed to ask God for the wisdom to understand, and He promises to give it!

Paul had to learn that suffering could be a way in which he was made aware that he should depend upon God, and not upon himself or his own resources (2 Cor. 12:7-10). When he understood this, he was able to glory even in his afflictions, and thereby grasp more securely the one thing God said was absolutely essential, His grace.

When we have faced adversity, God will use that experience as a means by which we can be more understanding and helpful to others in their times of difficulty (2 Cor. 1:5-7). In fact, this is one of the reasons that Jesus endured the trials that He had to face (Heb. 2:17-18, 4:15-16). In our times of affliction, we are emboldened to come to Him for help because we know He has been where we are and has faced the challenges of life that we face.

One of the hardest trials to accept is when we are unfairly dealt with by others. And yet, this may be seen as a wonderful manner in which to impress those about us with the power and strength of the Christian life (1 Pet. 2:12-19). As we develop this quality, we become like Jesus was in his time of ill treatment (Isa. 53:3-7).

There is also a disciplining in suffering that is an essential element in obedience, even as Christ experienced (Heb.5:7-9). When adversity brings us closer to God, it makes us more dependent upon Him, and allows us to see how faithful He is to His promise to aid, support, and protect us. As a result our love for Him increases, and our desire to be obedient to His will is enhanced.

Finally, our faithfulness in suffering becomes an important part of the victory that we gain as Christians (1 Pet. 5:10). As one writer has stated, "We are not called to triumph over suffering; we are called to triumph through suffering. The suffering we are called to witness to is not a helpless suffering begging for sympathy or an accusing suffering demanding guilt. It is the life-affirming suffering, a part of the dignity of human life that will not be denied." (R. Morgan, "Near The Cross," OTHER SIDE, Mar/Apr 1999).

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