The Value of Suffering: A Christian Perspective

Sue Bohlin looks at suffering from a Christian perspective. Applying a biblical worldview to this difficult subject results in a distinctly different approach to suffering than our natural inclination of blame and self pity.

This article is also available in Spanish.

There is no such thing as pointless pain in the life of the child of God. How this has encouraged and strengthened me in the valleys of suffering and pain! In this essay I'll be discussing the value of suffering, an unhappy non-negotiable of life in a fallen world.

Suffering Prepares Us to Be the Bride of Christ



Among the many reasons God allows us to suffer, this is my personal favorite: it prepares us to be the radiant bride of Christ. The Lord Jesus has a big job to do, changing His ragamuffin church into a glorious bride worthy of the Lamb. Ephesians 5:26-27 tells us He is making us holy by washing us with the Word—presenting us to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. Suffering develops holiness in unholy people. But *getting there* is painful in the Lord's "laundry room." When you use bleach to get rid of stains, it's a harsh process. Getting rid of wrinkles is even more painful: ironing means a combination of heat plus pressure. Ouch! No wonder suffering hurts!

But developing holiness in us is a worthwhile, extremely important goal for the Holy One who is our divine Bridegroom. We learn in Hebrews 12:10 that we are enabled to share in His

holiness through the discipline of enduring hardship. More ouch! Fortunately, the same book assures us that discipline is a sign of God's love (Heb. 12:6). Oswald Chambers reminds us that "God has one destined end for mankind—holiness. His one aim is the production of saints."{1}

It's also important for all wives, but most especially the future wife of the Son of God, to have a submissive heart. Suffering makes us more determined to obey God; it teaches us to be submissive. The psalmist learned this lesson as he wrote in Psalm 119:67: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees."

The Lord Jesus has His work cut out for Him in purifying us for Himself (Titus 2:14). Let's face it, left to ourselves we are a dirty, messy, fleshly people, and we desperately need to be made pure. As hurtful as it is, suffering can purify us if we submit to the One who has a loving plan for the pain.

Jesus wants not just a *pure* bride, but a mature one as well—and suffering produces growth and maturity in us. James 1:2-4 reminds us that trials produce perseverance, which makes us mature and complete. And Romans 5:3-4 tells us that we can actually rejoice in our sufferings, because, again, they produce perseverance, which produces character, which produces hope. The Lord is creating for Himself a bride with sterling character, but it's not much fun getting there. I like something else Oswald Chambers wrote: "Sorrow burns up a great amount of shallowness."{2}

We usually don't have much trouble understanding that our Divine Bridegroom loves us; but we can easily forget how much He longs for us to love Him back. Suffering scoops us out, making our hearts bigger so that we can hold more love for Him. It's all part of a well-planned courtship. He does know what He's doing . . . we just need to trust Him.

Suffering Allows Us to Minister Comfort to Others Who Suffer

One of the most rewarding reasons that suffering has value is experienced by those who can say with conviction, “I know how you feel. I’ve been in your shoes.” Suffering prepares us to minister comfort to others who suffer.

Feeling isolated is one of the hardest parts of suffering. It can feel like you’re all alone in your pain, and that makes it so much worse. The comfort of those who have known that same pain is inexpressible. It feels like a warm blanket being draped around your soul. But in order for someone to say those powerful words—”I know just how you feel because I’ve been there”—that person had to walk through the same difficult valley first.

Ray and I lost our first baby when she was born too prematurely to survive. It was the most horrible suffering we’ve ever known. But losing Becky has enabled me to weep with those who weep with the comforting tears of one who has experienced that deep and awful loss. It’s a wound that—by God’s grace—has never fully healed so that I can truly empathize with others out of the very real pain I still feel. Talking about my loss puts me in touch with the unhealed part of the grief and loss that will always hurt until I see my daughter again in heaven. One of the most incredibly comforting things we can ever experience is someone else’s tears for us. So when I say to a mother or father who has also lost a child, “I hurt with you, because I’ve lost a precious one too,” my tears bring warmth and comfort in a way that someone who has never known that pain cannot offer.

One of the most powerful words of comfort I received when we were grieving our baby’s loss was from a friend who said, “Your pain may not be about just you. It may well be about other people, preparing you to minister comfort and hope to

someone in your future who will need what you can give them because of what you're going through right now. And if you are faithful to cling to God now, I promise He will use you greatly to comfort others later." That perspective was like a sweet balm to my soul, because it showed me that my suffering was not pointless.

There's another aspect of bringing comfort to those in pain. Those who have suffered tend not to judge others experiencing similar suffering. Not being judged is a great comfort to those who hurt. When you're in pain, your world narrows down to mere survival, and it's easy for others to judge you for not "following the rules" that should only apply to those whose lives aren't being swallowed by the pain monster.

Suffering often develops compassion and mercy in us. Those who suffer tend to have tender hearts toward others who are in pain. We can comfort others with the comfort that we have received from God (2 Cor. 1:4) because we have experienced the reality of the Holy Spirit being there for us, walking alongside us in our pain. Then we can turn around and walk alongside others in their pain, showing the compassion that our own suffering has produced in us.

Suffering Develops Humble Dependence on God

Marine Corps recruiter Randy Norfleet survived the Oklahoma City bombing despite losing 40 percent of his blood and needing 250 stitches to close his wounds. He never lost consciousness in the ambulance because he was too busy praying prayers of thanksgiving for his survival. When doctors said he would probably lose the sight in his right eye, Mr. Norfleet said, "Losing an eye is a small thing. Whatever brings you closer to God is a blessing. Through all this I've been brought closer to God. I've become more dependent on Him and less on myself."{3}

Suffering is excellent at teaching us humble dependence on God, the only appropriate response to our Creator. Ever since the fall of Adam, we keep forgetting that God created us to depend on Him and not on ourselves. We keep wanting to go our own way, pretending that we are God. Suffering is powerfully able to get us back on track.

Sometimes we hurt so much we can't pray. We are forced to depend on the intercession of the Holy Spirit and the saints, needing them to go before the throne of God on our behalf. Instead of seeing that inability to pray as a personal failure, we can rejoice that our perception of being totally needy corresponds to the truth that we really are that needy. 2 Corinthians 1:9 tells us that hardships and sufferings happen "so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

Suffering brings a "one day at a time-ness" to our survival. We get to the point of saying, "Lord, I can only make it through today if You help me . . . if You take me through today . . . or the next hour . . . or the next few minutes." One of my dearest friends shared with me the prayer from a heart burning with emotional pain: "Papa, I know I can make it through the next fifteen minutes if You hold me and walk me through it." Suffering has taught my friend the lesson of total, humble dependence on God.

As painful as it is, suffering strips away the distractions of life. It forces us to face the fact that we are powerless to change other people and most situations. The fear that accompanies suffering drives us to the Father like a little kid burying his face in his daddy's leg. Recognizing our own powerlessness is actually the key to experience real power because we have to acknowledge our dependence on God before His power can flow from His heart into our lives.

The disciples experienced two different storms out on the lake. The Lord's purpose in both storms was to train them to

stop relying on their physical eyes and use their spiritual eyes. He wanted them to grow in trust and dependence on the Father. He allows us to experience storms in our lives for the same purpose: to learn to depend on God.

I love this paraphrase of Romans 8:28: “The Lord may not have planned that this should overtake me, but He has most certainly permitted it. Therefore, though it were an attack of an enemy, by the time it reaches me, it has the Lord’s permission, and therefore all is well. He will make it work together with all life’s experiences for good.”

Suffering Displays God’s Strength Through Our Weakness

God never wastes suffering, not a scrap of it. He redeems all of it for His glory and our blessing. The classic Scripture for the concept that suffering displays God’s strength through our weakness is found in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, where we learn that God’s grace is sufficient for us, for His power is perfected in weakness. Paul said he delighted in weaknesses, hardships, and difficulties “for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Our culture disdains weakness, but our frailty is a sign of God’s workmanship in us. It gets us closer to what we were created to be—completely dependent on God. Several years ago I realized that instead of despising the fact that polio had left me with a body that was weakened and compromised, susceptible to pain and fatigue, I could choose to rejoice in it. My weakness made me more like a fragile, easily broken window than a solid brick wall. But just as sunlight pours through a window but is blocked by a wall, I discovered that other people could see God’s strength and beauty in me because of the window-like nature of my weakness! Consider how the Lord Jesus was the exact representation of the glory of the Father—I mean, He was all window and no walls! He was

completely dependent on the Father, choosing to become weak so that God's strength could shine through Him. And He was the strongest person the world has ever seen. Not His own strength; He displayed the Father's strength because of that very weakness.

The reason His strength can shine through us is because we know God better through suffering. One wise man I heard said, "I got theology in seminary, but I learned reality through trials. I got facts in Sunday School, but I learned faith through trusting God in difficult circumstances. I got truth from studying, but I got to know the Savior through suffering."

Sometimes our suffering isn't a consequence of our actions or even someone else's. God is teaching other beings about Himself and His loved ones—us—as He did with Job. The point of Job's trials was to enable heavenly beings to see God glorified in Job. Sometimes He trusts us with great pain in order to make a point, whether the intended audience is believers, unbelievers, or the spirit realm. Quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada, no stranger to great suffering, writes, "Whether a godly attitude shines from a brain-injured college student or from a lonely man relegated to a back bedroom, the response of patience and perseverance counts. God points to the peaceful attitude of suffering people to teach others about Himself. He not only teaches those we rub shoulders with every day, but He instructs the countless millions of angels and demons. The hosts in heaven stand amazed when they observe God sustain hurting people with His peace."{4}

I once heard Charles Stanley say that nothing attracts the unbeliever like a saint suffering successfully. Joni Tada said, "You were made for one purpose, and that is to make God real to those around you."{5} The reality of God's power, His love, and His character are made very, very real to a watching world when we trust Him in our pain.

Suffering Gets Us Ready for Heaven

Pain is inevitable because we live in a fallen world. 1 Thessalonians 3:3 reminds us that we are “destined for trials.” We don’t have a choice whether we will suffer—our choice is to go through it by ourselves or with God.

Suffering teaches us the difference between the important and the transient. It prepares us for heaven by teaching us how unfulfilling life on earth is and helping us develop an eternal perspective. Suffering makes us homesick for heaven.

Deep suffering of the soul is also a taste of hell. After many sleepless nights wracked by various kinds of pain, my friend Jan now knows what she was saved from. Many Christians only know they’re saved without grasping what it is Christ has delivered them from. Jan’s suffering has given her an appreciation of the reality of heaven, and she’s been changed forever.

I have an appreciation of heaven gained from a different experience. As my body weakens from the lifelong impact of polio, to be honest, I have a deep frustration with it that makes me grateful for the perfect, beautiful, completely working resurrection body waiting for me on the other side. My husband once told me that heaven is more real to me than anyone he knows. Suffering has done that for me. Paul explained what happens in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

> *“Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

One of the effects of suffering is to loosen our grasp on this life, because we shouldn’t be thinking that life in a fallen

world is as wonderful as we sometimes think it is. Pastor Dick Bacon once said, “If this life were easy, we’d just love it too much. If God didn’t make it painful, we’d never let go of it.” Suffering reminds us that we live in an abnormal world. Suffering is abnormal—our souls protest, “This isn’t right!” We need to be reminded that we are living in the post-fall “Phase 2.” The perfect Phase 1 of God’s beautiful, suffering-free creation was ruined when Adam and Eve fell. So often, people wonder what kind of cruel God would deliberately make a world so full of pain and suffering. They’ve lost track of history. The world God originally made isn’t the one we experience. Suffering can make us long for the new heaven and the new earth where God will set all things right again.

Sometimes suffering literally prepares us for heaven. Cheryl’s in-laws, both beset by lingering illnesses, couldn’t understand why they couldn’t just die and get it over with. But after three long years of holding on, during a visit from Cheryl’s pastor, the wife trusted Christ on her deathbed and the husband received assurance of his salvation. A week later the wife died, followed in six months by her husband. They had continued to suffer because of God’s mercy and patience, who did not let them go before they were ready for heaven.

Suffering dispels the cloaking mists of inconsequential distractions of this life and puts things in their proper perspective. My friend Pete buried his wife a few years ago after a battle with Lou Gehrig’s disease. One morning I learned that his car had died on the way to church, and I said something about what a bummer it was. Pete just shrugged and said, “This is nothing.” That’s what suffering will do for us. Trials are light and momentary afflictions . . . but God redeems them all.

Notes

1. Oswald Chambers, *Our Utmost for His Highest,* September 1.
2. Chambers, June 25.
3. *National and International Religion Report,* Vol. 9:10, May

1, 1995, 1
4. Joni Eareckson Tada, *When Is It Right to Die?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 122.
5. Tada, 118.

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Living With an Eternal Perspective

Sue Bohlin considers several ways to develop a way of seeing our earthly life as part of the much bigger picture that extends into eternity.

What Does It Mean To Live With an Eternal Perspective?

Years ago, after spending his whole life on the mission field, a career missionary made his final trip home on a passenger ship. One of the other people on his sailing was a celebrity, and as the ship made its way into the harbor, all those on board beheld a huge throng of well wishers at the pier with signs and instruments to celebrate the famous person's return.



The missionary stood at the railing, watching wistfully, knowing that not a soul was there for him. He said, "Lord, I've served You my whole life. Look at all the recognition and revelry for that famous person, and there's nobody here for me. It hurts, Lord."

He heard the still, small voice say, "You're not home yet,

son.”

I love this story that helps me keep in mind the big picture that includes the eternal, unseen realm, and the long picture that extends into the forever that awaits on the other side of death.

The apostle Paul had a firm grasp on what it means to live with an eternal perspective. We can especially see this in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18—

> So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

In these verses, Paul provides three aspects of an eternal perspective that kept him from losing heart, despite living with profound physical persecution and assault such as being hammered with stones, whipped by a cat-o’-nine-tails, beaten with rods, and shipwrecked. He knew what it was to go without sleep, food or drink, sometimes he was cold and naked. The man *knew* what it was to suffer! (2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

But Paul had a sort of spiritual periscope that allowed him to “see above” into the spirit realm while continuing to “live below” in this physical world. He saw the contrast between our bodies and our souls, how earthly affliction prepares us for glory, and the need to focus on the unseen and eternal rather than the seen and temporary.

Paul’s Eternal Perspective

The apostle Paul showed us in 2 Corinthians 4 that he understood what it was to live with an eternal perspective. He

understood that our bodies can be growing older and weaker on the outside, while our spirits are growing stronger, brighter, and more mature on the inside. I get that; as a polio survivor who has also needed both my hips replaced, I am very aware that I keep getting weaker the longer I live in this compromised body. But I also know the beauty and glory of Jesus making me more and more like Himself, day by day, so by His grace I can keep growing in vitality and joy on the inside! I may have diminishing energy in my body, but my spiritual energy capacity keeps getting bigger!

Paul also understood that the hard parts of living in a fallen world, much less living with the pains and trials of persecution, are merely a "light and momentary affliction" compared to what's waiting on the other side: an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Even horrible pain on earth is still "light and momentary" compared to the infinite length and glory of eternity with Christ. We can see how the Lord Jesus modeled this understanding as He faced the cross, and Hebrews tells us that He "despised its shame" because He was valuing the glory of the joy set before Him (12:2)

And Paul understood that we can shift our focus from the visible and temporary things of this world, to the unseen and eternal things of the spirit realm. We have to work at seeing the unseen and eternal. We do that with the eyes of our hearts (Ephesians 1:18). We do that by training ourselves to view everything through the lens of God's word.

I've been working at developing an eternal perspective for years. For me, it's about connecting the dots between earthly things and heavenly things.

I look at earthly things and wonder, "How does this connect to the spirit realm? How does this connect to what is unseen and eternal?" For examples, look at my blog posts, such as Glorious Morning Glories [probe.org/glorious-morning-glories/], Back Infections and Heart Infections

[probe.org/back-infections-and-heart-infections/], Cruise Ships, Roller Coasters and Attitudes [probe.org/cruise-ships-roller-coasters-and-attitudes/], and Blowing Past Greatness [probe.org/blowing-past-greatness/].

Jesus' parables are the world's best examples of using the physical to provide understanding of the eternal. He was always connecting the dots between the things He was surrounded by—different types of soil, lost coins and sheep and sons, a wedding banquet—and explaining how these things related to the Kingdom of Heaven.

One of the most important prayers we can ask is, "Lord, help me see Your hand at work"—and then intentionally looking for it. For years I have kept a "God Sightings" Journal where I recorded evidence of God intervening in my life and the lives of others I have seen. I love to ask my friends and mentees, "Do you any God Sightings to share?" to help them identify the hand of God in their lives.

An Eternal Perspective on Suffering

As we talk about living with an eternal perspective, let's remember that we live in a permanent battle zone of spiritual warfare. We have an enemy who hates us because He hates God. He and his fellow demons continually attack us with lies and deceptions. Some are personal, but many of them constitute the cultural water we swim in.

When we forget that we live in a culture of anti-God, anti-truth, it's like going out in our underwear, needlessly exposing ourselves. Living with an eternal perspective means staying vigilant, donning our spiritual armor (Ephesians 6:10-18) and using it to fight back against the lies of the enemy.

Spiritual warfare is HARD. It means suffering. Sometimes physical, most often mental—because spiritual warfare is waged

on the battlefield of the mind. But the suffering of spiritual warfare is temporary, because the vast majority of the believer's life will be spent in heaven where warfare of all kinds will be a distant memory.

But for right now, suffering is still part of life, and developing and maintaining an eternal perspective really helps us remind ourselves of the larger truth. Romans 8:18 says that "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Being faithful when we're suffering means glory in the future.

My friend Holly has battled cancer three times on top of the horribleness of cystic fibrosis. She suffers literally every day of her life. Yet, with a beautiful, godly stubbornness, she reminds herself of what is true: "What if the worst thing happens? Oh wait, it can't. The worst thing that can possibly happen to anyone is to die apart from Christ and spend eternity in torment. For me, to die means instant joy and relief in the arms of my Savior!"

Like Joni Eareckson Tada, my friend Chris has lived with quadriplegia for almost fifty years. What comes to mind when I think of Chris is two words: "sweet joy." Because of his eternal perspective, Chris knows his suffering is temporary, and he chooses not to give into self-pity. People are drawn to him like honey because of how he radiates Jesus.

And then there's me. I've lived with a disability my whole life. As a polio survivor, I have walked every step with a very noticeable limp. Living with an eternal perspective means that, by the grace of God, I know I will receive a beautiful, strong, perfectly healthy resurrection body in heaven. My polio days are limited, but my resurrection body days will be unlimited! Meanwhile, I get to see God use my disability for His glory and others' good in ways I never would have imagined. It really is okay!

Remembering the Long View

Another aspect of living with an eternal perspective is focusing on the reality that our time on earth is short, especially compared to the never-ending life on the other side of death.

One of my favorite questions is to ask, “A hundred years from now, when you are face to face with Jesus in heaven, what do you want to be glad you chose today? Indulging your flesh and doing whatever you think will make you happy right now, or making choices that honor God and bless other people?”

Probably my favorite question remains an essential part of my eternal perspective: passing everything through the grid of the great question, “In the scope of eternity, what does this matter?” [probe.org/in-the-scope-of-eternity/]The frustrations of traffic? Not getting our way? A loved one who does not know Christ? The answer determines what is worth getting upset about, what we should just let go, and where we should be investing time in prayer.

We can remember the long view by pre-deciding now that we will use our earthly days fully, engaged in ministry, as long as God gives us breath.

Years ago, my view of living with an eternal perspective was shaped by the story of a lady who decided to start college in her 70s. When they asked her why she would do such a thing when her life was basically over, she said, “Oh no! It’s not over! I’m preparing for the next part of my life in heaven! The more equipped I can get on earth, the more ready I’ll be for what the Lord has for me on the other side!”

Another lady was homebound because she was so disabled. She got the word out that every afternoon, her home was open for anyone who needed prayer. Some days it was like there was a revolving door, so many coming and going! She had a vibrant

ministry in the waning days of her life because she was determined to use her remaining earthly days fully, to the glory of God.

One of my friends is a TSA [Transportation Security Administration, part of the U.S. Government] agent at a major airport. She diligently reminds herself daily that every traveler who comes through the security line is infinitely valuable because they are made in the image of God, and Jesus died for them. She showers kindness on them because they are so important. One of her co-workers, for whom work is just a job where he punches a time clock, once told her, "In twelve months you'll stop being nice to everyone." We don't think so. (Especially since she's already had this job for several years.) She works at maintaining an eternal perspective, seeing the unseen.

In the time you have now, live well, to the glory of God. Keep reminding yourself that everything we do now has an eternal impact. Our choices, our behaviors, our words, ripple into eternity. Which is why we need to seek to do everything for the glory of God.

Eternal Perspective is What God Sees

As a mom of littles, Nicole Johnson was feeling sorry for herself when she met with a friend who had just returned from Europe. She writes,

> "My friend turned to me with a beautifully wrapped package, and said, 'I brought you this.' It was a book on the great cathedrals of Europe. I wasn't exactly sure why she'd given it to me until I read her inscription: 'With admiration for the greatness of what you are building when no one sees.'
>
> "In the days ahead I would read—no, devour—the book. And I would discover what would become for me, four life-changing truths, after which I could pattern my work:

> “1) No one can say who built the great cathedrals—we have no record of their names.
>
> “2) These builders gave their whole lives for a work they would
> never see finished.
>
> “3) They made great sacrifices and expected no credit.
>
> “4) The passion of their building was fueled by their faith that the eyes of God saw everything.
>
> “There’s a story in the book about a rich man who came to visit the cathedral while it was being built, and he saw a workman carving a tiny bird on the inside of a beam. He was puzzled and asked the man, ‘Why are you spending so much time carving that bird into a beam that will be covered by the roof? No one will ever see it.’
>
> “And the workman replied, ‘Because God sees it.’{1}

Living with an eternal perspective as we make choices and invest our time to glorify God is like building a cathedral that we won’t be able to see finished.

It means living with the long view in mind, aware that the things we can see, hear, and feel are temporary, but the spiritual realm is permanent.

An eternal perspective means that the things you do that no one sees but God—the unseen and eternal—*they matter!*

God tells us in Isaiah that our purpose in life is to glorify Him (43:7). Paul puts a point on this in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

And that’s the key to living with an eternal perspective.

Notes

1. thejoysofboys.com/monday-motivation-the-invisible-mom/

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Spiritual Life and the Kingdom of God

Tom Davis explores how recovering the practice of classic spiritual disciplines can enhance believers' relationship with God and our impact on the world around us.

There is a loss of spiritual knowledge of the truth of Christianity and how we live in light of that truth. This loss of spiritual knowledge is the result of shifts in cultural attitudes toward faith, happiness, ethics, freedom, and tolerance. The answer to the loss of spiritual knowledge is a return to the practice of spiritual disciplines. After examining the benefits of suffering and the disciplines of study, prayer, and fasting, I will show how these disciplines restore spiritual knowledge in society.

Loss of Spirituality

Today's society is in spiritual turmoil. Most people are not knowledgeable about spiritual things. The National Study of Youth and Religion indicates that the Church has become less influential in the lives of people. The effects of modernity and post modernity have created a popular culture that is suspicious of any claim to objective religious knowledge and any idea of an authoritative source of information concerning spiritual issues. Christian Smith writes, "In this culture religion lost, at least in theory, any remaining principled, authoritative standing to make truth claims that it has

enjoyed in previous eras of history."{1}

Basically, this means that most people have adopted a mindset that says, "You can't know anything for sure about religion. And if you think you do, you're an arrogant bigot."

Five Steps to Spiritual Death

In his book, *Kingdom Triangle*, Biola professor and theologian J.P. Moreland claims that there are five cultural shifts that have contributed to today's state of spirituality in the culture. The first shift separates knowledge from faith.{2} All spiritual beliefs are considered valid because they are not real knowledge. Many people think that all religions lead to the same God. They say that we should not criticize other religions because they call God by a different name or hold different theological beliefs. These things are a matter of faith, not knowledge. This kind of attitude relegates all things spiritual to the subjective arena of faith. The things of the spirit are relegated to the "upper story" of faith. Real knowledge only exists in the "lower story" of the academic disciplines.{3} The result of this view of faith is that spirituality becomes something that is neither true nor false. Separating faith and knowledge ultimately leads to a denial of spiritual truth.

The second shift is the definition of happiness.{4} In the Bible happiness is portrayed as part of a right relationship with God. To live the good life meant that a person had intellectual and moral virtue. God created people to live well according to what they were created to be. J.P. Moreland explains, "So understood, happiness involves suffering, endurance, and patience because these are important means to becoming a good person."{5} The pressure of modernism and postmodernism has changed this view. Happiness is now associated with pleasure. Television commercials promise to deliver happiness through the next fad diet that will increase your sex appeal. Male enhancement drugs promise to give men

happiness by giving them back their youth and an increased sex drive. Happiness can be achieved by buying the newest car, toy, accessory, or a trip to an exotic place or amusement park. The good life now means having fun and collecting things so that you can feel good.

The third shift that Moreland notes is a shift from duty and virtue in morality to a minimalist view of ethics.{6} Previously, moral knowledge was viewed as an objective set of propositions about right or wrong, or good and evil. It used to be that everyone would agree it was always wrong to torture and kill small children. Now moral knowledge is viewed as subjective feelings or opinions. This change can be seen if we look at the language we use when making moral statements. People used to say things like, "I know," or "I think that this is the right thing to do." Now we say, "I felt that it was right for me to do this."

Duty to one's society used to be viewed as an essential part of a moral life. People were expected to help their neighbor. If an old lady was trying to cross the street, young men were expected to help her. Now, as long as they do not push the old lady into traffic, or rob her, the young men are considered to be moral. This change is the result of culture. People are no longer expected to contribute to their society. As long as people are not hurting anyone else, they are now considered to be moral. This view of morality changes a person's view of life. Life is now about having the most fun without harming anyone. Life used to be about living for something bigger than the individual. People used to live for God and country. Now people live for themselves and their own pleasure.

The fourth shift is in how people view freedom.{7} Freedom used to mean that people could live the way they ought to live. People were free to do what was right without government interference. Now freedom means the right of people to do what they want, when they want. Popular culture says that as long as you do not hurt anyone you can do what you want.

The last shift that Moreland notes is a shift in the meaning of tolerance.{8} Classic tolerance is when people will allow others to be, do, or believe differently than they do, even though one person thinks that the view of another person is wrong. People were allowed to critique the views of other people, but respect for the other person was still maintained. Contemporary tolerance is the view that people are not allowed to critique another person's beliefs. People are no longer allowed to say that someone is wrong. This attitude ends all public discussion. Every idea must be tolerated, except ideas that claim that other ideas are wrong. Ironically, the new tolerance fails its own definition of tolerance because they do not tolerate intolerance.

Returning to Spiritual Health

The popular culture has raised five strongholds against the knowledge of God: separation of faith and knowledge, a self-centered view of happiness, a minimal view of ethics, a new view of freedom, and a new view of tolerance. How are Christians to respond to this? Paul writes, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Christians must recapture our spiritual disciplines.

Theology, the Intellect, and Spirituality

The first thing that needs to be addressed is that Christians need a renewed interest in theology. J. I. Packer, while discussing the influence of the Puritans in his life, writes, "All theology is also spirituality, in the sense that it has an influence, good or bad, positive or negative, on its recipient's relationship or lack of relationship to God."{9} Theology comes from two Greek words. *Theos* is the Greek word for God; *logos* is the Greek word for logic. Theology can be understood as the logic, or science of God.{10} Spirituality,

in the Christian context, is a person's relationship with God. In order to claim to have a relationship with God a person has to have knowledge of who God is. It would be odd to have a man talk about having a relationship with a woman and then say he does not know her and has never met her. The concept of a relationship presupposes that each party in the relationship has knowledge of the other party.

The Bible and Books

An essential step to gaining spiritual knowledge is a disciplined approach to reading the Bible. Billy Graham addresses the importance of studying the Bible: "Your spiritual life needs food. What kind of food? Spiritual food. Where do you find this spiritual food? In the Bible, the Word of God."{11} Paul writes, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God gave the Bible to people so that people can learn about God. By studying the Bible a person will gain knowledge about God and strengthen that person's relationship with God.

Christians should also read other books. The Bible contains essential information for salvation and knowing God. However, the Bible is not exhaustive in its knowledge. Christians can grow intellectually and spiritually by gaining knowledge about God's creation. David Naugle, head of the philosophy department at Dallas Baptist University, sums up the impact of books on his life: "I have sought and still seek to be a person of the Book and of books, that I might know God and more and more about his world in the context of faith."{12} The study of the disciplines of theology, philosophy, the humanities, and the sciences helps people develop a coherent worldview. A worldview gives people the ability to understand the world through the corrective lens of the knowledge of God.

The medieval priest Thomas à Kempis advises, “If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the saying of the ancients, for they were not made without purpose.”{13} We grow intellectually and spiritually when we read the books of others. We gain insight to their wisdom. We should humbly read the books written by the ancient teachers. They left their wisdom in writing so that we can learn from them.

Suffering

Contemporary society thinks that suffering should be avoided at all costs. However, suffering can have a good outcome. Paul writes, “More than that, we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4). When we suffer, we can learn to endure. Our endurance produces character—that is, we mature and learn to trust God. God is the only hope that will never fail. Matthew Henry writes, “He who, being thus tried, comes forth as gold, will thereby be encouraged to hope.”{14} When soldiers train, they punish their body; they suffer. Their suffering in training makes them better soldiers in combat because their suffering has made them stronger and given them more endurance. As a Navy veteran, I know this is true personally.

Prayer

Prayer is the spiritual discipline of talking to God. God speaks to us in the Bible like the way people communicate through writing letters; the communication is one way. Praying is more like a discussion between two people. In prayer we get to talk with God.

Paul told the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The best way to start a disciplined prayer life is to pray every day. This is easier if we begin

each day with prayer. J. P. Moreland writes, “When you get up in the morning, start off with praise and thanksgiving to God for the things you honestly appreciate about him and his dealings with you. Then lift your burdens to him until you have a sense of rest before the Lord.”{15} By beginning each day with prayer we turn our minds and our hearts toward God and His will. Each day is a new opportunity to minister to someone in need. Our prayers will give us spiritual discernment so that we can recognize those in need. Our minds will also be turned towards God and the things of heaven, and we can continue to keep these things in our minds throughout the day.

John Calvin used four rules for prayer. First, we must “have our heart and mind framed as becomes those who are entering into converse with God.”{16} We must prepare ourselves to pray. Minds that are distracted do not make for good conversation. This is no ordinary conversation. People prepare themselves for meeting with important people. We should be prepared to open our hearts and minds to God when we pray. We should be aware that we are praying to our God, but that this God loves us and wants to bring our concerns to Him. Paul writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). We should not be anxious when praying because we know that God cares for us and can do all things. We should pray about all our concerns. Our prayers should be full of worship, thanking God for all that He has done.

One way to prepare to pray is to remember what David Naugle calls the “Three P’s.” These are “(1) my purpose, or what I would live my life for, (2) my profession, or what I would spend my life doing, and (3) my partner, or who I would spend my life with.”{17} David Naugle’s “Three P’s” cover the most important decisions we will make in our lives. Our purpose fills our life with purpose. We should pray for purpose so

that God will align what we want our purpose in life to be with what He wants our purpose in life to be. Our profession is where we fulfill our purpose. A car mechanic can glorify God in fulfilling his purpose to be God's representative in the auto shop. Our spouse is our ministry partner. Husbands and wives are not separated from each other. They share each other's joys and burdens. Praying for these things will focus our minds on what is important and orient our hearts toward living a life pleasing to God.

John Calvin's second rule is "That in asking we must always truly feel our wants, and seriously considering that we need all the things which we ask, accompany the prayer with a sincere, no, ardent desire of obtaining them."{18} Our requests should be things that we truly want or need. When we pray for the wants and needs of others, we should try to feel their desire for the request so that we can better minister to them through prayer. James tells us, "Is anyone suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (James 5:13). We should be honest and sincere in our requests and in our thanksgiving. A sincere prayer would be praying for a loved one to get well when they are sick. An insincere prayer might look like praying for a job promotion when you know that you have not been putting your best effort into the job.

Third, "discard all self-confidence, humbly giving God the whole glory."{19} When we pray, we should realize who we are, and who God is. Jesus said, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others" (Matthew 6:5). The hypocrites' motivation to pray in the street corners was so that people would see them and think that these people were righteous. Jesus makes this point with more clarity in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

> Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself

> prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I 9give tithes of all that I get.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:10-13)

The Pharisee came to God in prayer thinking that he was righteous and better than other men. He even pointed out his fasting and tithing as if God should be impressed with these things. The tax collector was humbled in the presence of God. He would not look up to heaven because he understood that he was guilty before God. The tax collector prayed sincerely for mercy. Asking God for mercy gives God glory and humbles the person.

John Calvin’s fourth rule of prayer is, “We should be animated to p-ray with the sure hope of succeeding.”{20} God is all powerful, able to meet our every need. Jesus teaches this same principle, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8). By grace we have been made children of God. If we ask, God will give us what we need. When we humble ourselves before God, He will be merciful. God knows what we need and will give us what is good for us. Jesus said, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him” (Matthew 7:11).

Through our prayer life we should conform to the image of God revealed in Jesus. Andrew Murry taught:

> And of all the traits of a life *like Christ* there is none higher and more glorious than conformity to Him in the work that now engages Him without ceasing in the Father’s presence His all-prevailing intercession. The more we abide

> in Him, and grow unto his likeness, will His priestly life work in us mightily, and our life become what His is, a life that ever pleads and prevails for men.{21}

Our prayers should make us more Christlike. By praying, we conform to God's will. Christ makes intercessions to the Father for us. We have the privilege of making intercessions to Christ for others.

Fasting

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life."{22} One way to exercise self-control is by abstinence (saying no to ourselves by not doing something we want). Fasting is one of the most difficult abstaining disciplines. Calvin defines fasting as "when we retrench somewhat from our accustomed mode of living, either for one day or a certain period, and prescribe to ourselves a stricter and severer restraint in the use of that ordinary food."{23} In short, fasting is abstaining from food for a short period of time.

Jesus taught:

> When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting is to be done in secret. Again, Jesus points to the hypocrite, who wants to gain a reputation from his spiritual discipline. Jesus taught that people would be rewarded by not making a spectacle out of their spirituality.

What is the goal of fasting? Augustine taught, "While we live in the temporal order, we must fast and abstain from the

enjoyment of what is temporal, for the sake of the eternity in which we desire to live."{24} Fasting reminds Christians that they do not depend on temporal things. God wants Christians to rely on Him to supply our needs. In a world where tight schedules are kept and frivolous distractions are available everywhere, it can be easy to forget God. Fasting emphasizes the importance of a right relationship with the world by abstaining from the sustenance of food. John Calvin lists three goals for fasting: "We use it either to mortify and subdue the flesh, that it may not wanton, or to prepare the better for prayer and holy meditation; or to give evidence of humbling ourselves before God, when we would confess our guilt before him."{25} Many times the flesh (the part of us that operates independently from God, either in active rebellion or passive indifference) will want to rebel against the spirit. Fasting deprives the flesh of sustenance and weakens it. The spirit can then rule the flesh. There are times when a Christian will need to place special focus on prayer and meditation. Fasting is one way to prepare the spirit for these activities.

Reversing the Shifts

In our contemporary culture faith is viewed as being completely separate from knowledge. This faulty view originates within Christianity with the ideas of some Christian philosophers and theologians. Soren Kierkegaard saw faith as "the highest passion in a human being."{26} He applies this view to Jesus: "The proofs which Scripture presents for Christ's divinity—His miracles, His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven—are therefore only for faith, that is, they are not 'proofs,' they have no intention of proving that all of this agrees perfectly with reason: on the contrary they would prove that it conflicts with reason and therefore is an object of faith."{27} Kierkegaard believed that Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead. But he thought that Jesus was unknowable through

knowledge and reason. One could only know Jesus through faith, and that meant that faith was opposed to knowledge and reason.

When writing to Theophilus, Luke says, “Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, to write an orderly account for you” (Luke 1:2-3). John writes “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you” (1 John 1:3). The New Testament authors were writing about what they knew. These men walked, talked, and ate with Christ for three years. These men knew Christ face to face. Wayne Grudem addresses the harmony of faith and reason: “Rather, saving faith is consistent with knowledge and true understanding of facts.”{28} Faith is not separate from knowledge, it is trust in knowledge.

Once the facts of the Bible are known, faith in those facts will affect how we experience happiness. Happiness defined as satisfaction of desires is an empty pointless feel-good emotion that lasts only for a moment. But the joy of God does not fade. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). Christians get joy through meditating on the things of God. Neal Anderson and Robert Saucy state that “Meditation on the Word should produce thoughts that reach our emotions.”{29} A relationship with God produces happiness, a deep well-being of the soul, that lasts. The Psalmist writes, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight” (Psalm 19:14). What we study and put into our minds affects our relationship with God. When we have knowledge of God then we can meditate on God. It is impossible to meditate on an object that you have no knowledge of. Meditation on the things of God brings joy.

The cultural shift to a minimalist ethic, the idea of contemporary freedom, and the meaning of tolerance are the result of relativism’s effect on the culture. Relativism is the idea that there are no objective moral values, and

morality is either decided by each person or each community. There are many problems with this view. Relativism makes it impossible to criticize others. If moral truths are subjective then each person gets to decide for himself what is right or wrong. Relativism cannot place blame for wrong doings. What people do is neither right nor wrong. Right or wrong is up to each individual. Why should we expect each person to reach the same conclusion? Relativists cannot promote tolerance because any definition of tolerance is an objective definition that, if true, applies to everyone.{30} But if morality is objective (meaning that there are things that are right and wrong for all people at all times), then freedom cannot mean that people can do what they want when they want. People will have responsibilities. They will be free to do what is right, and they will be free to do what is wrong. Being free means that we make choices of our own volition.

Conclusion

The loss of spiritual knowledge has caused a fractured society and people who lead fractured lives. The cultural shifts are a result of people not taking spiritual knowledge seriously. Spiritual knowledge must have absolutes to provide meaning for life. Francis Schaeffer observes, “we need absolutes if our existence is to have meaning—my existence, your existence, man’s existence.”{31} Absolutes are learned by practicing the spiritual disciplines. A careful study of the Bible will bring knowledge ABOUT God; heart-surrender to Him, coupled with learning to abide in Him, will bring knowledge OF God. Prayer will keep people in touch with God. Fasting will break down the resistance of the flesh to living a spiritual life. The five shifts of contemporary culture mean death. The spiritual disciplines bring people spiritual life. True spirituality can only be found in Christ. Only meditation and learning about Christ can return wonder to life. I pray that through spiritual disciplines we may retain the wonder of a life given to us by God.

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Trusting God on the Other Side of Bizarre

In my last blog post, Trusting God in the Bizarre," I shared how a diagnosis of tongue cancer had blown up my world and how I was wrestling with my fear—again—of pain and suffering.

It has now been 11 weeks since a surgeon removed a third of my tongue. I am still healing, both my tongue and my neck, from which he removed 20 lymph nodes—which were cancer free. I still thank the Lord for that graciousness. My speech is no longer impaired although it *is* affected. I sound like I have a

cough drop in my mouth when I talk, and the “s” sound is still a challenge.

Let me share with you what “Trusting God in the Bizarre” looks like on the other side of surgery.

I continue to believe that this cancer is a form of spiritual warfare, and it was a very personal attack as retaliation for continually speaking out about the goodness of God’s design for sex, gender, and sexuality. According to Ephesians 6:13, the outcome of successful spiritual warfare is to *just stay standing.* (“[W]hen the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”) I dug in my heels, so to speak, and determined to keep standing in the goodness of God, not allowing the enemy to knock me down. And to keep standing in my trust of His sovereignty, that a good and loving God is in control. As I praised Him for using pain as a sculpting tool to shape me like Jesus, my heart of thanksgiving repelled the enemy, for the Lord abides in the praise of His people (Psalm 22:3). I love the image of the God of light dwelling in the heart of the believer, because darkness cannot stand before light. It has to flee. And so did the enemy, as I thanked and praised God for His lovingkindness to me.

Before the surgery, I was pretty much terrified of the physically torturing pain that never came—a source of wonder and deep thanksgiving. What I was *not* prepared for was the emotional pain of soul-wrenching loss. The grief of losing my life before the surgery; the grief of losing a body part; the grief of losing my clear speech, which I had always taken for granted. In the first couple of weeks, my husband Ray told people at church, “She almost never smiles anymore,” and when I did, it was lopsided, still affected by the surgery, the numbness, the cut nerves.

I journaled, *I am depressed and sad and grieving and unhappy and feeling crummy. My life is not lost, it’s put on hold. . .*

. STUPID HARD. That's my phrase for this. And the shock of it shows I'm blessed by how beautiful my life has been up to this point.

For two of those early post-op days I was deep in the weeds of grief, exhausted from frequent tears that came unbidden. Instead of a tissue box, I kept a stack of napkins next to my recliner and it was amazing how many I went through. Then the third day, I received such moving encouragement via texts from my son in California that tears of gratitude and appreciation flowed. I actually started to feel dehydrated from the crying. When the fourth day proved to be tear-free, I was amazed by how much energy I had! What a poignant reminder of how exhausting tears are, and why people overtaken by tears need to be given extra-large doses of grace and compassion.

Before my surgery, I asked God to give me a handle to hang onto when I woke up and then afterwards, and He gave me this: "Be a window." I journaled, *A window doesn't work at being transparent and clear, just as a branch doesn't work at receiving the life of the vine. I just need to ABIDE. I will have the IV right there as a visual reminder to be "actively passive" in receiving the Lord's life and letting Him shine through me.*

Wincing internally because of my speech, I kept using the phrase, "I'm not ready for prime time," but the Lord showed me that oh yes it is. I noticed that when people knew about my tongue cancer surgery, they were able to understand me easily, not like strangers who didn't know and would ask me to repeat myself. He impressed on me that I am in a window of time, ever-closing as I slowly heal, where people are listening more closely to me than ever before. I don't know if God is anointing me, or if He's anointing the ears of people I'm talking to, but something special is happening.

When I realized that rather than putting my life on pause, waiting for "prime time," I am in a limited-time window of

blessing, I prayed, “Please don’t let me miss any opportunity You are opening for whatever You want to do through me?” Various doors opened to speak or teach—at church, at a women’s luncheon, in a couple of classes at a Christian high school—and when I am able to share about recovering from tongue cancer surgery, *people listen extra hard.*

So the first direction I got from God was, “Be a window.” Now that’s been expanded to, “Be a window IN this window.”

Before the pathology report for my lymph nodes came back clear, I wrote:

I have been begging God for no cancer in the lymph nodes, but what if He says no? What if my path goes into the radiology unit?

God is good even when there is cancer. He loves me even if He has given a green light to more cancer. If He says yes to lymph nodes then He has a plan for me to bring glory to Himself through me, through my response. He will show others what the response of faithfulness and trust looks like, as I seek to “be a window.” Lord, give me direction and wisdom in how to show YOU off without showing ME off. You know—oh, how You know!!—how I struggle with pride. I want to be the best example of a faithful suffering Christian—but I don’t want to suffer to do it! Thank You for using this trial to make me more like Jesus. Thank You that I will look back on this “light and momentary affliction” (2 Corinthians 4:17) and think, “TOTALLY WORTH IT!!” Thank You that this is how I glory in my suffering (Romans 5:3)—by focusing on You and on what is true, and not the pain. Just as Peter needed to focus on You and not the storm when he walked on water.

I recorded several videos for social media to give updates on how I was healing and how I was sounding. In this one, I was transparent about the fact that sometimes I have a hard time with the “s” sound. But it struck me that there is more value

in people seeing the Spirit-enabled grace of self-acceptance in the face of loss, than if my speech were unaffected in the first place.

https://www.facebook.com/559034244/videos/1924001134618178/

Several people have asked, “What do you think God wanted you to learn from this trial?”

I honestly don’t think it’s about gaining more information about God or learning more life lessons. I think it’s about building my character and perseverance. I think it’s about growing my roots deeper in my dependence on Christ and maturing me spiritually, to make me more like Him. That’s the spiritual fruit that the Lord wants to see His people bear, I think.

I’ll keep you posted. *still a little lop-sided smile*

This blog post originally appeared at https://blogs.bible.org/trusting-god-on-the-other-side-of-bizarre/ on March 22, 2023.

Christ and the Human Condition

Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that “man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward” (5:7). Whether it’s the trouble that befalls us as we’re simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer’s and ALS. While natural evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what (if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written

> As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, cooly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God’s capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son’s

> humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.{1}

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

Moral Evil

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced "very good" by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history, bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, "The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man's depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God."{2} Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God's wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ "who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we're told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is "accursed of God" (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross, Christ became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as *we* are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we

examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that "the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus."{3}

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the "one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God."{4} Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom.{5} And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply

the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there *is* an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown.{6} Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an "enemy," but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. "The last enemy that will be abolished," he writes, "is death" (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

> Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.{7}

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It's reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.{8} Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

The Weight of Glory

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as "an incommensurable good."{9} By this they mean that knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an "incommensurable" or "immeasurable" good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). He understood that "intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately good-for created persons."{10}

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He famously wrote that "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a "momentary, light affliction"? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. "He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God."{11}

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and

experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis wrote, "In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised."{12} Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

Notes

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.
3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.
5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ's coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.
6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis" (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).
7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.
8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.
9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.
10. Marilyn McCord Adams, Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.
11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.
12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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Probe Live: If God is Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?

The problem of why God allows pain and evil has been the biggest obstacle to faith for thousands of years. Sue Bohlin, living with a lifelong disability, provides both philosophical and practical answers to this question.
PROBE FB LIVE Sue Bohlin 2022.mp4 from AGAPE MEDIA on Vimeo.

What Difference Does the Resurrection Make?

Sue Bohlin suggests four ways the resurrection of Jesus can make a difference in the lives of believers today.

What difference does the resurrection make—in our lives? It's the most important event in all of human history. Where's the "so what" for today?

I meditated on this question for weeks, eventually creating a list too long for this blog post. So let me share my favorites.

All pain and suffering will be redeemed and resolved.

I've lived in a body with a disability since I got polio at

eight months old and was paralyzed from the waist down. I got some use of my left leg and hip back, but I had to wear a steel and leather brace for the first several years of my life. Every step I've taken, I have limped. I had several orthopedic surgeries and 14 years of physical therapy.

We used to sing a song in church that made me cry Every. Single. Time.

You Hold Me Now {1}
For eternity
All my heart will give
All the glory to Your Name

No weeping, no hurt or pain
No suffering
You hold me now
You hold me now

No darkness, no sick or lame
No hiding, You hold me now
You hold me now

The first time I walk without a limp will be in my resurrected body, in heaven where there will be no polio, no weakness, no limping. There will be no scooters in heaven. No wheelchairs. No walkers.

No insulin pumps.
No percussion vests for cystic fibrosis.
No cochlear implants for the deaf.
No braille books or signs for the blind.
No dentures or dental implants.
No prosthetics.

All the technology and tools we have developed to help people deal with life in a fallen, broken world will be obsolete and never needed again. The fallen, broken world will be resurrected too! Full of glory and beauty and strength and

perfection.

What difference does the resurrection make? It affects how I live through times of pain and suffering. I know I can bear it if there is a purpose and God is going to make everything right.

The resurrection means all pain and suffering is temporary, and there is meaning to it.

The resurrection means God sustains me through the difficult times because He is doing a beautiful thing in me that I will only be able to see and appreciate in my resurrection body.

A second difference the resurrection makes is that ***heaven is real, so we don't have to fear death.***

The resurrection means that if we are believers, if we have trusted in Christ, when we cross over from life on earth to life in heaven, we will be with Jesus and with all the people, starting with Adam and Eve, who put their trust in Him.

It means we can look forward to being reunited with our loved ones who have died.

I'm looking forward to seeing my daughter Becky again. She's been with Jesus 42 years. I'm looking forward to being there when our sons Curt and Kevin meet their sister, who was born and died before they came along. I'm looking forward to seeing my mom and dad, my grandparents and other family members, including my wonderful cousin George who just moved to heaven last week.

We can look forward to meeting super distant family members and even people we heard about but never met, like the apostles and Saint Augustine and Corrie Ten Boom and Billy Graham.

And since heaven is real, it means we don't have to fear death.

When we put our trust in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, death is merely a doorway into the next life. We leave our bodies and step across the threshold of heaven to be with Jesus.

There are so many stories of what a difference the resurrection makes in the life of a believer as they face death!

Recently I posted a question on Facebook asking friends to share dying stories of heaven-bound believers. I got so many delightful responses!

"My friend Charla was a hospice nurse for many years. She tells of one man, O.J., on his deathbed. His best friend, Floyd, had gone to heaven several years earlier. O.J. had been comatose for a day or so. Charla said he was peaceful and close to death as she sat with him, holding his hand and speaking soothing words to him. All of a sudden, with his eyes still closed, O.J. broke into a brilliant smile, lifted his other hand up into the air and said expectantly, 'Floyd!' and he went right to heaven! Charla said she'd held his hand on Earth as Floyd grasped his hand in heaven."

"In the last moments of my father's life, he was beaming with joy as he saw his friends on the other side waiting for him. He held up his hands, greeting them by name, 'Brother Harold! Brother Bob!'"

3 weeks before my believing aunt passed, she saw her husband who had died several years before, in white robes reaching out his arms to her. Then while in the hospital, Aunt Rose walked by a statue of Jesus and paused as if talking to him. My cousin asked, "Mom, are you talking to Jesus?"

She said, "Yes, and He said, 'Hang in there Rosie, you'll be with Me shortly.'" A few days later, she told my cousins what she was seeing as the curtain between heaven and earth grew more and more transparent.

She exclaimed that heaven was so beautiful, so filled with warmth and kindness. Her daughter asked her if it was like Hawaii and she laughed and said, “No, it’s like a warm summer afternoon in Wisconsin.” The week she died, she started seeing Jesus in a white robe, and then the day before she died the robe turned gold. That night she told my cousin, “Go to bed. You’re keeping me from meeting Jesus.” She died several hours later.

What difference does the resurrection make? It means when loved ones die, it’s just a “see you later” rather than a forever goodbye.

It means that as you get rolled from pre-op to the operating room and get ready to undergo anesthesia, you can relax in peace knowing that if anything were to go wrong during surgery, you’d wake up in heaven.

It means being legitimately concerned about the dying process hurting, but not concerned about what happens one minute after death.

The resurrection means death has been robbed of its power and its sting.

Another difference the resurrection makes is that ***we become more aware of the unseen, eternal world.***

Since Jesus said He had come from heaven, and that He would rise from the dead in 3 days—*and then He did!*—that validates everything He taught about the unseen and eternal dimension of life.

We can become more aware of the fact that we live in two worlds at the same time, the seen and physical world and the unseen spiritual world (2 Corinthians 4:18).



I love to snorkel in the Caribbean. I love being able to look at the beautiful fish and corals of the underwater world while effortlessly breathing the air of the above-water world. I love functioning in two worlds at the same time.

What difference does the resurrection make? It means we can operate in two worlds simultaneously.

It means we can learn to focus on the unseen, eternal realm as more real than the temporal realm.

It means we can intentionally become so much more effective in our prayers because we start to see we truly do release God’s power into other people’s lives and situations when we pray.

Operating in two realms at the same time means we can sit in our living rooms and release the light of God’s truth and power into legal and political situations in our nation’s capital.

We can be walking or driving in our cars wherever we are and pour the grace of God’s power into the hearts of persecuted Christians on the other side of the world.

We can read or hear the news on the internet or the newspaper and lift up events and needs and problems to the throne of God no matter where they are.

The resurrection means we can wear “invisible snorkel gear” and operate in the earthly realm and the spirit realm at the same time.

A final difference the resurrection makes is that ***we will be married to Christ.***

The church, the body of Christ, will be married to our heavenly bridegroom Jesus.

The greatest earthly marriages are still only a foretaste of the ultimate, perfect marriage between the Bride of Christ and the Lamb.

The best, healthiest earthly marriages are still between two broken, fallen sinners who hurt and irritate and annoy each other and are in constant need of forgiveness.

The very best marriages are not ultimately fulfilling and completing because only Jesus can fill and complete us. There are still times of loneliness and not being understood and wondering, "Is this as good as it gets?" Yes, because earthly marriages are not the ultimate purpose of your life.

If you are single, even if by God's grace you are content in your singleness, there is still a longing for connection that eludes you on earth because you were made for a deep and perfect union and connection with Jesus.

What difference does the resurrection make? It means we will be bound up with the rest of the body of Christ to become His bride.

And these three differences that the resurrection make, I believe, are only the tip of the iceberg.

1. Hillsong Music, words and music by Joel Houston & Aodhan King

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_difference_does_the_resurrection_make

on April 16, 2019.

“Why Are Children Born Blind?”

I have asked the question of why children are born blind. I get no satisfaction from any of any religious explanation. The fact of the matter is that the Almighty can see but these little children cannot. It is cold comfort to hide behind some doctrine when an innocent child will spend his or her life in darkness.

It’s a great question. In fact, God considered it such a good question that it is included in the Gospel of John:

> As [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”
>
> “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. . . .” (John 9:1-3)

So the first answer of why babies are allowed to be born blind is so that God can put His goodness and His power on display through the person’s life.

I can imagine that an immediate response might be, “How sadistic and egocentric can you get? Why would a good and loving God allow such pain and distress just to set Himself up to get glory?”

And my response would be, “When we start to understand God as He really is, as majestic and powerful and beautiful and most

of all GOOD, we stop pushing back at His actions that reveal His character. Just like we don't raise a fist at the sun and scream, 'How dare you shine so brightly that I can't look at you without hurting my eyes?! How dare you pour such radiant light into the world that it lights everything up? Stop being so shiny and bright!'"

Another answer is that in the scope of eternity, there are many worse things than being physically blind. It would be far worse to live a life disconnected from God, refusing His invitation to the abundant life Jesus came to give, and enter hell with perfectly working eyes.

I do realize that this may seem callous, which is why I need to tell you that as a survivor of polio paralysis since I was eight months old, I have lived my entire life handicapped. I may as well have been born with a disabled body like a baby born blind. So this question is not a hypothetical, theoretical question. This is my daily life. And I have seen God "display His works in me" (John 9) in many ways not *despite* my handicap, but *because* of it. My very weakness is what allows His strength and joy to shine through me in the weak places.

Jesus went on to say immediately after the above statements that He was the light of the world. The juxtaposition of these two details, I believe, is making a statement: that things that exist in the physical realm point to corollaries in the spiritual realm. Blindness comes in various forms, physical and spiritual and emotional and intellectual, but Jesus is the light that makes all the difference with those kinds of blindness.

I do think it's easier to grasp this truth when we cultivate an eternal perspective, remembering that our life on earth is but a short breath compared to the bulk of our existence that will happen on the other side of death. Blindness, for believers in Jesus, is limited to life on earth. All physical

maladies will be restored to perfection in the New Heavens and the New Earth, which means no blindness, no lameness, no illness of any kind in the next stage of life.

You might ask, "But what about babies born blind who don't become believers in Jesus? What is the point of their blindness then?" It seems to me that the promise of healing and wholeness through a relationship with Jesus could be even *more* appealing to someone born blind. It might be the very best way for them to come to the place where they trust in Christ.

One final comment, addressing your statement that "the Almighty can see but these little children cannot."

There was a time when the Almighty restricted Himself to a human body while living on earth, leaving all His power and privileges behind in heaven when He took up residence in a young girl's body. I believe He experienced an even worse kind of blindness than merely physical blindness as He hung on the cross, absorbing all the sin, all the dysfunction, all the sickness, and all the brokenness of life in a fallen world into Himself for three hours. He was so immersed in the horror of a sin-sick world, I believe, that He could no longer "see" or sense His Father—because that's what sin does, it separates us from God, and the Bible tells us that He actually BECAME sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). No wonder He felt lost in sin's blindness. (Thus crying out "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?")

So I would respectfully submit that Jesus, the Almighty, very much knows what the deepest kind of blindness feels like. He is Emmanuel, God with us—God who understands what it's like to be human and live in a broken world. Including blindness.

I do hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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A Pilgrim's Progress: Suffering in the Life of John Bunyan – A Christian View of Suffering

Dr. Michael Gleghorn considers the lessons presented by the life and writings of the famous author of The Pilgrim's Progress *to give each of us a better understanding of the role of suffering in the lives of followers of Christ.*

A Suffering Pilgrim



John Bunyan is known to most people today as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress,* a book he began writing in prison. It tells the story of "Christian," who makes his way from the "City of Destruction" (which represents this world) to the "Celestial City" (which represents Heaven). It's been described as "perhaps the world's best-selling book" (after the Bible), and has been "translated into over 200 languages."{1} Written in the form of an allegory, it essentially relates the story of Bunyan's own Christian journey.{2} And just as *his* life was full of trials and suffering, so also "Christian" must face many hardships and difficulties as well.

Bunyan was born in England in 1628 at a time of great political and religious unrest. In 1644, at just fifteen years

old, both his mother and sister died within a month of each other. Later that year, "when Bunyan had turned sixteen, he was drafted into the Parliamentary Army and for about two years was taken from his home for military service."{3} He married in 1648, at about the age of twenty, but his wife died just ten years later, leaving him with four children, the oldest of whom was blind. He married again the following year, in 1659, but incredibly, just one year after this, "Bunyan was arrested and put in prison."{4} His wife, who was pregnant at the time, suffered a miscarriage, probably because of the added stress which this ordeal created. She was then left to care for Bunyan's four children while he spent the next twelve years in jail.{5}

As you can see, Bunyan was no stranger to suffering. Indeed, he had an intimate, firsthand acquaintance with heartache, trials, and difficulties. But what crimes had he committed to be cast into prison? Essentially, the charges against him were two: first, "he refused to attend the services of the Established church" of England; and second, he "preached to unlawful assemblies."{6} You see, Bunyan had converted to Christianity during his first marriage and had become a powerful and respected preacher. But in the volatile political and religious climate of that day, the freedom of Nonconformist preachers like Bunyan eventually came to an end. And when it did, he was arrested and put in prison.

In the remainder of this article we'll look at some of the trials this man endured, how he responded to them, and what they might teach us as we each make our own spiritual journey.

The Pilgrim's Conversion

The Pilgrim's Progress is one of the best-selling Christian books of all time. But as Bunyan tells us in another of his books, the autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, before becoming a Christian he had few equals in

“cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God.” Indeed, prior to his marriage, he says he was “the very ring-leader of all the youth . . . into all manner of vice and ungodliness.”{7}

Bunyan’s young wife had a very godly father. When he died, he left her two books which she brought into her marriage: *The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*. According to Bunyan, although these books did not awaken him to his “sad and sinful state,” they nevertheless did arouse within him “some desires to religion.”{8} One of the practical effects of these new desires was Bunyan’s regular attendance at a local church.

Soon Bunyan also began to read the Bible. He then came under such powerful conviction of sin that he scarcely knew what to do. “Sin and corruption,” he wrote, “would as naturally bubble out of my heart, as water would bubble out of a fountain. . . I thought none but the devil himself could equalize me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind.”{9} Bunyan was plunged into a state of despair over the greatness of his sin which, he tell us, “continued a long while, even for some years together.”{10}

Eventually, after years of spiritual and emotional agony, Bunyan described “what seemed to be the decisive moment.”{11} He was heading into the field one day when suddenly this sentence broke in upon his mind: “Thy righteousness is in heaven.” At this, he says, “I . . . saw . . . that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse: for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, *the same yesterday, and today, and for ever* (Heb. 13:8).” “Now,” he said, “did my chains fall off my legs indeed . . . my temptations also fled away . . . now went I . . . home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God.”{12}

After years of spiritual anguish, Bunyan had been set free by

the grace of God from some of his worst fears and torments. But as we'll see, this was not to be the end of his experience with suffering. As one set of trials was ending, another was soon to begin.

The Pilgrim's Imprisonment

According to Bunyan, five or six years after his conversion, in about the year 1655, some of the believers in his local congregation began entreating him "to speak a word of exhortation unto them."{13} Although initially hesitant, Bunyan agreed to their request "and suddenly a great preacher was discovered."{14} Apparently, word spread quickly through the English countryside. According to one author, "In the days of toleration, a day's notice would get a crowd of 1,200 to hear him preach at 7 o'clock in the morning on a weekday."{15}

Unfortunately, it was not to last. In 1660, the same year in which Charles II was brought home as king in the Restoration of the Monarchy, John Bunyan was arrested and imprisoned "for preaching without state approval."{16} Officially, he was charged with being in violation of the Elizabethan Conventicle Act of 1593. According to this Act, anyone found guilty of "abstaining from coming to church to hear divine service, and . . . being a common upholder of several unlawful meetings . . . could be held without bail until he or she submitted to the authority of the Anglican church."{17} As a Nonconformist preacher, this Act applied to men like Bunyan.

What's interesting, however, is that Bunyan could have gone free at any time, so long as he agreed to give up preaching. But as he was firmly persuaded that he had been called by God to this ministry, he was completely unwilling to abandon his calling. He thus spent the next twelve years in prison, largely cut off from his wife, children, friends, and church.

I say "largely cut off" for, strange as it may seem, it

appears that Bunyan was occasionally let out "to see his family or make brief trips."{18} Of course, this was the exception and not the rule. Nevertheless, by "the standards of the seventeenth century the conditions in which he was held were not particularly brutal."{19} On the other hand, Bunyan was largely fortunate in this respect: "hundreds of Dissenters died in prison, and many more came out with their health broken by foul, over-crowded conditions."{20}

Although these qualifications must be admitted, we must never lose sight of the fact that Bunyan was willing to endure twelve long years of this suffering, rather than agree to give up preaching. And thankfully, as we'll see, God brought a great deal of good out of His faithful servant's suffering.

The Pilgrim's Writings

Most people today know John Bunyan as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but this is just one of many works written by the metal-worker turned minister. His first book was written in 1656, when he was twenty-eight years old. But by the time of his death, some thirty-two years later, he had authored fifty-seven more!{21} John Piper notes:

> *The variety in these books was remarkable: books dealing with controversies (like those concerning the Quakers . . . justification and baptism), collections of poems, children's literature, and allegory (like The Holy War and The Life and Death of Mr. Badman). But the vast majority were practical . . . expositions of Scripture built from sermons for the sake of . . . helping Christian pilgrims make their way successfully to heaven.{22}*

What's especially astonishing about the size and variety of Bunyan's literary legacy is that it came from a man with almost no formal education. As a child Bunyan had been taught to read and write, but nothing more. He had no university or

seminary degrees in which to boast. And yet his diligent study of the Bible, born mainly out of a burning desire to find peace with God, made Bunyan mighty in the Scriptures. Indeed the Bible, more than any other book, would be the primary influence upon his many writings. So evident was this to Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth century Baptist preacher, that he once wrote of Bunyan:

> *He had studied our Authorized Version . . . till his whole being was saturated with Scripture; and though his writings are . . . full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress—that sweetest of all prose poems—without continually making us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.*{23}

Not even his suffering in prison could dampen Bunyan's enthusiasm for the Word of God or for writing. Indeed, if anything, it increased it. Some of his best-known works were written from the confines of a prison cell. These include *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, written during his first imprisonment, as well as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, apparently completed during a second, briefer period of imprisonment in 1677.{24} Bunyan's writings are surely one of his greatest gifts to the church.

Lessons from a Suffering Pilgrim

A thoughtful examination of John Bunyan's reflections on the purpose and value of suffering can give us much wisdom in how best to deal with it in our own lives. Near the end of his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, he appended a brief account of his imprisonment in the Bedford jail. In it, he tells of how he tried to prepare himself for imprisonment, and possibly even death, when he realized that he might soon be called upon to suffer for the

cause of Christ. Naturally, as one might well expect, one of the things he did was pray. He was particularly concerned to ask God for the strength to patiently endure his imprisonment, even with an attitude of joy (Col. 1:11).{25}

However, it's the second thing he says that I find especially interesting and helpful. He reflects on the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:9: "[W]e had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (NASB). Commenting on this verse, he then makes the following two observations:

> *By this scripture I was made to see that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. . . . The second was, to live upon God that is invisible; as Paul said in another place, the way not to faint, is to look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen, they are eternal{26}.*

Bunyan realized that, like it or not, suffering, pain, loss and death would all come to him in one way or another. Indeed, sooner or later every single one of us must ultimately face these terrifying realities. How, then, can we best prepare to meet them? As Bunyan reminds us, if we only prepare for prison, say, then we will be unprepared for beatings. But if we stop our preparation with beatings, then we will be unprepared for death. But we cannot evade or cheat death forever. And thus, concludes Bunyan, "the best way to go through sufferings, is to trust in God through Christ, as touching the world to come; and as touching this world."{27} This was how Bunyan lived, and with God's help it was also how he died. May the eternal and unseen God grant each of us the

grace to follow his example.

Notes

1. Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628-1688* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 375, cited in John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 60.
2. W. R. Owens, "Introduction," in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (New York: Penguin, 1987), xxiii.
3. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 49.
4. Ibid., 54.
5. Ibid.
6. Owens, "Introduction," xv.
7. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. W. R. Owens (New York: Penguin, 1987), 8.
8. Ibid., 10.
9. Ibid., 24.
10. Ibid.
11. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 52.
12. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 59.
13. Ibid., 67-68.
14. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 53.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 47.
17. Owens, "Notes," in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 127, n. 137.
18. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 48.
19. Owens, "Introduction," xvi.
20. Ibid.
21. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 60.
22. Ibid., 60-61.
23. Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 159; cited in Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 77.
24. Owens, "Introduction," xvi-xvii.

25. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 79.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

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"This Too Shall Pass"

I wrote this blog post on May 7, 2012, not quite five years ago. I had no idea that by this point, I would hardly be walking, using a scooter 95% of the time and unable to move without a walker for the rest. Pain and serious weakness are my daily companions. As I noticed the counts on my most popular blog posts and discovered this one among the top, I am grateful that the wisdom God gave me five years ago is even more true today. And I am grateful that I can even minister to myself . .

Sometimes it's the simplest things that help us navigate life. The old, old adage "this too shall pass" is one of them.

No matter what trial, grief, trouble or challenge we face, there is comfort in reminding ourselves that it's temporary. Some are very short-lived—the time crunch of a deadline, the pain of recovering from surgery, waiting for results of a test or an application. We can remind ourselves, "By this time next week (or month), this will be behind me. This too shall pass."

Some are very long-term—a permanent disability like my polio or my dear friend Lael Arrington's painful rheumatoid arthritis. The death of a loved one, or a marriage, or a cherished dream. The realization that God is choosing to give us grace for, not deliverance from, our thorn in the flesh. Even so, when we remember that our time on this earth is short

compared to our life on the new earth, we can remind ourselves, “A hundred years from today, this trial will be just a memory. I can either be glad for how I handled it, or regret the short-sighted choices I made. Because this too shall pass.”

It’s helpful to remember that even the good times, the fun times, the stress-free (or low-stress) times will also pass, because life is like that. When we remember everything is temporary, it helps us hold onto sweet moments and days with a looser grasp while reminding ourselves to be grateful for the blessings we’re enjoying because “this too shall pass.” If we are mindful of the transience of the good days, we won’t be devastated when they dissipate.

“This too shall pass” is one way we can live in light of eternity, keeping our earthly life in perspective. When the hard times come, whether moments or years, we can comfort ourselves with the truth that “our momentary, light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison because we are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

When the good times come, we can give thanks for the way they point like signposts to heaven’s unending joy.

Which will NEVER pass away!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/this_too_shall_pass on May 8, 2012.