

VARIETIES OF SUFFERING¹

“The same sun that melts wax hardens clay.” Suffering does not deepen and enrich us automatically.

DIVERSITIES OF SUFFERING

There is a remarkable variety in the teaching of the Bible on pain and adversity. The shapes, causes and responses to adversity vary greatly. A one-size-fits-all prescription for dealing with (and helping others deal with) suffering is bound to fail because not only does suffering come in many forms, but the sufferers come with so many different temperaments and spiritual conditions.

This means that simple “how to” formula for dealing with people who are suffering just won’t work. Not only are our sufferings different but the ideas and thoughts that comfort and strengthen us vary greatly.

The Bible speaks of at least 4 types of suffering:

THE SUFFERING WE BRING ON OURSELVES: JONAH, DAVID

This type of suffering is caused by our own failures. (E.g. hardnosed business person eventually discovers she has fewer and fewer friends and her career is ruined; caused by her own hard-knuckled and foolish behavior.)

Jonah faced two traumatic experiences: in the belly of a great fish; the destruction of his “comforting vine” by worm and wind. Why? He was a racist. God used these experiences to show him the evil of his own heart. God was trying to wake him up.

David experienced a great deal of suffering as a result of his sins. God was trying to get a message through, “change your ways or lose your kingdom.”

Was God extracting retribution or punishment? No! But God often appoints some aspect of the brokenness of this world (cause by sin in general, Gen. 3; Rom 8:18ff) to come into our lives and wake us up so that we will turn to him. The severity depends on the heart’s need.

It is important to distinguish between a “David” experience and a “Job” experience. E.g., a Christian man who develops lymphoma compared to a man who gets engaged and breaks up 6 times because of a “personality flaw” in the girl. Perhaps a particularly brutal breakup will shake him to the core and finally let him see his personal problem.

Suffering and distress often serve as a wake-up call to change something. We may pray, “Cleanse me from hidden faults” (Ps 25); in general it is only troubles and difficulties that can reveal such things to us.

THE SUFFERING OF BETRAYAL: PAUL, JEREMIAH

This is suffering caused by good and brave behavior. Often suffering is the result of attack or betrayal by others. Most of Paul’s and Jeremiah’s suffering was caused by their commitment to do what God had called them to do. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, Paul catalogs his suffering. Jeremiah (20:1-6) was imprisoned for “speaking the truth to power.” There are many who beaten, imprisoned or even killed around the world today for similar reasons. It is very possible that you will become the object of an attack in your community or business if you are open about your commitment to an unpopular cause.

Betrayal takes place when a personal relationship goes sour. A person feels wronged and begins an attack to hurt you or damage your reputation. They may do it because they think it will advance their career or interests. Personal betrayals are very horrific and can cause you to want to give in to debilitating anger and bitterness.

This kind of suffering forces you to wrestle with issues of repentance and forgiveness. The temptation is to become bitter and hide your growing hardness and cruelty under the self-image of being a noble victim. It may be that confrontation and restorative justice is required, but it must be done without the spirit of vengeance lest this experience turn you into a worse person rather than a better one.

¹ Material taken/quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, chapter 10.

THE SUFFERING OF LOSS: MARY, MARTHA

This type of suffering threatens to overwhelm with grief. Suffering from loss is universal: everyone will face it sooner or later regardless of your behavior, good or bad. Decay and death are primary sources of this type of suffering. A biblical example is the loss Mary and Martha faced when their brother died.

There is great variety even within the category. It's one thing to lose a loving spouse after 50 years of marriage, quite another when someone with whom you have unresolved issues dies. Is it the slow decay of aging (!!) or the swift death of an accident?

While there may be a need for some self-examination in this type of suffering, as Christians our primary response must be to learn to direct our minds and hearts to the various forms of comfort and hope that our faith offers. We do not grieve like others (1 Thess. 4:13); we do not lose heart... for our light and momentary troubles are achieving an eternal glory that far outweighs them all (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

THE SUFFERING OF MYSTERY: JOB

The "Job" type of suffering may overlap with the ones listed above, but it is probably the one which troubles us most. This is the mysterious, unlooked for, and horrendous suffering that people most often call "senseless." Perhaps because it is so difficult to understand that the Bible pays particular attention to this type of suffering. Ps 44:17-19, 24

Psalm 44:17-26 The Message (MSG)

17-19 All this came down on us, and we've done nothing to deserve it.

We never betrayed your Covenant: our hearts were never false, our feet never left your path.

Do we deserve torture in a den of jackals? or lockup in a black hole?

20-22 If we had forgotten to pray to our God or made fools of ourselves with store-bought gods,

Wouldn't God have figured this out? We can't hide things from him.

No, you decided to make us martyrs, lambs assigned for sacrifice each day.

23-26 Get up, God! Are you going to sleep all day? Wake up! Don't you care what happens to us?

Why do you bury your face in the pillow? Why pretend things are just fine with us?

And here we are—flat on our faces in the dirt, held down with a boot on our necks.

Get up and come to our rescue. If you love us so much, Help us!

Many other psalms and the prophets echo these sentiments. The scripture provides a long detailed account of Job's struggle. His wealth, children and health were all taken from him within a short period of time. His wife no longer supported him. The book of Job makes it clear to readers that this was not due to Job's sin or someone's betrayal or even the normal cycle of decay and death. On the surface there is NO SENSE to Job's loss. When people experience horrendous, unusually severe suffering, it leaves the sufferer not so much filled with guilt, or resentment towards others, or pure grief---but with anger toward life and God himself.

Job, and his friends, tried to determine what sin had caused these tragedies; or at the very least Job sought a clear lesson from God that he was supposed to be learning. He wanted to know what there was in his life that was causing this.

But there was nothing in his life that God was after. In fact, that was the point of Job's suffering. He was being led to the place where he would obey God simply for the sake of who God is, not in order to receive something or to get something done. Job's suffering was not a chastisement or lesson aimed at changing a flaw in his life. The "lesson" was really a revelation about the whole tenor of his life and the need to base it fully, with all his heart, on God.

When this type of mysterious, inexplicable suffering comes upon us, our journey is a long one. It certainly may entail repentance, forgiveness, and fixing our eyes on our hopes. But Job-type suffering requires a process of honest prayer and crying, the hard work of deliberate trust in God, and what St. Augustine called a re-ordering of our love.

DIVERSITIES OF TEMPERAMENT

Suffering varies not only because of the external factors, but also the internal—the different temperaments of those experiencing the suffering. Simon Weil lists some of the internal marks of affliction:

- **Isolation.** Suffering creates a barrier between us and even our closest friends. One reason is that you suddenly sense a new gulf and almost everyone who hasn't experienced what you are experiencing. You no longer share the

common experience you previously experienced with others. Severe suffering turns you into a different person; you no longer feel an affinity with your friends.

The isolation can also be caused by friends who stay away. Why do they stay away? It may be just ignorance or it may be because they thought we brought this on ourselves or weren't wise enough to avoid it. In this way we can assure ourselves that it could never happen to *us!*

- **Implosion.** Intense physical suffering makes **you unavoidably self-absorbed**. You can't think about anything else, just how much it hurts and how to stop it. Inner pain can suck us down into ourselves; you and your needs are the only solid, real thing. It is a numbness, a fixation on what is happening to ourselves. Weil states, "Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dean man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell... During this absence there is nothing to love."
- **Sense of Doom, of Hopelessness and of Condemnation.** This comes in part from a hard-to-define, barely conscious shame. While we should feel guilty when we do wrong, we usually do. Even though the things we may have done wrong don't have any relation to our affliction, the affliction makes keenly aware of our flaws and fragility.
- **Anger.** It may be anger at one's self, bitterness against people, specific anger at God or general anger against the injustice and emptiness of life.
- **Temptation.** A temptation toward complicity. Suffering can "little by little, turn the soul into its accomplice, by injecting a poison of inertia into it." We become complicit with the affliction, comfortable with our discomfort, content with our discontent. "This complicity impedes all efforts he might make to improve his lot; it goes so far as to prevent him from seeking a way of deliverance, sometimes even...from wishing for deliverance." It can make you feel noble, and the self-pity can be sweet and addicting. Or the affliction can become a great excuse for all sorts of behavior or patterns of life you could not otherwise justify.

These elements explain how infinitely complex and variegated a condition affliction can be. It could be said that all these elements are present to some degree in any affliction. People of different cultures, genders, personalities process emotions differently. Same trouble, different responses, because there is a different identity structure within the heart.

DIVERSITIES OF PATHWAYS

Every affliction, then, is virtually unique. And it means that every sufferer will need to find a somewhat different path through it. When our loved ones suffer, we must understand that there is no one right way to get through it. There are no "pat answers."

John Feinberg's personal struggle illustrates this diversity. A theologian, he had written academic books giving the answers to the problem of suffering. He thought that as long as he had all the theological answers he could face affliction, "the sufferer would be satisfied." Later his wife was found to have Huntington's chorea, a progressive neurodegenerative disorder and that each of his children would have a 50-50 chance of getting the disease. He stated, "I had all the intellectual answers, but none of them made any difference in how I felt." It wasn't that these truths were of no value; he knew them in the abstract but now had to connect them to lived experience, to the actual affections and function of the heart. He found that biblical and theological reasoning can and does become important to the sufferer, but only after a great deal of hard inner heart work. D.A. Carson adds, "That is not to say, however, that the set of beliefs is irrelevant. It is to say that ... the Christian, to find comfort in them, must learn *how* to use them."

Feinberg's friends were much like Job's friends, giving pat answers, true statements but inappropriately applied. This became his list of "Things that Didn't Help." They were truths, but expressed unskillfully or offered at the wrong time, in an "unseasonable" manner. His list of "Things That Helped" consists also of truths but applied in the right order, in the right way.

As it turns out, there is more than one path through the valley. (Ps. 23:4)