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THE PROBLEM OF PAIN, Part 3

(From C. S. Lewis' book, with some paraphrasing)

“We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are rebels who must lay down our arms. The first answer, then, as to why humans have pain is that to surrender back to God the will which we have so long claimed for our own, is in itself, however it is done, a grievous pain. We remember this self-will as it was in childhood, the bitter, prolonged rage at every thwarting, the burst of passionate tears, the black, Satanic wish to kill or die rather than to give in. Thus the older type of parent was quite right in thinking that the first step in education is “to break the child’s will.” Their methods were often wrong: but not the necessity. And if, now that we are grown, we do not howl and stamp quite so much, that is partly because our elders began the process of breaking our self-will in the nursery, and partly because the same passions now take more subtle forms and have grown clever at avoiding death. Hence the necessity to die daily: however often we think we have broken the rebellious self we shall still find it alive. This process cannot be without pain.

The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it. We can rest contentedly in our sins and stupidities. But pain insists upon being attended to. **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.** (The preceding sentence is undoubtedly the most widely quoted statement in The Problem of Pain.) No doubt Pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.

Now God, who has made us, knows what we are and that our happiness lies in Him. Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can be looked for. It is just here, where God’s providence seems at first to be most cruel, that the Divine humility most deserves praise. We are perplexed to see misfortune falling upon decent, inoffensive, worthy people – on capable, hard-working mothers of families or diligent, thrifty little trades-people, on those who have worked so hard and so honestly, for their modest stock of happiness and now seem to be entering on the enjoyment of it with the fullest right. Let me implore the reader to try to believe that God, who made these deserving people, may be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed: that all this must fall from them in the end, and that if they have not learned to know Him they will be wretched. Therefore He troubles them, warning them in advance of an insufficiency that one day they will have to discover. Their happy life stands between them and the recognition of their need, and so He makes life less sweet to them.

God is humble, and He will have us even though we have shown that we prefer everything else to Him and come to Him only because of our pain and desperation. It is hardly complimentary that we should choose God as an alternative to hell; yet even this He accepts. This may explain why our Lord regards the vices of the dissipated so much more leniently than the vices that lead to worldly success. Prostitutes are in no danger of finding their present life so satisfactory that they cannot turn to God; the proud, the self-righteous, and even the honest, kindly, and temperate people are in that danger.

All arguments in justification of suffering provoke bitter resentment against the author. You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain, not writing books about it. You need not guess, for I will tell you; I am a great coward. When I think of pain - of anxiety...loneliness... misery ..scorpion-stinging pains...tortures...it quite overwhelms my spirit. If I knew any way of escape I would crawl through sewers to find it. But what is the good of telling you about my feelings? They are the same as yours. I am not arguing that pain is not painful. I am only trying to show that the Christian doctrine of being made “perfect through suffering” is not incredible. To prove it palatable is beyond my design.

The necessity of tribulation most of us have learned during the crises that led up to the present war. (C. S. Lewis served as an infantry soldier during the trench warfare of the 1st World War.) I am going along the path of life in my ordinary fallen and godless condition, absorbed in merry times with my friends, or a bit of work that tickles my vanity, a holiday or a new book, when suddenly a stab of abdominal pain threatens serious disease, or a headline in the papers threatens us all

with destruction, and sends the whole pack of cards tumbling down. Slowly and reluctantly I try to bring myself into the frame of mind that I should be in at all times. I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart, that my true good and only treasure is Christ. Perhaps, by God's grace, I succeed, and for a day or two become a creature consciously dependent on God and drawing my strength from Him. But the moment the threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys: I am even anxious to banish from my mind the whole experience that brought me to reality. God has had me for but 48 hours and then only by dint of taking everything else away from me. Let Him but sheathe that sword for a moment and I behave like a puppy when the hated bath is over – I shake myself as dry as I can and race off to reacquire my comfortable dirtiness, if not in the nearest manure heap, at least in the nearest flower bed. That is why tribulations cannot cease until God either sees us remade or sees that our remaking is now hopeless.”

SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ABOUT SUFFERING

God loves you and has a difficult plan for your life. Jesus never suggested that following Him and surrendering your life to God would make life easier. Rather, He said, *Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life and there are few who find it.* (Mt. 7:13) Whatever gave us the idea that being a Christian would protect us from suffering?

- *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though something strange happened to you.* (1 Peter 4:12) We are told in I Peter that suffering, described as a “fiery trial,” is for our testing and benefit, and that there is nothing strange or unusual about it. But Peter states that there is a type of suffering that is not appropriate for His people: *But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters.* (4:15)
- 1 Peter 1:6-7 speaks of some of the spiritual benefits of godly suffering: *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* God likens faith to gold, which goes through a refining process. God takes us through circumstantial fires, that true faith in Him might come forth.
- James gives more divine insight on the benefits that can be derived from godly suffering: *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.* (James 1:2-4) This doesn't mean that we are to enjoy suffering, but by faith we see that our trials are accomplishing something beautiful and eternal. Notice, it does not say “If” they come, but “When” they come. This is another indication that trials are a normal part of Christian experience. If we trust the Lord in the midst of adversities, He births patience, steadfastness and Christ-like endurance into our character.
- Rather than putting a mystical bubble around our lives to shield us from all suffering, believers are subject to more troubles than worldly people! Consider our Savior: When He was baptized in the Jordan, a dove came from heaven and settled on His lovely frame. *And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.* (Mark 1:12) Study this carefully. God affirmed Jesus as His Son and told him that He was “well pleased” with Him....and immediately “drove” Him out into the wilderness! The wilderness is defined in Scripture as a place of fiery testing. Snakes and scorpions were there. The burning sun by day and freezing nights were there. Hunger and thirst were there. Satan was there. And after 40 days of fasting and suffering, when Jesus must have been at the limit of His physical and emotional strength, the evil one came with temptations whose subtlety and power we can never plumb.
- What in the world was accomplished by this testing time at the beginning of Jesus' ministry? Luke 4:1 says that, *Jesus, being filled with the Spirit* (following His baptism in the Jordan) *was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.* After His time in the wilderness where He overcame the devil and his temptations, it is reported, *Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee....*(Luke 4:14)
- On the night before His crucifixion, in the upper room, Jesus assured His followers: *Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me....I am going to prepare a place for you.* (14:1) He also told them that the world would hate them just as it hated Him: *Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you.* (15:18)

2 Timothy 3:12 underlines the point: *Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*

The New Living Testament Study Bible summarizes the teaching of Peter about “Suffering in Christian Perspective” as follows:

1. We should not be surprised when suffering comes. We should expect an ungodly culture to respond with hostility, mockery, discrimination, and even violence.

2. God has a purpose for us in suffering: It brings us into fellowship with Christ, who suffered before He was glorified.
3. We need to commit ourselves to doing what is right when we face suffering. When difficulties come our way, we must live exemplary Christian lives.
4. Our loving response to enemies in the midst of trials can be a powerful opportunity to share our faith.
5. We need to remember in our trials that God is both sovereign and faithful. He controls all the circumstances of life, and we don't need to fear that a trial will come our way that can separate us from Him and His love.

One of the most beautiful and strengthening statements on the subject of suffering in all of the Bible is found in 2 Corinthians 4, and remember that these words were written by a man who, again and again, had been beaten, scourged, rejected, imprisoned, and who would very soon be killed for his faith: ***That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.***

LIKE A CURVE IN A WATERFALL

In his book, Miracles, C. S. Lewis used an analogy that captured my imagination. He wrote: "We all live in secondhand suits and there are doubtless atoms in my chin which have served many another man, many a dog, many a dinosaur. Nor does the unity of our bodies, even in this present life, consist in retaining the same particles. My form remains one, though the matter in it changes continually. I am, in that respect, like a curve in a waterfall."

Google informs that scientists disagree widely when they estimate the number of cells in the human body, but one school guesses that there may be 37 trillion cells! They estimate, further, that 50 to 100 thousand of our cells die and are replaced every second. (This explains how a bloodhound follows a convict's trail through the woods. It is following a trail of discarded cells.) The cells in our epidermis, our skin, are replaced after about a week. The cells lining our stomach, because of the acid, every five days. Our red blood cells last about four months. Our bone cells last about 10 years. It is estimated that we get an entirely new body about every seven to ten years. (And some of us could surely use a new body about now.) Thus we are like a curve in a waterfall. And remember that every individual cell contains that intricate double-helix DNA code.

This gives us deeper comprehension of the declaration in Colossians 1: *Everything was created through him (Christ) and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.*

In view of this ongoing miracle, we will either be convinced that there is a God, or we will deify Nature and the Environment.

WHAT EXACTLY DOES IT MEAN TO BELIEVE?

The Bible makes it clear that salvation, being made right and acceptable to God, is not something we can earn but that it is a gift. We receive that gift by faith, by believing in the Good News about who Jesus was and what He did for us.

But what does it mean to believe? It certainly means more than to believe that there is a God. James says that even the demons believe that, but that doesn't make them Christians! (James 2:19)

As I read and study the New Testament, I run across a certain statement again and again, and each time I read it, it jars me and makes me stop and examine myself. The statement is connected to the word "**belong**."

What I am seeing is that for the first Christians a "believer" in Jesus Christ was a person whose whole orientation to life had been so transformed that he no longer had any claim on his own life. He now understood himself to be owned, lock, stock, and barrel, by the Lord. Consider a few verses from the New Living Translation:

- Romans 1:6 – *You Gentiles are among those called to **belong** to Jesus Christ.*
- Ro. 8:1 - *There is now no condemnation to those who **belong** to Jesus Christ (The NIV translates it, *those who are in Christ*)*
- Ro. 14:8 – *Whether we live or die, we **belong** to the Lord.*

- 1 Cor. 1:4 – *now that you **belong** to Christ Jesus.*
- 1 Cor. 6:18-20 – *You do not **belong** to yourself....God bought you.*
- Gal. 5:24 – *Those who **belong** to Christ have nailed their passions and desires to the cross.*
- Eph. 1:6 – *God poured his grace on us who **belong** to his dear Son...He purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.*
- Phil. 1:1 – *to God's holy people who **belong** to Jesus Christ.*

I have not even quoted all the teachings of Jesus where he called on his followers to take up their cross and follow him even to death, or the teachings of Paul, Peter, John, and James where they declared we were to live lives of radical obedience to the Lord. Nor have I quoted the verses that declare that believers are “owned” by Christ, that they are “slaves” of God, that they are “in Christ,” and that they have been “chosen to be His holy people,” etc.

God is full of grace, and the Bible makes clear that our growth as Christians is a process and that God is full of mercy when we fall short. But the idea that one can become a believer in Jesus Christ and continue to live as he did before he became a believer, as worldly people live, is a fiction, It is simply not in the Bible.

Through Christ God has offered us a life of love, joy, peace, and purpose. He has offered us deliverance from judgment and condemnation. He has offered us heaven.

The question for us is: Do we belong to ourselves, or do we belong to Him?

THE STRANGE PEOPLE GOD LOVES

It was probably about 35 years ago when I first learned about John Wimber and started attending his seminars. At one of the first ones I attended, I think in Anaheim, he and a large team had just returned from a ministry trip to South Africa. :

He shared the following story:

At one of the week-long meetings they held, the team held, the team stayed in a hotel and each night they walked several blocks to the church. Their walk led them past a large park, and a motorcycle gang was using the park as party-central. They stopped the first night and started talking with the gang members and their girls and invited them to attend the services. The gang members thought that was funny, they couldn't imagine that someone would seriously think they would attend a church. The leader of the gang was a huge man, probably 300 pounds and six feet, four inches tall, with black leather, gold chains, and a long black beard. He was a scary looking guy. John struck up a conversation with him, and in his gracious way told the man he really would like for him to come to the meetings. The next night when the meeting was nearly over, the big guy suddenly came in through the doors carrying one of the girls. She was unconscious from a drug overdose. He carried her down to the platform, put her down in front of John, and said, “Heal her!”

John said he was paralyzed for a few moments, but the team gathered around the girl and prayed, and she came around and was healed. (Sigh of relief!)

After that, the big guy came to the services each night dragging a different girl along with him, and they sat on the back row.

On the last night, John preached about the prodigal son, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit was very strong in the church. As the invitation time was about over, the big gang-leader got up, walked down the center aisle, and with every eye in the huge auditorium on him he stopped before John. With tears running down his face, he looked into John's eyes and said, “I never knew that God could love a man like me.”

God Bless

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