

The Forgotten Value

BOB LAMSE was an elder of Wooddale Church in the 1970s. He owned and operated Carousel Porsche-Audi in suburban Minneapolis until he sold the business and moved to Georgia and then to Florida. In 1990 he was diagnosed with cancer that eventually took his life. Shortly after the initial diagnosis he underwent major surgery in south Florida. I was there to see him before the operation and waited until he was brought from the recovery room.

As I stood by his bed, it was obvious that Bob was in great pain in spite of the medical efforts to make him comfortable. He asked me to come closer. I bent over, and through the pain he whispered words into my ear that I will never forget. He said, “Leith, it is such an honor for me to experience just a little bit of the kind of suffering which I know Jesus experienced for me on the cross.”

In the midst of his anguish, Bob Lamse acknowledged the forgotten value of Christianity—suffering. My heart was heavy for my friend and what he was going through, but my soul was truly touched by the profound discovery of truth Bob declared in his darkest hour.

We live at a time when people become Christians for the sake of happiness. We tend to place high value on ourselves and our comforts. We like everything to be as pleasant and perfect as possible. I see it in myself. I like the weather to be perfect on the outside and the temperature comfortable on the inside; I want good health and good friends and good times.

Many today even go so far as to believe that true Christians never suffer. What a difference from the followers of Jesus Christ in earlier centuries who believed that suffering was a necessary part of the Christian life and an evidence of true faith.

A biblical characteristic of Christianity that makes it a unique religion is the way Christians face and value suffering. What other religion would dare say, “Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2)?

Sources of Suffering

Not all suffering is the same. The Bible lists many different sources of suffering. Determining the source goes a long way toward our response.

Sin

When human sin was born in the Garden of Eden, God clearly explained that sin always brings suffering

(Genesis 3:16-19). Adam and Eve made a tragic choice against God and for sin. It was like releasing a highly contagious virus that spread from person to person and generation to generation. With the epidemic of sin has come universal suffering and inevitable death.

That suffering began with the hard labor of child-birth and the hard labor of making a living. It scarred the environment and genetically altered humanity by making us all sinners. We all suffer directly and indirectly from sin.

The direct consequences of sin come because of what we have done. Immorality can destroy a marriage and bring a sexually transmitted disease. Violence can lead to criminal charges and legal consequences. Uncontrolled temper can damage relationships with those we love most. The list is long. We all sin and we all suffer as a direct result. Current culture minimizes the human responsibility and maximizes the suffering that has turned millions of Americans into self-declared victims. The truth is that much of our suffering is self-induced, whether we admit it or not. When suffering comes as a direct consequence of our sin, our response should be admission of guilt, confession to God, appropriate restitution, and acceptance of the consequences. As painful as all of this may be, suffering the direct consequences of sin can bring us to God as repentant sinners who would otherwise have continued in sin and kept God at a distance.

The indirect consequences of sin are everywhere, affect everyone, and are awful. Sin contaminated earth and humanity with communicable diseases, genetic defects, natural disasters, and the ability of evil to spread its effects upon innocent people. A drunken driver survives a crash that kills a busload of grade-school children. The bullets fired by an angry employee take the lives of a mail room full of postal employees. Children are born with AIDS. Bridges collapse. Fire from a single cigarette destroys an entire town. No one is exempt and no one is excluded. Everyone suffers from the indirect consequences of sin in our world. Perhaps the hardest part is that these consequences seem so senseless, often expressed by those who ask, “Why me?”

We cannot escape sin’s consequences; what we can and must do is decide how we will respond. Some choose to bitterly turn against God for not exempting them from this indiscriminate suffering. Others recognize that it is part of life in a contaminated world and turn to God for comfort and help.

Suffering Christians should ask, “God, is this suffering from you in order to discipline and correct me?”

Discipline

A second source of suffering is discipline from God. Hebrews 12:6 gives us God's perspective on this, telling us that "the Lord disciplines those he loves."

To help us understand, God uses the analogy of human parenthood. Good parents discipline their children because they love them. Because God loves us—His children—He disciplines us, and that discipline often comes in the form of suffering. It is not intended to be punishment. It is intended only for correction. If we misbehave and God does not discipline us, that may indicate that we are not truly Christians.

"I'm going to leave my wife," the man told me. I couldn't believe it. This couple had been married for more than twenty years—happily so, I thought. When I asked why, he said, "I want a change. I want to find another woman." He wasn't leaving because his wife had done anything wrong or because there was another woman. He just wanted a change.

I told him this was a bad choice and called on him as a Christian to reconsider and return to his wife. Amazingly, he acknowledged that what he was going to do was wrong. But after he did it, he said, he would confess his sin to God and God would forgive him.

I thought about this man's situation and his solution for his sin for days before settling on what to tell him. He was right about God forgiving him, I concluded. In many ways I didn't like that conclusion. His plan to sin and then to take such manipulative advantage of God's grace seemed incredible. Yet the Bible teaches that when we confess our sins God is faithful to forgive them (1 John 1:9) and that there is no condemnation for those who are Christians (Romans 8:1). Some might doubt that a true disciple of Jesus Christ would plan and follow through on such direct defiance of God's will. But experience tells me that Christians are still capable of great sin and that God's grace can be classified as "outrageous" by human standards. Yes, I concluded, he could directly disobey God's will, confess his sin after the fact, and be forgiven.

But he also needed to hear about God's discipline. If he is a Christian and he deliberately sins, God promises He will discipline him because the Lord always disciplines those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6). So, he should anticipate suffering to correct him and redirect him as an expression of God's love and commitment to him. On the other hand, if he proceeds with his plan and does not receive discipline from God, he should assume that he is not a Christian. Lack of suffering, of God's discipline in his life, would be a clear indication that he should immediately repent of all sin and accept Jesus Christ into his life in order to become a Christian.

Suffering Christians should ask, "God, is this suffering from you in order to discipline and correct me?" If there is sin, it should be stopped. Under such circumstances every Christian should be grateful for the suffer-

ing that proves God's love. If we can't figure out a connection between the suffering and some sin in our life, and if God does not answer our prayer-question, it is appropriate to conclude that our suffering is not intended as divine discipline for a particular sin.

Persecution

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told of a third source of suffering: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness ..." (Matthew 5:10). A Christian will be treated the way Jesus was treated—and that included persecution.

Persecution is suffering because a person is identified with Jesus Christ and because a person does what is right. Some who are persecuted lose their jobs. Some are divorced for righteousness' sake. Millions have died in this century because they were Christians. In fact, there have been more martyrs for Jesus Christ in the twentieth century than in all of previous history combined.

Persecution can take many different forms. Both the Roman Empire in the early centuries and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century persecuted Christians by taking away their children. That can be a horror worse than physical torture and death. Christians have been ordered to deny their faith or their children will be tortured. Christians have been told to renounce Jesus Christ or their children will be taken away from them and raised as atheists.

In preparation for a visit to China I read some of the writings of Jonathan Chao, who is both a fine theologian and a Sinologist. I was somewhat dismayed to read that Christians in the People's Republic of China consider suffering for Christ an essential evidence of true faith. While visiting Dr. Chao in Taipei I asked him how this could be, because it would mean that there are very few true Christians in the United States or Canada. His answer was quick and significant. He said that our Chinese brothers and sisters in Christ would say that Christians in America suffer persecution in their marriages and families. If that is true, this generation's suffering has been great as divorces have become epidemic and prodigal children numerous.

The diagnosis of suffering because of persecution also begins with a prayer-question to God, asking Him if problems we face are a result of our faithfulness to our Lord. The pain is not less if this is true, but there is a realization that we are privileged to remain faithful when the cost is high.

Origin Unknown

Whenever a Christian suffers it is helpful to determine why. Am I a victim of another's sin? Is it because I have done wrong and God is disciplining me? Or am I being persecuted because I have done right?

And what if it is none of the above? Many Christians are like the Old Testament saint Job, who suffered

severely and never knew why. When we read his famous biography, we learn that Job's troubles resulted because of an extraordinary debate between God and Satan (Job 1). When Satan claims there are no humans who love God and remain faithful to Him unless they get something good in return, God points to Job. That begins a forty-two-chapter biography of misery in which Satan systematically kills Job's children, steals his friends, and destroys his wealth, prestige, power, and health. Job's sufferings are legendary, but he never gives up on God. What is most amazing is often overlooked: Job never knew why he was suffering. God knew. Satan knew. We know. But Job never found out. There was a reason, but it was never made known to Job.

If we cannot pinpoint the source as sin, discipline, or persecution, then we must consider our suffering as of unknown origin. The Bible calls on Christians to do what seems impossible when we face such suffering: to rejoice (James 1:2)! Our joy is not in the pain but in the confidence that God uses such suffering to accomplish great good in our lives.

Think about it. Are not the most important lessons in life more often learned in pain than pleasure? Ask almost any Christian when he or she most significantly experienced the power and presence of God. The vast majority will say it was when suffering from a broken relationship, deep disappointment, physical illness, or other pain. I've not heard of people learning the greatest lessons of life and coming closest to God when winning the lottery or sleeping late on a day off.

Even unknown suffering can have its positive purpose.

Values of Suffering

Christians dare to go beyond endurance of suffering to actually value suffering. We can see and experience good in the pain that others passionately avoid.

Sharing the Experience of Jesus

The value of sharing the suffering experience of Jesus is one of the most wonderful and unusual values of the Christian life. It is what Bob Lamse talked about from his hospital bed. Romans 8:17 explains that "if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

There is a solidarity of suffering that brings and binds people together like little else. It is the comradeship of men and women who have experienced war or cancer or

unemployment or the death of a loved one.

If I talk about a suffering I have never experienced, those who have suffered immediately can tell. No matter how graphically I describe the pain of cancer or the disappointment of a divorce, they know I speak from observation, not from personal experience. If I share my own suffering, I may stumble in my description of losing a job or the death of my father, but any who have traveled those roads know I have traveled them too.

Jesus suffered for us. We can never fully know the horror of His acceptance of human sin and the consequence of death by crucifixion. But those who suffer great pain connect with Jesus in a way that others cannot.

The value is not in the suffering but in what the suffering does: It makes us one with Jesus.

Anticipating the Future

Romans 8:18 says that "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." To grasp the meaning of this, imagine an old-fashioned scale—a fulcrum in the middle, a rod across the top, and a tray on either side hanging from chains. On one side of the scale is present suffering. On the other side is future pleasure. It's overwhelmingly lopsided. No matter how great today's suffering, it is outweighed more than a thousand to one by the glory, thrill, and excitement of future victory guaranteed by God.

Perhaps it is somewhat like the pain of childbirth, the strain of an athlete in competition, or the fear of the soldier in battle. The mother-to-be knows that after the pain comes the baby, and she's worth it. The athlete faces the strain with his eyes on the prize. The soldier endures the fear with the final victory in mind.

Today's suffering is never easy, but someday we'll look back from heaven's perspective and say, "It was all worth it."

Evidence of Christianity

In words a non-Christian can never understand, Peter wrote, "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:16).

I think of American POWs and hostages who, in the midst of terrible abuse and torture and even death, never renounced their country. They suffered because they were Americans and were proud to do so.

Suffering because we bear the name of Jesus has far greater value, for such suffering

proves we are Christians.

When the Romans tried to eliminate the early Christians from their empire, they did horrible things: they

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sent unarmed men and women into combat with armed gladiators, fed them to starving lions, drowned them, burned them alive at stakes, covered them with pitch and lighted them as lanterns to illumine their arenas. The testimony of history says that these believers sang hymns, prayed, and praised God as they died because suffering and dying for Christ was proof they were Christians.

It is hard to identify with either the Christians who went through such horrors or the suffering they endured. We doubt that we could be as heroic or faithful if confronted with similar torture, much less reason that martyrdom proved anything good. Personally, I believe that the grace from God for such situations comes only when we actually need it. We don't have what it takes to be courageously spiritual, but the Holy Spirit will give us the very help we need if that kind of suffering ever comes.

Claiming Comfort

God gives supernatural comfort to Christians because He is "the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). As Christians we can value suffering because of the supernatural comfort we would not receive if we didn't have troubles. Some may think this a masochistic approach, like the man who was asked why he hit himself on the head with a hammer. "Because it feels so good when I stop," he said.

The reality is that we live in a world riddled with suffering. No one is immune from illness, disappointment, hurt, or brokenness. The difference for the Christian is that such suffering is not the path to desperation. It is the channel of God's comfort.

I think of the comfort my wife, Charleen, has given to me. Her cool hand on my face has comforted me when I have been hot with fever. She has held me when I have cried with grief. It is not that I like the troubles, but I greatly value her comfort.

Even more, Christians value the comfort of God that suffering brings: the way He touches us with His hand or when He holds us close. His presence and power are wonderful. It is something that must be experienced to be understood because words are never good enough.

Glorifying God

Another value of Christian suffering that only a Christian can understand is the thrill of glorifying God.

Throughout history, efforts to kill off Christians have often won even more people to Jesus Christ because of the way Christians have suffered and died. When unbelievers see the power of Jesus Christ shining through those suffering, tortured, and martyred they conclude, "Those Christians die differently. They have something I don't have. I want what they've got."

The apostle Peter was a prime example. In John

21:18 Jesus predicted the way Peter would die: "'I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.'" Realizing that these words might not make sense to readers, John added an explanation in the next verse: "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God" (John 21:19).

Tradition says that Jesus' prediction was fulfilled when Peter was crucified in Rome, and that Peter asked to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy to die like Jesus.

Notice that the reason Jesus told Peter about his death was to show the opportunity Peter would have to "glorify God" in the way he died. Peter would suffer in a manner that would make God look good—that's what "glorify" means.

I've watched hundreds of people suffer through heartbreaks, shattered dreams, sickness, business failure, divorce, lost children, and more—suffering but demonstrating the power and presence of God in stunning ways. You could see, feel, and hear God in their lives. In their suffering, they glorified God.

Every Christian has the same opportunity when we suffer for any reason. We can make God look good by demonstrating Christian character, virtue, and grace that cannot be counterfeited. It really doesn't matter whether our suffering is the slight inconvenience in an otherwise wonderful life or the anguish of emotional and physical pain. In every suffering we can glorify God.

Does all this sound new, different, and strange to you? Read and study the Bible for yourself so that you understand the New Testament teaching on the value of suffering.

And then comes the great challenge: When suffering comes to your life, don't run away. Don't curse the pain. Don't become bitter. In the reality of life's pains and problems, discover God himself. In the personal experience of suffering, experience the values of Jesus Christ.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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