

Have you heard someone say, “Why must she suffer so much, she is so good!”? Or “I hope he suffers because what he did was just terrible!” Doesn’t it seem as if we relate to suffering in terms of what is deserved or what isn’t? In other words, we try to make sense out of suffering before we engage it.

No one wants to suffer. Suffering around us makes us uncomfortable as well. So, “does God cause suffering?” Or “if He doesn’t, why does He allow it?” Do you not think that is foremost in the minds of people worrying about Coronavirus? Or those who cannot find a job or struggle with the aftermath of death? Some suffering is logical – if you put your hand in a flame it will burn. And some isn’t, as when we must deal with the loss of a child.

The story of the serpent in the Garden concludes that “suffering is symptom of separation from God.” This brokenness is what Jesus came to heal. And so, from the beginning of our salvation history, God’s concern is not that we wrestle with “why suffering,” but rather “how God sets out to heal the brokenness, bring peace to the conflict, and restore creation to what was lost. We believe that the entrance of Jesus into this question, was the ultimate response.

Jesus’ life on earth was about embracing every broken moment of suffering this world has to endure. He dealt with hunger, anger, and rage. With lepers, the lame and blind. With dinner guests who were outcasts. And he carried our pain and every ounce of blood suffering that anyone has ever encountered, onto the tree of death and set out to make it the beginning of a new life.

He suffered and died, as we do, and on Easter morning changed the narrative.

The real issue then is not “why must there be suffering” but how will we respond?

Saint Paul wrote, “*suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope will not allow us to ever be trapped in shame!*” (Romans 5:3-5)

Think about the power of that promise.

Who would ever have imagined suffering as a gift that winds up becoming hope? And yet, by faith, every moment of life is translated through the loving gift of Jesus into *faith, hope, and love!*”

Tim Keller wrote: “[in the 23rd Psalm], there is no promise to believers of exemption from trouble. God does not say, “**If** you go through the dark valley but **when** you go. The promise is not that he will remove us from the experience of suffering. No, the promise is that God will be with us, walking beside us in it.”¹

John 4 shares a glimpse of how that struggle of servant love makes a difference. The woman at the well suffered from five failed marriages, the scandal of a live-in boyfriend, and lugging buckets in the hottest part of day because she was an outcast. In addition, she was a Samaritan (an untouchable to the Jews.)

In her blessed encounter with Jesus, he didn’t promise that her struggles would end, but that he

¹ “Walking with God through Pain and Suffering.” Tim Keller. Dutton. p.227

would refresh her with living water to fill her soul and heal her spirit. Because she had been dragged so low, better than most, she would rejoice in the new life that this fresh drink of forgiving love would bring! And like shepherds at the manger, and the later disciples at an empty tomb, she would run back to her village, joyfully, sharing the fresh new life that emerged from her suffering and struggling past. And her suffering empowered her faith!

Why must Christians suffer??? It isn't that we must, but that we often will. And yes, suffering *sometimes is* as result of struggle with God or others. And yes, sometimes we deserve the pain that we cause. But most often, suffering isn't punishment, but the symptom of that broken condition called sin. Paul reminds us that real question is HOW might we deal with facts of life?

Living water means (in John's words) that we are never spiritually dehydrated. In fact, the very first miracle in John's Gospel, was when empty jugs were filled at a wedding feast and turned to wine. And the very last moment at the crucifixion, John shared that the crucified Jesus was pierced, and water ran from his side. In other words, by his wounds, we are healed. By his suffering we are made whole. And in our suffering, we understand God's love.

Why do Christians "suffer?" Who doesn't suffer? The reality of this life is that it is broken, and the hideous nature of sin brings suffering to all. What is more important is what we do when suffering intrudes. This is where the power of faith shines through and the strength that comes from only from God lifts us up. That is what it means to drink from the well of *living water* – Christ gives power to ENDURE and when you endure you live in HOPE

At the same time, it is in suffering that we most clearly understand the power of what Christ's love brings us. That is why Paul talks about "boasting" not BECAUSE we suffer, but that Christ's love is STRONGER than any suffering! The boast is not about ME but about what Christ has done and is doing IN ME!

When there is no suffering, it is easy to take faith for granted or mistakenly assume we deserve to happy, and healthy, and free. But when suffering comes, there is a different kind of joy that comes from knowing God is with us, ALWAYS!

I have never seen an eagle next close up but have read that when a mother eagle builds her nest she starts with thorns, broken branches, sharp rocks, and other items that seem entirely unsuitable for the project. Then she lines the nest with a thick padding of wool, feathers, and fur from animals she has killed, making it soft and comfortable for the eggs. By the time the growing birds reach flying age, the comfort of the nest and the luxury of free meals make them quite reluctant to leave. That's when the mother eagle begins "*stirring up the nest.*"

With her strong talons she begins pulling up the thick carpet of fur and feathers, bringing the sharp rocks and branches to the surface. As more of the bedding gets plucked up, the nest becomes more uncomfortable for the young eagles. Eventually, this and other urgings prompt the growing eagles to leave their once-comfortable abode and move on to more mature behavior.²

² *Today in the Word*, June 11, 1989

Our problem is that we often forget God's love when things are cozy, and so we forget about it as well when we suffer. What if we were to see suffering as "stirring up the nest ... and a reminder that it is such a time when the flight of faith is most reassuring?"

The woman at the well understood Paul's words before he even wrote them ... "*trouble produces endurance, endurance brings God's approval, and his approval creates hope. This hope does not disappoint us!*" And so, whether I suffer or not, God is one with me. And because of that, no matter what, I celebrate the wind beneath my wings and the living water than never leaves me thirsty again! We will suffer. But in faith, we will also grow and endure!