

Theology Matters

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Losing the Life of Our Dreams: A Christian View of Suffering

by M. Craig Barnes*

One of the high privileges of the pastorate is listening to the stories of those who have made their way into my office. I know these people. I baptize their babies, and watch them grow up in the church. I sit across the table arguing with the church members at committee meetings that go long into the night, and I rush to the hospitals when someone gets sick. I sit beside them as chemotherapy slowly makes its way into their bodies, and I have lied more times than I can remember about how good a wig looks after their hair has fallen out. I've stood before the young couples who exchange vows on the most wonderful day of their lives, and I have also stood over their graves when one of them died way too soon. I know that the suffering of their lives is real.

So when they come to talk to me, we do not speak as strangers. Nor do I sit across from them as the professional therapist who will unlock the mysteries of their life with important insights from their family history. I am the pastor who loves them, and who in prayer places them back into the hands of God--where they have been all along.

Their stories are always different, but never as much as they want to believe. We talk about their relationships, health, work, and the deep, deep, hurts from the past. Sometimes these stories are so severe, I find myself

reaching for the Kleenex before the person who is talking. I can never get used to how it is in our harsh world. But almost always, somewhere in the discussion we get to "the question." It is phrased in different ways, with different levels of intensity, but they always want to know why this awful thing has happened. And behind that question is the even deeper question they are typically afraid to ask--*Why did God let this happen?*

I know this question is as old as Job, but it does seem to be coming up with more frequency in recent generations. Scripture seems to state that "why" is not nearly as good a question as "who." Being reminded of who they were as God's creatures, biblical men and women eventually lost interest in questions like why, and how. But we have recovered a preoccupation with figuring out why our fragile lives have not turned out just right. I suppose that is because we have again become confused about the questions of identity. We are not as clear about the identity of God, and we are certainly not clear about our identity as fragile creatures who were never intended to be whole.

Our Favorite Myth

God can and does transform aspects of our lives. God often heals our pain and binds our wounds. But, wholeness--absence of *all* pain and suffering--will not be

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ours. Suffering is a part of our lives. Yet, the rhetoric of personal wholeness abounds in our society. It floods the self-help book sections of our bookstores as a popularized distortion of the more profound insights of serious psychology. It sells well because we want to believe that it is true. We are dying to find that mythic place of complete perfection in this life where there is no hurt or pain. In fact, suffering has become something of an accusation that we have made mistakes, or worse yet, that we have been not been treated well. The next step is then to assert that we have a right, A RIGHT, to live without this suffering because it is preventing us from being whole.

In an effort to stay relevant to the felt needs of our society, the church has baptized this assumption about personal wholeness, and brought it into the mainstream of our teaching and preaching. It has become the basis of our successful church programs that promise a Christian recovery from the pain of life, and it is one of the unquestioned assumptions in our current debate about sexuality. As soon as someone begins to express a personal need or a painful experience, she or he is immediately granted more authority than all of the teachings of the church over the last two thousand years. Because, well, "How can it be right for someone to be in pain?" We ask that question because we assume we have a right to wholeness which we think means that you should not have to live without the thing that is missing. It is a small step then to assert that no one should have to live in an unhappy marriage, or maintain celibacy just because he or she is not married. We assume that if we have an orientation to a particular sexual activity we should be allowed to act on it, because celibacy will be very difficult, and how could God ask that?

Discussions of personal wholeness have invaded the messages we receive from sermons, retreats, songs and new hymns, and enough religious writing to successfully compete with the secular formulas for self-help. Where we do not find this message, however, is in the Bible.

From the beginning, the Bible has made it clear that we were never intended to have it all. The first two chapters of Genesis give us our only picture for life as God intended it to be lived before sin corrupted the world. That makes this brief passage incredibly important to anyone trying to discover what God had in mind for our lives.

Created Limitations

According to the narrative, after creating the world and human life, God placed Adam and Eve in a garden and told them to take care of it and to enjoy it. They were given the freedom to take whatever they wanted from it, except from the fruit of the tree that was "in the midst of the garden." Something was missing from the middle of their little world, a daily reminder that they did not have it all. The absence of the fruit of that tree from their lives was a critical symbol of Adam and Eve's status as creatures. Creatures do not have it all. The temptation of the serpent was to remind them of this very fact. The reach for the fruit of that tree, the reach for something more than they were

created to have, has become an enduring illustration of our compulsive need to live as something more than creatures. We too believe the serpent that we can be like God, whole and complete, lacking in nothing.

The tragedy of this is that when we become so driven to take what is missing from our lives, we find that we have lost the garden that was really pretty good even without the fruit that was missing from our diets. At the time we were reaching for more, we were not thinking about the nine hundred and ninety-nine other wonderful trees that were all ours. When men and women destroy their families trying to find a new passion in life, they are not thinking about all the wonderful things that exist in that family. When people work themselves to exhaustion trying to become successful, they are not thinking about the daily blessings of health and relationships that are being tossed aside. When they demand to exercise their sexuality outside of the biblical norm of fidelity within marriage, they are not thinking about all of the other garden God has given them. Forgetting about that, they allow themselves to be defined by the tree that is missing-- "What am I going to do about this thing I don't have?"

One day, while my family was on vacation, we launched into a huge 3,000 piece jigsaw puzzle. As we sat at the kitchen table and slowly assembled it, we did the things that families do well--we told stories, we laughed, we teased each other, and we enjoyed the precious moment that we had. As evening approached, the puzzle picture started to form and I got much more interested in "getting this thing done." Much to my horror, when we got to the end, there was one piece missing. At first, we all looked under the table and checked our laps and clothing. Still, no missing piece. Then I became obsessed with finding it. I looked everywhere--under the sofa, behind the refrigerator, even in the dog's mouth. I tried to get the rest of the family to join me in this frantic search, but no, they were too busy still laughing and being the family. I did not care about that stuff any more. "What about this missing piece? How could anybody be having a good time when a piece was missing?"

There is not a one of us who has all the pieces to life's puzzle. We can decide that the picture is still pretty good even without the missing piece. We can decide to enjoy the laughter and love we find along the way as we assemble life. Or we can forget about all of that, and make those around us miserable by insisting on finding the one thing we do not have. Essentially, it is a decision to be either a creature or a creator.

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If we are convinced that the purpose of our lives is not to become gods, then it is easier to use these lives to glorify and enjoy the true God. The simple truth is that it is easier to do that as a people who confess our need for a savior,

then as people who pretend to be our own saviors. We glorify God not by getting life just right, but by witnessing to the mercy of God who loves us and brings us into his broken body called the church.

Rehearsing Identity

Every Sunday we Presbyterians gather into a great a diversity of churches. Some of our congregations are very small and humble. Others are huge and ornate. But we all do one thing that is pretty critical to our identity. At some point in the worship service, we confess the truth. If we take the Prayer of Confession seriously, it is pretty frightening business. It is hard enough to tell ourselves the truth. Telling God the truth can be overwhelming. Week after week we remind ourselves that we have reached for things we were never intended to have, and we have not been thankful for nine hundred and ninety-nine blessings that abound in our garden. We have hurt others, we have hurt ourselves, and we have hurt our relationship with God. It is not just our sins that we confess, but our inclination to sin. After all these years we still spend our days trying to become something more than creatures who have things missing from the midst of our lives. But then we hear those words that still amaze me every time, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." We get so excited we have to jump to our feet to sing the Gloria Patri.

I think that is already high drama, but it is never the end of the story. As we tell the truth, our hearts are made open to the even deeper truth of God's Word as it comes to us from the Bible, the sermon and the sacraments. It is always a word of hope because it draws us to the amazing grace of God. Nothing is more amazing to me than the discovery that God has a purpose for our broken lives. In the words of Isaiah, "we are his witnesses." We leave worship renewed in our vision to watch and to witness to the marvelous things that God is doing in our lives and in the world around us. We call that the mission of the church.

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Now we are ready to talk about wholeness. Not our personal wholeness, but God's whole purposes for salvation and redemption in the world. We throw our lives into this divine activity, and commit our lives to the work of Christ in the world. We do that not as people who have been given a perfect-suffering-free existence by the savior, but as a people who left those expectations behind, when we picked up our own crosses to follow him.

All of this makes Christians rather unique in the world. We are unique in our mission of following Christ, we are unique in telling the truth about our need for a savior, and we are certainly unique in abandoning the quest for

personal wholeness. But that is not our most distinctive mark as Christians. I believe the followers of Christ are made unique in the world most of all by our gratitude. Christians have the audacity to be thankful, even when their lives are riddled with missing pieces, because we have discovered that our hope is not in finding the life we want but in being found by a savior who has come looking for those who lost their way chasing dreams. It is out of that gratitude that we then give our lives over to following Christ into every dark corner of the world in need of salvation.

The Use for Suffering

The Old Testament speaks with great beauty about the *Shalom* of God that provides an all inclusive peace and restoration of the earth and its created inhabitants. People of faith have learned to pray for this shalom and to work for approximations of it by doing justice, and loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. That is the wholeness to which we are committed, praying and working for God's restoration of all our relationships. But according to our Scriptures, the operative dynamic behind shalom is that it comes as a grace from God. We work toward it only as a way of worshiping God who alone brings redemption and restoration to the earth, someday.

Actually, we are better witnesses to God's shalom as a people who know we are dependent on God then as those who are on a quest to recreate life into our own image of goodness. About this the Bible is very clear--God created our lives without giving us all we wanted, and then called this created order "good." What does this mean for those who have an orientation toward a sexuality activity that the Bible clearly proscribes? What does it mean for those who have an orientation to alcoholism, or other addictive behavior? Clearly what it does not mean is that we can act on impulses that further distort God's image in our lives. We all spend life aware that we have to resist some particular fruit we seem disposed to take. For some that temptation seems so great. The fact remains that the order God has created and called good, has to be good enough for those humble enough to live in the hands of a Creator.

The Bible makes it painfully clear that every time we demand shalom on our terms, in our timing, we have to take control from God who is always too slow and mysterious to be trusted. In the process, of course, we distort shalom into something much less than peace for all the earth. When wholeness becomes a personal agenda, it always comes at the cost of God's intended shalom for creation.

When we move from the old to the new covenant in the Bible, we find all creatures looking for the creation of a New City with the river of the water of life "flowing from the throne of God and from the Lamb" (Revelation 22:2). On either side of the river is the tree of life, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. We are told there will be no more night because of the glorious light provided by the reign of the Lord God. That is the Christian vision of restoration and redemption. Like those

who have gone before us, we too work for approximations of that vision, but all our work is only a witness to the real Savior Jesus Christ who breaks into our world with his reign.

Jesus did not heal and feed broken, hungry lives in order to make people whole. This is obvious because they all got sick and hungry again. The purpose of his miracles of compassion was to draw our attention to the Incarnation of God, who alone is whole and complete. In fact, it was when the crowds discovered that Jesus' mission transcended their personal concerns that they abandoned him to his cross. There he died for the sins of the world, not the least of which was our obsession with getting the life of our dreams. As Jesus kept trying to tell us, it is not until we lose the life of our dreams that we will be able to receive the dreams he was dying to give us.

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So let us be careful about assuming that it is a Christian mission to relieve all suffering. Certainly we are called to give the cup of cold water in Jesus' name, to feed the hungry, to give shelter to the homeless, and to visit those

in prison. Certainly we are called to work for justice and to show compassion and mercy. But we do all of that as a witness to the Savior. What we must avoid is the temptation to become the savior.

The Choice

So what do I tell my beloved parishioners when they unveil their suffering before their pastor? Of course, it depends on suffering they are enduring. I do not tell abused women to stay with the men who are beating them. I do not tell victims of racism, or sexism that they have to put up with that injustice. I do not tell people who are in lousy jobs, or churches, or even marriages that they can never leave. But what I dare not say is that suffering is always evil, and that they should never hurt. There are some things that break God's heart, and to have a broken heart is sometimes the only reasonable response to the events of life. I do not reassure them that if they just make better choices, or if they are very careful, or if they just get healthy again, well, then everything will be fine for them. And I never tell them they have a right to get what they want in life. That would be the worst thing I could do.

For each of us there will always be something in the midst of the garden that is missing. That forces a choice upon us. Either it can drive us crazy with desire, or it can become the altar where it is easiest for us to kneel before the Lord our Maker.

The Terrible Necessity of Tribulation: C.S. Lewis on Human Suffering

by James R. Edwards*

Not long ago a pastor was lamenting the moral and theological collapse of his denomination. His one hope in what seemed an otherwise hopeless situation was to retire and get on the pension plan before the bottom fell out of things.

Whether or not we think this attitude admirable, each of us can recognize ourselves in the pastor's attempt to shield himself from uncertainties, dangers, and suffering. Avoidance of suffering is as natural as it is advisable, unless, of course, avoidance comes at the expense of morality and personal integrity. But advisable or not, suffering is not always escapable. And neither is the question why suffering befalls us.

I make no claim to having anything original to say on this subject. I have, however, been helped by what C.S. Lewis has to say about it, and I should like to review the main thesis of his chief work on the subject, *The Problem of Pain*.

Lewis observes that all religions have at least two things in common: the sense of the numinous, and consciousness of a moral law. By numinous he refers to the sense of awe, mystery, and even dread that people feel for powers that lie beyond everyday experience. Imagine yourself walking alone unarmed through a woods in which you suspect there are grizzly bears, and you have some inkling of how primitive man in particular felt about the supernatural.

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Consciousness of the moral law is more obvious. It is essentially what Lewis calls the rules of fair play that are universally recognized and approved.

Surprisingly, in many if not most religions the numinous and the moral exist independently of each other in the form of non-moral religion and non-religious morality. The Jews, however, understood them to be combined, for God is “the *righteous* Lord.” Indeed this very God, according to Christians, became an actual human being in Jesus of Nazareth. Now, it is the very goodness of God, especially as it is manifested in the Incarnation, that makes pain and suffering so intolerable, “for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.”

This brings us to the problem of theodicy, an experience (if not a word) that we all know. “‘If God were good,’ says Lewis, ‘He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.’ This is the problem of pain, in its simplest form.” People often impugn God by saying that if he were all powerful or truly loving he would not allow certain things to happen. Lewis reminds us, however, that the fixed nature of the world is precisely what makes human freedom and human life possible. If the world were like a chess game in which every bad move could be revoked, there would be no game. “Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you will find that you have excluded life itself.”

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The first order of business in thinking about theodicy lies in reconsidering the meaning of terms like “goodness” and “love.” Lewis begins with the premise that “if God is wiser than we His judgments will differ from ours on many things, and not least on good and evil. What seems to us good may therefore not be good in His eyes, and what seems to us evil may not be evil.” Above all, God’s love is not to be confused with mere kindness or niceness. God’s job is not simply to keep his creatures happy or contented; he wills to see them changed, ultimately into his own likeness. “It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms; with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes. If God is love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness.”

There are many kinds of love, according to Lewis. Love of animals is one kind, which itself illustrates divine love, for a master tames a dog that he may love it, not that it may

love him; and that it may serve him, not that he may serve it. A higher form is the love of parent for child, with authoritative love on the parental side, and obedient love on the child’s. The highest form of love is conjugal love, which in Scripture symbolizes Christ’s love for the church. This most perfect form of love, ironically, causes the most pain, for “it demands the perfecting of the beloved; that mere ‘kindness’ which tolerates anything except suffering in its object is at the opposite pole from Love.” True love wills the perfecting of the beloved, and this intensifies the problem of suffering. We were, after all, not made simply that we might love God, but above all that he might love us. “To ask that God should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God; because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable.”

This results in quite an amazing paradox, for when we suffer we often accuse God of too little love. The truth is actually the reverse; our pain in such instances is the result of “a love that will not let us go,” to quote the hymnist. God “intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want. Once more, we are embarrassed by the intolerable compliment, by too much love, not too little.”

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If divine benevolence needs rethinking, so does the state of humanity, and especially human wickedness. True love, we noted is willing to cause pain to the beloved in order to make it more lovable. But moderns do not think themselves unlovable, and in their natural state they do not think themselves wicked. There are two principal reasons why we no longer accept the traditional Christian analysis that humanity has abused its free will and become very bad. One, according to Lewis, is that in the past hundred years kindness has eclipsed all other virtues and become virtually the sole norm of morality. “Most of us do not feel anything except kindness to be really good and cruelty to be really bad.” A terrible irony results, however, for we are an increasingly cruel people. This is so because “every vice leads to cruelty. Even a good emotion, pity, if not controlled by charity and justice, leads through anger to cruelty.”

A second reason we no longer think ourselves bad is due to the dismantling of guilt and shame in our day. Until recent times, guilt was like the red light on the dashboard of a car, warning of a malfunction in the engine. But modern psychology has taught us to view guilt and shame as “repressive.” Former generations considered cowardice, unchastity, deception, greed and so forth to be despicable,

but today we are encouraged to “get them out into the open” on the ground that they are not shameful but natural. A generation that denies its evil, of course, will misjudge the wrath of God against evil as something barbarous.

A recovery of the sense of sin is thus essential for apprehending the gospel. Christian evangelists and apologists must today establish the first condition--the sinfulness of humanity--before they can turn to its antidote in the cross of Christ. Lewis enumerates eight further reasons why people today do not think themselves bad. These include false comparisons (“I’m not as bad as so-and-so”), emphasizing social evils and minimizing individual sins, shifting responsibility for personal sins to social causes, and “safety in numbers” mentality (“Surely God won’t send the whole world to hell”).

If truth be told--and the gospel tells it--the human creature is a rebel in the universe, in revolt against his or her rightful Lord and Master. We have, by our misuse of the God-given gift of freedom, elevated self in place of God and ruined an innate divine likeness, spoiled a supernatural consciousness that could prevail over our bodily needs and the material world around us in a way comparable to the powers that Jesus possessed. One of the costs of our revolt was the forfeiture of this special charism of consciousness and a devolvement to a baser animal status. In this state, souls become wicked, and they use the possibilities inherent in freedom to inflict pain on others and hurt them. The vast majority of the suffering in the world is due to this misuse of human freedom and has nothing to do with God’s will. But not all of it is, believes Lewis. God can and does use pain as a physician uses medicine, as a remedial and corrective good to bring the human creature back into relationship with his or her Creator, where the creature will itself become good, happy, and fulfilled.

The first answer to the question why redemption is painful is a simple one: it is a painful process--the Bible calls it a mortification (Colossians 3:5)--for a habitually swollen and defiant will to humble itself and surrender to God. But what might cause a human will to surrender? Certainly not blissfulness. Pain is a tool of God reminding us that all is not well. “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Lewis makes no apologies for the severity of the medicine--a severity necessitated by human wickedness, however, and not by divine malevolence. “Pain is a terrible instrument: it may lead to final and unrepentant rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul.”

Second, pain also reminds us that what we “have” is not our own and not enough for us. Sometimes God must take things from us--perhaps even loved ones--to shatter the illusion of self-sufficiency, and to serve notice that our comfortable possessions and allegiances are insufficient for our eternal destiny.

Third, pain is the inevitable consequence of choosing God’s will over our own. When a fallen creature *wills* to love and obey a holy God, it is doing something contrary to its

nature, cutting across the grain as old as DNA itself. Lewis calls repentance and obedience a movement “full speed astern,” the undoing of the rebellion of the first Adam for the salvation of the Last Adam.

In short, the world is “a vale of soul-making,” according to Lewis, and necessarily so, since tribulation is the only way, despite its disagreeableness, that a loving Creator can remind sovereign rebel wills that their final good is not in themselves but in God alone, and through that pain draw them, if possible, to himself. Only empty hands can be filled; God must relieve us of our own treasures in order to give us the supreme treasure of Jesus Christ.

Suffering thus has the potential of reducing the rebel will and restoring it to reliance on God. And, despite its unpleasantness, it appears to be doing its job. It will not cease until “God sees the world to be either redeemed or no further redeemable.” This not only banishes utopian promises and ideals; it is a healthy reminder that trials and tribulations are not an alien intrusion in life, but a necessary and constant part of life, coaxing and prodding us away from our illusion of self-sufficiency--even wrenching it from us when necessary--to restore us to our rightful image and good.

C. S. Lewis saw the world as a place of *longing*. It could not be otherwise for creatures who have fallen from a pristine state and still carry, despite their feverous attempts to erase it, the residual memory of paradise. All true joys in life hold the promise of greater and final joy to come, but all worldly joys are equally transitory, lest we settle for appetizers instead of feasting at the banquet prepared for us. Lewis was utterly convinced that human life was an either-or. Either God will make us fully like himself as fit partners for eternity, or we will retain management of our souls for eternity in hell. In *The Great Divorce* he put it unforgettably, “There are only two kinds of people in the end; those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’” “All that you are, sins apart, is destined, if you will let God have His good way, to utter satisfaction,” says Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*.

C.S. Lewis believed that God alone could fulfill the deep longing of his creatures, and that when he did life would be full, good, and happy. The terrible necessity of tribulation is God’s last resort to restore the rebel will to the divine image, to bring those whom he loves “further up and further in.”

Other works by C.S. Lewis which deal with suffering:

*The Great Divorce; The Screwtape Letters
The Last Battle(Chronicles of Narnia Series)*

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 2 Cor 4:7-10

Baptized into Christ's Death

by Shirley Smith*

Dedicated in loving memory of Mr. Jackie Futrell: a man who taught us all how to suffer with grace.

“What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:1-3 NIV)

“For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” (2 Corinthians 1:5 NIV)

“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Galatians 6:14 NIV)

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:12-13 NIV)

In his poem, “Musee des Beaux Arts,” W.H. Auden has this to say about suffering:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window
or just walking dully along;
How when the aged are reverently, passionately
waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen,
skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its
course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where dogs go on with their doggy life and the
torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun
shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the
green

Green water; and the expensive delicate ship that
must have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.”

Auden understood the two things about human suffering that makes it so very difficult to deal with in any effective way. It is universal and it is subjective and because of this we often ignore anyone's pain but our own. So universal is it, that merely by it's scope, we are often deadened to it on any but the most minute of scales. And yet, so subjective is it, that we cannot escape dealing with the issue of suffering when it comes to examining our own personal lives for signs of pain. So we walk the tightrope that is tethered between being overly aware of its presence in the world and being numbed by that very knowledge.

Suffering is a reality that goes on all around us whether we choose to acknowledge its presence or not. While we may find it easy to stand in the kitchen nightly, washing dishes and thinking pretty thoughts, others in this world, in our churches, in our own households are harboring within them demons of pain that render them as motionless as the paralytic man who lived his life lying on a mat. It is that kind of pain and suffering, the kind brought about by sins and circumstances beyond our control, the kind of pain brought about by making decisions in the heat of the moment, that the typical pastor must grapple with each and everyday as he/she leaves the comfort of the church office and steps into the reality of a world groaning in travail.

Only the mystery of the cross can shed light on the darkness of human suffering. It is Jesus Christ's birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection that gives to our lives the meaning we so long for. But the truth is that we often despise the meaning ascribed to our lives via the Scriptures. For the meaning given to us as children of the living God, often entails suffering. In fact, our commitment to the Christian faith ensures that pain and tragedy will be a part of our lives and we confirm this each and every time we baptize a person into the faith.

In Romans 6:3-4 an answer to the question “Why do we suffer?” is provided if only we will listen. “Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Being baptized into Christ's death means for us a certain amount of pain and suffering in our lives as we experience our own sort of crucifixion, be it cancer or accident or dysfunction. This seems a harsh truth

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for many Christians to live with. Yet, if we take our baptisms seriously, we must admit that the receiving of this sacrament--the reality of being crucified with Christ--plunges us into a realm of being in which we begin to understand more fully his sufferings because of the suffering we ourselves endure. Our personal experience of pain and suffering helps us finally to recognize at least part of what Christ experienced as he hung on a cross and died so that we may live.

Understanding human suffering in terms of part of the bargain we make when we are baptized into the Christian faith is for many people an unpalatable idea. But the Scriptures are plain in this regard. At some point in time we must take our blinders off and recognize that making a commitment to Christ is not something we do to guarantee for ourselves a life filled with bliss, but says to our Lord and Savior, "I am with you, in the good times and the bad, I am with you."

I began to understand more fully what it means to be baptized into Christ's death as I watched my friend Jackie Futrell die of bone cancer. When he cried out to me for prayers for his baptism to finally be completed, I began to understand that here was a human being who had profound knowledge of what it meant to be a baptized member of the body of Christ. He was experiencing his own kind of crucifixion while life went on all around him. With the exception of his family members and a few of his friends, most had no idea of the depth of pain he endured. Most never saw that it was endured with grace and often joy because in his suffering he felt a closeness and kinship with the one he called Lord and Savior. His suffering was not limited to the extraordinary physical pain he endured but extended out into concern for the welfare of his beloved wife, his three children and his grandson. The pain he felt at the thought of being separated from them by death was at least as great as was his physical pain. But all was not lost, for just as he believed this awful experience to be a part of his baptism, he also understood that his hope for the future and the future of his family lay in exactly the same spot as did his pain. For just as he was baptized into the death of his Savior, he was also baptized into the new life promised to those who believe.

Following his death I began to understand in a new way, the profound reality of what it means to be baptized into Christ. Part of our baptism promises us that pain and suffering will come our way. We cannot predict how that pain will be precipitated out into our lives, but we can be sure that it will be ours. However, that is not the end of the story. Just as we are baptized into his death, we are also baptized into new life and therein lies our promise of release from the suffering we all too often flee. Where our suffering meets the sufferings of Christ lies that mystic sweet communion so many long for.

It is the cross and Christ crucified that ascribes meaning to our pain, as well as, the cross that offers us hope in the sure face of seeming hopelessness. For many this will not be a sufficient response to the problem of human suffering. After all, how does one translate this message into a

language that a young girl can understand who lost her legs when a land mine exploded in Nicaragua? Did Christ himself not experience the inability to use his legs as they were nailed to a wooden beam? How does one include in this idea of being baptized into the faith, the loneliness that a young man in Haiti experienced when his village ostracized him because to them the sixth finger on his hand meant he was demon possessed? Did Christ himself not experience utter loneliness on his way to Calvary? How did his own community of Nazareth treat him?

It is the cross and Christ crucified that ascribes meaning to our pain as well as the cross that offers us hope in the sure face of seeming hopelessness

For those whose main arsenal in life is the Word and the sacraments, this provides ample information in response to the question of why people suffer. Many will take up feminist Dorothee Soelle's cry that this framework perpetuates the idea that God indeed is masochistic. If that were so, then only the crucifixion would have taken place. Yet, out of his mercy God also raised Christ from the dead offering us the promise of new life. Finally there are those who would say that this only perpetuates a sort of passive acceptance of suffering that benefits no one. To those people, I would say that indeed there are forms of suffering to which we have no choice except to submit. We can fight cancer with chemotherapy, but our bodies continue to undergo pain regardless of our efforts.

We can respond to pain by dashing the cross to pieces and claiming that we no longer have need of it. We can devise sociological categories for managing the whole idea of pain. We can implore those who suffer to fight back, to take steps necessary to escape the pain their bodies feel. Or, we can finally accept that being a Christian entails a certain amount of pain and that if we listen to it we might just find a new sense of meaning in sharing in the sufferings of Christ and a new sense of life as we too begin the process of being raised up out of the depths.

The most powerful word we can speak to someone in danger of being consumed by pain is that you are not alone in this and here is why. We can call God names, we can throw out theology altogether or we can construct new ways of categorizing human pain in a manner that will make it appear more manageable. In the end all we will have done is throw more words at something that can only be understood in terms of the physical reality of the cross at Calvary and what happened there so long ago. Indeed suffering does seem meaningless and tragic without the intrusion of the cross into its midst. It is that cross and the suffering endured upon it that turns suffering not into an extended wake but an opportunity to celebrate our coming into communion with Christ himself. To Him be all glory forever more.

Theology Matters, Vol 2, No. 2, Mar/Apr 1996 with articles: “Keeping Faithful: Homosexuality and Ordination” by the Rev. Dr. Jack Haberer, “The Bible and the Practice of Homosexuality” by Dr. James R. Edwards, and “Why We Believe in Heresy” by Dr. Thomas Oden, is an important resource as you prepare to discuss and vote on the changes to the *Book of Order* regarding the ordination of people practicing homosexuality. **These changes were approved by the 1996 General Assembly but must be approved by a majority of the presbyteries to be incorporated into the *Book of Order*.** For copies of *Theology Matters* to give to members of your church or presbytery, write or call, Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062, (540) 552-5325.

IMPORTANT NEW BOOKS

***When God Interrupts: Finding New Life Through Unwanted Change* by Dr. M. Craig Barnes** (InterVarsity Press, 1996) “If easy answers and ‘Praise the Lord anyway!’ theologies are not your cup of tea, then you’ll find Craig Barnes’ book *When God Interrupts* to be of great encouragement along the hard road of trying to follow Jesus amidst a broken world. The book is really about conversion--how God works through and redeems all of those unwanted interruptions to our best laid plans in order to turn us more and more to Himself. In doing so, Barnes anchors himself in that most frightening and comforting of books, the Bible, to remind us that what really matters is that, when all is said and done--and gone from our lives (i.e. success, health, family, false images of God, etc.)--only the One, True, Living God really matters. Barnes writes out of the crucible of his own suffering. He writes as an evangelical Christian who is convinced that authentic hope and joy arise, not out of God giving us a new identity, but out of God graciously interrupting our lives in ways that enable us to discover our true identity in Jesus Christ. This book equips real live Christians for real life.” Rev. Dr. Ron Scates, senior pastor, Central Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, MD.

***Death of a Pew Potato* by Greg Gregoris** (1995) “This is a humorous and inspiring book about the role God might be calling believers to fill in their church. Gregoris, a layman at Bunker Hill Presbyterian Church in NJ, points out that a number of the heroes of the Bible started out as pew potatoes, until God got involved, changing their lives dramatically. Autobiographical in its story, it is nonetheless motivational in its impact, inspiring lay men and women to get more involved in their local church because that is where the action and the satisfaction are found.” Rev. Mark Atkinson, Bunker Hill Presbyterian Church, Sewell, NJ. Mark is a member of the Board of Directors of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry.

Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark

CHAPTER 9

(chapter 10 will follow in the next issue)

of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Observe the Text to understand the author’s meaning:

Read 9:1-8 In vs 1 Jesus probably was talking about his resurrection which would be a manifestation of the Kingdom of God.

Peter who confessed Christ, then denied him, is now one of the three who sees the transfiguration. This is a glimpse into heaven. Compare vs 3 to Rev 1:12-17, Daniel 7:9-10,13-14, Ezekiel 1:26-28, Exodus 34:28-29,34-35.

Can you speculate on why Jesus took these three with him. James and John were brothers. See 1:16-19, Acts 3:16(this is where Jesus changes “Simon” to “Peter”) What roles did they play later. See Acts 1:13, 15.

Why do Elijah and Moses appear? What do we associate with them? See Malachi 4:4-6.

What is Peter’s response to this heavenly visitation?

Why does this seem strange to us now but would have made perfect sense to Peter who envisioned a Messiah King after the order of Solomon and David? Peter is drawing an analogy with the OT when God’s glory filled the temple and God dwelt there. 1 Kings 8:11, 8:22ff.

In vs 6 what is one motivation for Peter’s response?

In vs 7 God speaks again. Notice the clouds are similar to Dan 7. What does God say? Where has God said this before in Mark?

In these few words, how does God identify Jesus to set him apart from human beings, even from Elijah and Moses?

What is God's command to the disciples?
Give another word for "listen." The prophets prefixed their statements with "Thus saith the Lord"--see Ex 20:1, Jeremiah, 9:23, 10:1-2. The command in Scripture was always, "listen to God." Now God is saying that same thing about Jesus-- "listen to him."

Read 9:9-13. Notice again in vs 9 the call to secrecy until after the resurrection. They had just seen Moses and Elijah and now Jesus talks about rising from the dead. Understandably they are confused!

Then the disciples ask about Elijah. It is interesting here that they attribute the notion of Elijah's return to the scribes rather than "it has been said" or "the law" or "Malachi." Elijah is mentioned in Malachi 4:6-8. In Acts 4:13, Peter and John are called "uneducated and untrained" so probably their understanding of the OT came from the teaching of the scribes--which is part of the problem.

Who is Jesus referring to when he says Elijah has indeed come? Jesus is not saying that John is the re-incarnation of Elijah, what is he saying? Jesus shows the OT was fulfilled but not the way the disciples expected it.

Read 9:14-29. When Jesus returns with James, John and Peter, a group of scribes are arguing with the disciples. Want to speculate on what they are saying based on the rest of the narrative?

What is the problem? How did the father ask the disciples to cure his son? Who has the unbelief that Jesus speaks about? Why do you think Jesus made a point of how long the boy had this problem?

Jesus speaks and the spirit comes out, why do you think Jesus allowed the boy to cry out and go into terrible convulsions? Again notice the difference between before and after--this is similar to chapter 5, the man among the tombs.

Was the father changed from vs 18 to vs 24 by Jesus' questions and comments? What drove the father to Jesus and the disciples? Jesus was not just a magic healer that people could "tell" to heal them. He was the Son of God, who would only heal when faith was present. See 6:5-6.

When the disciples ask why they could not heal the boy, what is Jesus' answer? What does Jesus mean? Who are they to seek power from?

Read 9:30-32. Notice again the call for secrecy. Again, Jesus tells his disciples what to expect in the coming days. Notice how plain and clear Jesus makes his statement-- "they will kill him and when he has been killed..." 8:32

also said that Jesus "was stating the matter plainly." Why the need for this clarity? Why is Jesus repeatedly telling his disciples the depressing things that lie ahead?

Notice when the boy in the previous narrative is healed, he looks dead and Jesus "raised him."

In spite of the clarity and repetition what is the response of the disciples? What could have made the disciples "afraid to ask Him?" Perhaps the word, "betrayed" or "delivered"--they may have been afraid it was one of them who would betray him.

Read 9: 33-37. Notice Jesus is in Capernaum--still around the Sea of Galilee in the north. Jesus, their leader, is talking about being killed and the disciples are arguing over which of them is the greatest. The disciples were still thinking in terms of royalty, a Kingdom like David's, pomp and circumstance, wealth, earthly power. With all the multitudes following them, with Jesus' power to heal and feed, they must have envisioned a kingdom without death, without suffering, with only joy and glory. And it will be like that but not yet!

Jesus turns their model of the kingdom upside down and talks about servanthood. What does it mean to be "servant of all." How was Jesus servant of all?

What does servant of all mean in terms of our relationship with God? with Others? Who is our master?
What does Jesus say servanthood is according to vs 36-37?

Read 9:38-50. Jesus then talks about who is for and who is against him. Who do the disciples suggest is against him in vs 38-39?

What is the man doing? Why do the disciples object to him? What motivates them right after this discussion on who is greatest?

Jesus however, suggests that while he may be a counterfeit, he is doing no harm because he casts out demons in Jesus' name. How does Jesus know who is with and who is against him?

Then Jesus gives some examples of those who are for and those who are against him. Who is for Jesus in vs 41?

Christ is preparing the disciples for the crucifixion and resurrection. He is explaining what his death means, what their roles will be and eventually what their death will mean. So given that understanding, who are the ones who may cause stumbling in the next weeks as Jesus moves toward the cross? Pharisees, scribes, Jews (Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ--part of the body is cut off), others?

Notice it is not just giving "anyone" or "everyone" a cup of water but to do it precisely because these men are followers of Jesus. To do that is to identify yourself with Jesus, perhaps publicly. While we are to care for others in need, we are to take special care of those within the household of faith.

Who is against Jesus in vs 42?

“Little ones” may mean “humble one” and not child. Also notice these are ones who believe. So the issue is a spiritual one--causing one with little faith to stumble in their faith. Can you think of any example where we cause one another to stumble?

What does vs 49 mean?

Again in light of the cross and coming suffering?

Remembering that “salt” and “fire” are used in Scripture to purify, there will be suffering but it has purpose--it is still according to God’s will and plan.

What is the distinction that Jesus makes between the person casting out demons in his name in vs 38-39 and those that cause others to stumble?

What is the difference in their fruit? What is the fate of each? Those who cause others to stumble as well as those who bear fruit for Christ will experience fire. What will it do to the one group? to the other?

What does vs 50 mean?

It seems here Christ uses “salt” as a preservative, although it also could be seen as a purifier. Preserving what?

Who are they at peace with? the world? or each other?

Interpret the Text:

1. Jesus has just given them a glimpse of his heavenly glory. This is a high point. But what do we learn from his teachings about the nature of the kingdom of God for Jesus and the disciples? What is Jesus telling them about their future.

2. Throughout Mark, Jesus has absolute power to heal physical problems, cast out demons, etc. But there is always a relationship between physical healing and spiritual healing. What is that?

While Jesus’ miracles are ways God cares for the “sheep”, and shows his sovereignty over every situation, he did not come to eliminate every disease, but to show who he is and to bring spiritual healing.

3. What in this chapter causes suffering? for the disciples? for the Pharisees? Can suffering be “good?” Is it always to be feared and avoided?

4. Where do you see grace in this chapter? judgment?

BIBLE STUDY NOTES

(Compare these notes to your thoughts after you have looked at the passages and answered the questions yourself)

Mark 9:1-8. These three were leaders, mentioned first in the list in Acts and then Peter immediately stands up and takes control. Peter preaches the first sermon in Acts 2:14. In Acts 3:1 Peter and John go up to the temple. Acts 4:1-3, 13, 18-19 Peter and John are put in jail. In Acts 12:1-2 James is martyred. (Stephen was already martyred in Acts 7--so James was not the first martyr but the first disciple who was martyred)

Calvin also suggests that the transfiguration showed these men that Jesus went willingly to the cross in obedience to the Father. The transfiguration shows Christ is fully divine, even though his divinity is “hidden under the veil of the flesh.”

Mark 9:14-29. There are two ways to interpret Jesus’ answer to the disciples--first that the spirit was particularly strong and needed more power from God to be removed. But he also might have meant that the disciples could not heal, in fact should not heal, when faith was not present. Faith comes from a heart touched by God. So, the disciples’ prayer was for this man to know Jesus as the Son of God with power and authority. In the midst of physical healing, Jesus gives spiritual healing.

Mark 9:33-37. Notice the upside-downness of the kingdom of God. Being greatest is not ruling over princes but caring for a child. When a disciple receives a child, it is Jesus they receive and the Father. Now that is being the greatest! That is wealth, power, authority, prestige, Mother Theresa is an example!

Mark 9:38-50. Then Jesus explains how serious it is to stumble. These can be understood two ways. First, the responsibilities of leadership--we are not to cause others to stumble. Or, it can be understood how serious it is if someone else causes the disciples to stumble.

The importance of the disciples’ mission is to spread the truth about Jesus Christ after his death and resurrection. Being at peace with one another would help their mission, after all they are a small group of men who will be hated just as their leader was hated. They need each other!

A Gathering of Presbyterians Sponsored by the Presbyterian Coalition September 16-17, 1996, Chicago, IL

“This is the right time, the right way, and the right spirit for the church to send a clear word that speaks to the moral confusion of our culture”...In support of the recent GA action on sexuality, this meeting will be for prayer, study and equipping Presbyterians. Speakers will include Rev. Roberta Hestenes, Rev.

John Huffman, Rev. David Dobler.

For more information call or write, PFFM, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062, (540) 552-5325

News from Around the World

THE 208th GENERAL ASSEMBLY is sending to presbyteries for their vote an amendment to the Constitution of the PC(USA) which states: *“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman(W-4.9001) or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.”* **Unless a majority of the presbyteries vote for the amendment, it will die and not affect the Book of Order. No action by a presbytery is equivalent to a “no” vote.**

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY approved changes to the *Book of Order* which would finalize PC(USA) implementation of COCU(Churches of Christ Uniting). The amendments adopted call for the substitution of PC(USA) “administrative commissions” for “bishops” in COCU councils and ordinations. If these enabling amendments to the *Book of Order* are approved by a majority of the presbyteries and COCU is implemented at the national covenanting level, COCU participation at all governing body levels, including the session level, would become mandatory. Although the GA’s polity concerns

were satisfied by the proposed amendments to the *Book of Order* that were adopted, these proposed amendments still do not address the foundational theological issues raised by PC(USA) participation in COCU.

AN OVERTURE OPPOSING PARTIAL BIRTH and late term abortions was disapproved by the GA. The action included rejection of the overture’s request to exclude coverage of partial birth abortions from the denomination’s medical benefits plan. A minority report from the General Assembly Commissioners Committee which asked the GA to “affirm that partial birth abortion of a live fetus, except to save the life of a mother, falls short of God’s plan for humankind” was also rejected.

THE GA ASKED THE BOARD OF PENSIONS to present a detailed report to the 210th GA(1998) showing how the current “dues stream process” is or is not protecting the relief-of-conscience monies from funding abortions. A preliminary report is to be brought to the 1997 GA.

AFTER SOME SOPHISTICATED POLITICAL MANEUVERING, the General Assembly agreed to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The 189 page Platform for Action was not available for commissioners to read prior to their voting.

Come Join Us Working for Renewal in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Join us in being a voice calling the Presbyterian Church(USA) and individual Presbyterians back to Reformed Christian faith rooted in Scripture and our Confessions while also rejecting false gods and their ideologies.

_____ **Enclosed are names and addresses of people I think would be interested in receiving *Theology Matters*.**

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes eight clergy and two lay people, six women and four men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)’s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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