

Hoping¹

*Then shall those powers, which work for grief,
Enter thy pay,
And day by day
Labour thy praise, and my relief;
With care and courage building me,
Till I reach heav'n, and much more thee.*

George Herbert, "Affliction IV"

There is nothing more practical for sufferers than to have hope. When a person has no hope, suffering becomes unendurable. The Bible provides us with the ultimate hope—a material world in which all suffering is gone—"every tear wiped from our eyes."

¹Then I saw a new earth (with no oceans!) and a new sky, for the present earth and sky had disappeared. ²And I, John, saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven. It was a glorious sight, beautiful as a bride at her wedding. ³I heard a loud shout from the throne saying, "Look, the home of God is now among men, and he will live with them and they will be his people; yes, God himself will be among them. ⁴He will wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain. All of that has gone forever." ⁵And the one sitting on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new!" (Rev. 21:1-5a NLT)

The Apostle John wrote these words to people who were suffering terrible persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian near the end of the first century. Their homes were being plundered and taken, they were torn apart by beasts in the arena as crowds watched. Others were impaled on stakes and while still alive covered with pitch and set on fire. John did not give them a message of revolt or revolution. Revolutions, even when successful, often lead to great(er) disappointment. He gave them the ultimate hope—a new heavens and a new earth. And it worked. The early Christians faced this suffering with great poise and peace. They sang hymns as they were torn apart by beasts and forgave the people killing them. And the more that died, the more the Christian movement grew. Why? Because others saw that these people died well. "These people have got something." They did, a living hope.

Humans are hope-shaped beings. The way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about your future. Two people can face the same circumstances, one without hope and the other with hope. The one without hope will wither and the one with hope endure. What do you believe will happen when you die? Rot? Is this world all the happiness you will ever have? Or do you believe in a judgment day when all injustices will be brought to light and righted? Do you believe in an eternal future of endless joy? Those are two utterly different futures, and depending on which one you believe in, you are going to handle your suffering in two utterly different ways.

An example of how a hope-filled future changes lives is the Negro spiritual. These songs were the mainstay of enslaved African-Americans. These songs deepened the capacity for endurance; it taught a people how to ride high in life, to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope and to use those facts as raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that the environment with all its cruelty could not crush. The believed the Christian faith and there knew that all their desires would be fulfilled and that no perpetrator of injustice would get away it anything. They had a hope that no amount of oppression could extinguish because their hope was not in the present, but in the future.

Our secular society tells us that this world is all there is, that the truths of the Bible are at best symbolic encouragements, at worst, wishful thinking or myths. "There isn't a Judgment Day that will put all things right but I still want you to live with hope and fearlessness." I would reply, "Let me get this straight. You tell me this life is all there is, and if we fail to achieve happiness here and now we will never find it at all. And I am still supposed to live with my head held high? Give me my old hope back. It didn't depend on political fortunes!"

¹ Material taken/quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, chapter 16.

None of us is likely to be thrown to lions and torn limb from limb as people cheer, and probably none of us will experience a life of servitude and slavery. If this Christian hope helped the early Christians face martyrdom and the slaves face injustice, surely it can help you face the pressures of day to day life!

Believers with this hope can face all types of difficulties, even death. If the death of Christ happened for us and he bore our hopelessness that now we can have hope—and if the resurrection of Jesus Christ happened—then even the worst things will turn into the best things and the greatest are yet to come.

Summary²

If we know what the Bible teaches about suffering and we have engaged these truths with our hearts and minds, then when grief, pain and loss come, we won't be surprised but can respond ways laid out in Scripture. In summary:

1. Recognize the *varieties of sufferings*. Some afflictions are brought on by wrong behavior; others by betrayals or as a result of attacks by others. Then there are the universal experiences that everyone faces regardless of how they live. A final form of suffering is the horrendous—mass shootings, evil dictators. Suffering may come as a combination of one or more these four types. Each kind of suffering comes with different feelings: the first brings shame and guilt, the second, anger and resentment; the third grief and fear; the fourth confusion and perhaps anger at God. These types of suffering call for some common responses, but each also requires its own specific response.
2. There are *distinctions in temperament* between people. We must be careful not to think that the way God helped others through the fire will be the same way he will help you. Affliction may result in feelings of isolation, self-absorption, condemnation, anger and "complicity" with the pain. These factors may be stronger or weaker depending on one's temperament.
3. There is *weeping*. It is crucial to be brutally honest with yourself and God about your pain and sorrow. Do not deny or try to control your feelings in the name of being faithful. Pour out your soul to God. He is very patient with us when we are desperate.
4. There is *trusting*. Although we are encouraged to pour out our hearts to God with emotional honesty, we are also summoned to trust God's wisdom (since he is sovereign) and his love (since he has been through it all before).
5. There is *praying*. Although Job did a lot of complaining and cursed the day he was born—he did it all in prayer. In suffering, you must read the Bible and pray and attend worship even if it is dry or painful. If you can't love God, you must *want* to love God or at least ask him to help you love him.
6. We must practice disciplined *thinking*. Meditate on Biblical truth and gain the perspective that comes from remembering what God has done and will do for you. Following the pattern in Psalm 42, practice "self-communion." This is both listening to your heart before God and talking to your heart. This is not forcing yourself to feel a certain way, but rather directing your thoughts until your heart, sooner or later, is engaged.
7. We must be willing to do some *self-examining*. One biblical image for suffering is the "gymnasium." While not all suffering is caused by our thoughts or actions, we must use the time of adversity to look at ourselves and ask—how do I need to grow? What weaknesses is this time of suffering revealing?
8. We must learn to *reorder our loves*. Suffering reveals the things we love too much or love God too little in proportion to them. Our suffering is often aggravated and doubled because we turned good things into ultimate things.
9. We should not shirk *community*. Suffering can isolate. The suffering members of the early church drew strength from each other. The "died well" not because they were rugged, tough individuals but because the church was a place of unparalleled sympathy and support. Our churches should be filled with people who support, not people like Job's friends.
10. Some forms of suffering, particularly the first and second listed above in #1, require skill at receiving grace and forgiveness from God and giving grace and forgiveness to others. When adversity reveals moral failure of character flaws, we must repent and seek reconciliation. When our suffering is caused by betrayal and injustice, it is crucial to learn forgiveness and forgive from the heart.

² Material taken/quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, chapter 17.