

How God Can Use Suffering

"My God, I've never thanked Thee for my thorns. I have thanked Thee a 1,000 x for my roses, but not once for my thorns. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross: but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Teach me the glory of my cross: teach me the value of my thorn. Shew me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. Shew me that my tears have made my rainbow."

Seldom does God use a person greatly who has not been hurt deeply.
- A.W. Tozer

Last week at the end, we saw that suffering was a preparation for believers to help others. For example, in 2 Corinthians especially, the apostle Paul speaks of the sufferings that he has endured, prepared him to help others by going through really rocky times.

That is, the way that suffering, granted that it is a fallen world, is sometimes used by God, in his providence, to prepare us to help others and to bring comfort with the comfort that we ourselves have been comforted with. Let's look at a few things that the Bible speaks about that we can conveniently locate under this mystery of providence.

Suffering as a temporal discipline.

Suffering is part of God's means of disciplining us. There are many passages that talk this way, perhaps none more straightforwardly than Hebrews 12, where we're told that every good father disciplines his child and God, in particular, always disciplines those whom he loves.

So much so that if God doesn't discipline you at some point, then you are (the language is very blunt) you're an illegitimate child, because his genuine sons and daughters will be disciplined. God is a good father. That's very strong language. That means that some of the things we face, some of the sufferings we face, are part of God's rebuke or punishment or toughening us up.

Sickness, may have nothing to do with punishment. For example, in John 9,

On the other hand, in chapter 5 of John's gospel, Jesus heals a man who has been paralyzed for 38 years, and after he is healed, Jesus says to him, "Go and sin no more. **By and large, when the church is most holy, there is most temporal discipline. One of the marks that** God is abandoning his people in judicial punishment is that there aren't many temporal judgments. It's as if God is saying, "Okay, go ahead, and do what you want.

So it's when the church is holy, just this side of Pentecost, that you get the Ananias and Sapphira episode.

So this means, therefore, that when we do suffer, we should not automatically assume that we're suffering as a direct consequence of some sin. We should at least ask the question of whether God is yelling at us through the megaphone of pain.

Hebrews 12 says, very emphatically, he does this because he's the perfect Father. He does it out of love.

Suffering that gives us authority in our witness.

Sometimes, granted that this is a fallen and broken world, how we handle suffering (by still trusting God) gives us a voice of immense authority in our witness.

In a tsunami a number of years ago, one of the people killed was a young Christian Danish chap and his wife who were there on their honeymoon. He was training for ministry in Denmark, which is an immensely secularized state.

His father was a recently retired minister in the Danish cabinet, whom everybody knew to be a Christian and thought he was a bit of an odd duck. There aren't many genuine Christian believers in leadership in Denmark. So this father was asked, on national television, how he was going to justify his belief in God in the light of losing his son and daughter-in-law (on their honeymoon, of all things) in a tsunami with countless thousands of others. How would he handle that?

On national television, he quietly said, "I don't know, except I do know that the God I serve sent his Son, who died most horribly so that I might be forgiven." Every time they pushed him, he went back to the cross. Every time. All of Denmark was stilled under the integrity of the man's quiet faith.

Then he would add something like, "Of course, I do know I shall see my son again. It's not a final goodbye because the Christ I serve, who suffered so much for me, rose from the dead.

in the mystery of God's providence, sometimes God uses suffering things to enable people to speak with a kind of clarity and credibility to a watching world which they would never, ever have were it not for those things.

suffering can make us homesick for heaven.

Sometimes, especially for those of us who have watched people die, we know that suffering can serve, in God's good providence, to make us homesick for heaven.

It can be a great mercy to go through just enough that you start thinking in transcendental terms, rather than acting, as too many of us do, as if this life is all there is.

God, in his providence, sometimes uses even these things to make us reorient our visions, hopes, aspirations, and sense of belonging.

suffering as an occasion to testify to God's grace and goodness.

Sometimes, these sorts of things also give us occasion to testify to God's goodness before a watching world: God's goodness, because he has taken us out of them, or God's goodness, because he's added more grace.

On the one hand, there is Psalm 40. the psalmist said he was in a miry bog. He was in a slimy bog, and God took him out and put his feet on a safe place.

2 Corinthians 12, there is the apostle Paul with this thorn in the flesh, this messenger from Satan. He prays earnestly that God will take it away, and God says, Nope! Not going to. So Paul prays some more, three times, earnestly. God says, Paul, my grace is sufficient for you.

Therefore, Paul says, "I will the more readily glorify in my weakness. I will boast in my weakness that the strength of Christ may be manifest in me. Paul has actually got to the place in his suffering where he sees that the weakness (which God himself, in his sovereignty, is putting him through) may be an advantage, so that Paul will learn that God's strength is manifested in our weakness.

Insights from the centrality of the incarnation and the cross, including the resurrection and all that flows from it. I wish we had the time to go through passage after passage where biblical texts speak of the person and work of Christ. When I was a boy, we sang:

Christians who are thoughtful can never think of their sufferings apart from Christ's sufferings as he faces, in his own limitless person, the judicial wrath of his father that his own people might go free.

Do you remember the spectacular scene in Matthew 16 and parallels where Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

Suffering and the Lost

What sort of comfort, then, can one give to those who suffer who are not Christians? One can often give all kinds of practical helps, show affection and kindness, but one should never, ever give false comfort. When dealing with a first-class reprobate who is dying, from whom you have no confidence that they know Christ in any sense, how dare you pat them on the shoulder and say, "Your suffering will soon be over"?

Finally, Christians who get to know God well and sense his comfort, by the Spirit poured out upon us in the wake of the cross and resurrection, do not, as a rule, think very commonly in terms of theodicy (that is, how to explain suffering). Christians who get to know to know God well do not think often in those terms, but instead in two others.

A. Confession. There is a wonderful example from Nehemiah 8 and 9. There, Nehemiah and the other leaders, the priests, lead the people in prayers of confession. The whole point of those chapters is they look through their sufferings, and they acknowledge that the sufferings that have come upon them have come upon them because of the sin and rebellion and idolatry that they and their fathers and their forefathers have demonstrated generation after generation.

The goodness of God. When Christians begin to understand this well, I think, they're much more inclined to speak of the goodness of God.

We pray, God, bring us back, again and again, to the cross. Help us to be willing to recognize our own blindness, our own myopia, our own smallness of understanding, so that even when we understand so little, we will understand, we will see, we will believe that you are great, sovereign, good, and trustworthy. All of this, heavenly Father, for the glory of your dear Son and for the good of the people for whom he shed his life's blood. In Jesus' name, amen.