

WHAT DID JESUS SAY? PART 3 ABOUT SUFFERING.

“Does God Care?”

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John 9:1-7

In Carlisle's literary classic Sartor, there is a vivid passage in which he pictures the philosopher standing at the window of his attic room, gazing out across a sleeping city nestled warmly in the arms of midnight. Huddled about him are the homes of some half-million human beings. As he surveys the seemingly endless jam of rooftops, he begins to ponder the mingled joys and sorrows, hopes and miseries of the people who live beneath them. “But I,” he exclaims last, “I sit above it all. I am alone with the stars.”

I was chatting with a university student the other day who expressed the opinion that God is like that: removed by the vast reach of the stars from any consciousness of the human struggle. A spectator gazing down indifferently at the frantic antics of man to survive. And in voicing that view, my young friend gave utterance to the conviction of many: that God simply does not care about the miseries and pain of the people who live on this bit of cosmic dust we call our earth.

Other folks go a step farther. They look at the physical and mental anguish which flogs men and conclude there is no God at all. “There can't be a God,” they argue. “How *can* there be a God and life be as it is?”

And though our souls recoil at their conclusion, for we know they are assigning blame to God which does not belong to him, we can understand their rebellion. For we, too, have suffered and therefore must honestly admit that the problem of pain is one of particular poignancy.

It would be sheer deceit for me to say I have never joined the poet in his plea --

“Lord, take-away pain.

The shadow that darkens the world thou hast made.

The close-coiling chain that strangles the heart.
The burden that weighs on the wings that would soar.
Lord, take away pain from the world thou hast made
That it may love thee the more.”

But even as I assailed heaven with the withering fire of my urgent protestations, it seemed as if I could hear God's calm reply:

“Shall I take away pain?
And with it the power of the soul to endure
Made strong by the strain?
Shall I take away pity that knit's heart to heart?
And sacrifice high?

Will you lose all your heroes who lift from the flame
White brows to the sky?
Shall I take away love that redeems with a price
And smiles through the loss?
Can you spare from your lives that would climb into mine
The Christ on his Cross?”

Yes, we too have suffered, have cried out in protest, have hurled our rebellion into the teeth of heaven, and therefore we can understand the reasoning of those who look at the clouds of pain and anguish that envelope man and conclude there is no God. Or, that the God that is simply does not care what becomes of the creatures who tread his earth.

But to say that we understand their reasoning is *not* to say that we agree with their conclusion. For, by the grace of God, Christ has spoken to the problem before us. He has said something about the suffering of man and the love of God. And his words have helped us to see that *is* a reason for at all. That God *does* care!

This does not mean we have all the answers, for we do not. With Paul we must say, “We know in part.” The answer is incomplete. But at least we can say “we know” even if it is “in part.” And for that we give thanks to Jesus.

Well, what *did* Jesus say to the riddle of human suffering? We must start by pointing out that he said --

Suffering Is An Essential Part Of God's Plan For Man.

“The son of man *must* suffer many things . . .” “In this world you *shall* have tribulations . . .” Suffering is something Jesus saw as inescapable if God's purpose for us is to be fulfilled. And what is that purpose? That we learned to love and obey him, *willingly*.

God could have made us like puppets dangling from the strings of fate. But there is no love in a puppet. There is no character, no warmth, no courage, no moral sinew in a marionette whose every mood and deed is determined for it.

And so God made us free. He took what I have often called his magnificent gamble. He wagered the world on the hope that free man would respond to his overture's of love and would return that love, not because they *had* to, but because they *chose* to.

And so, he put us in the only environment in which we could learned to do that. A world where good and evil are both real. Where every day we would be faced with the necessity of choosing between them. And, in the process, could learn goodness by overcoming evil.

Did God do right? Well . . . Could we appreciate beauty if we had never known ugliness?
Could we revel in the warmth of a sunny day if we had never wrestled with a raging tempest?
Could we luxuriate in the restorative power of sleep if we had never known the destructive power of fatigue?
Could we enjoy good health if we had never known disease?

As someone has said, “Work tires a muscle, but it also makes it strong.” And man has become what he is because in God's plan he has had to struggle with the obstacle of evil. To continue quoting, “Without sin, suffering, disease, difficulties and complexities of a thousand kind, man never would have developed the strength, initiative, and resourcefulness which sets him apart from the rest of God's creation”

If we had never known sin, would we be able to understand the glories of salvation?

If we had never experienced sorrow, would we enjoy happiness?

If we had never been weak would we know what it means to be strong?

If we had never been tempted would we be able to say, “I am more than conqueror through Christ?”

You see, God has a plan. Part of that plan is that we learn to love and obey him, *willingly*. And so our heavenly Father placed us in the only environment in which that lesson can be learned. And once we catch a glimpse of God's great plan for us we will not want a perfect world if it means giving up our power to choose. For it is only as we wrestle with good and evil and through the struggle learn to love good and hate evil that we become suitable citizens for the Kingdom of heaven. Having said that much, let me pause long enough to take --

A Brief Detour

which I think is extremely important. Jesus completely rejected the traditional view that suffering is a form of punishment. To the people of Jesus' day life was a matter of “an eye for an eye and a tooth through tooth.” If a man was in trouble he was simply receiving his just desserts. God was merely reeking vengeance for his disobedience.

But Jesus' response to the problem of suffering was in sharp contrast to this ancient error. And, in the ninth chapter of John, it is etched for us with unmistakable clarity. Here we read how one day Jesus was confronted by a blind man. His disciples, reflecting their childhood training, asked,

“Master, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” And Jesus answered “Neither hath this man sinned or his parents: but that the power of God might be revealed in him.” It’s not a question of punishment, Jesus said. Suffering is not punitive. There is a much greater purpose for it than that.

I hope you'll file that away in the safe depository of your soul this morning so you can refer to it quickly the next time you are in trouble. God does not send suffering. God does not use pain or sorrow as a brutal bludgeon to batter people into submission.

Suffering is one of the elements of life which, like the rain, falls upon the just and unjust. And its presence or absence has nothing whatsoever to do with punishment. What a glorious comfort this brings to the child of God who is bewitched by the demons of disaster. God is not the author of evil but, by his grace, he takes evil and uses it for good... thus revealing something about himself and his plan for people

So much for the detour, now let us go on. Not only did Jesus assert that God has a plan in which suffering is an inescapable part, but also that in God's plan

Suffering Can Be Turned To Good.

Look at our text: Luke 9:22. “The son of man must suffer many things, be despised and rejected of chief priest, scribes and elders and be slain,” Jesus said. But he didn't stop there. He added, that he might “be raised again the third day.” Through the power of God the humiliation of Good Friday would be turned into the joy of Easter.

I think all of us have lived long enough to know that many a supposed sorrow or disappointment has proved to be a blessing in disguise. Stella O. Barnett tells the story of a man who was the only survivor of a terrible shipwreck. He was able to reach an uninhabited island and managed to build a rude hut in which he kept the few precious things he was able to save from the sinking ship. Every day he prayed to God for deliverance and anxiously scanned the horizon for the sight of a

ship that might be passing by. But his situations seemed hopeless.

And then one day, to add insult to injury, when he returned from a hunt for food he found his little hut in flames. Everything he had on earth was gone and to the man's limited vision it was the worst thing that could possibly have happened. In utter frustration he lashed out at God.

But a short time later a ship arrived. When the man asked how they had found him on that tiny speck of land in the middle of ocean, the captain said, “We saw your smoke signal.”

“All things work together for good,” said Paul. Not “all things are good” but “all things work *together* for good.” The important word is “together.” The cross of Christ was not good. Taken by itself it is the blackest mark on the pages of history. But we cannot take the cross by itself! There is also the empty tomb. And the empty tomb is the crowning proof that “all things (do, in fact) work together for good to them that love God.”

Sometimes we cannot see it... and the process of learning is often hard. But it is a great moment when we discover that God has a plan for us and in that plan he is prepared to help us make the best of the worst.

That doesn't mean we will be free from handicaps, affliction and failure. There is no assurance in God's word that because we believe in Christ we become a breed of “cosmic pet's.” Often the opposite is true. And yet, through the handicap, affliction or failure that assail us, there is added a dimension of life which otherwise might have been missed.

Historians tell us that Demosthenes had an impediment of speech, and yet he became the greatest orator of all times.

Beethoven was harassed by sickness, deafness, blindness and poverty, and yet out of the depth of physical devastation came some of the grandest music to ever fall on the ear of man.

Dante was a dyspeptic. Aesop was a hunchback. Milton was blind. Caesar was an epileptic. Michelangelo was a chronic sufferer from fever. Mozart's nearly starved. Schubert once sold his immortal songs for 20 cents apiece. Fannie Crosby was left blind when only six weeks old. And yet out of their handicap and adversity these people gave contributions to life and history which is unique.

Psychologists tell us that the greatest single spur to achievement is not great ability, but a great handicap! “Life does not come ready made like a suit or a dress one might buy in a store. Life comes like a bolt of dry goods, shapeless and formless, waiting to be made into something.” And God has a plan for life. A plan that is good. And if we let him, he will take that shapeless thing and make it into something beautiful, something worthwhile, something eternal.

“Does God Care?” the skeptics asks. And we are bold to answer, “Yes, God cares!” And we know God cares because Christ has promised, “Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted.” “Blessed are they that hunger for they shall be filled.” “In this world you shall have tribulations, but fear not, I have overcome a world.” “In my fathers house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am ye may be also.”

And so we see the totality of Christ's teaching about suffering: God has a plan and God's plan is good because --

God's Plan Is Complete.

This world in its present form is neither as God originally created it nor as he ultimately purposes it to be. And so, in tackling the problem of suffering, Jesus not only turned our eyes back to the creation so we can see the world as it was, he also turned our eyes to the consummation so we can catch at glimpse of the world as it *shall* be when God's great plan has been completed. He knew that if we could capture the whole sweep of God's eternal purpose we would begin to understand the meaning of our present struggle.

Billy Graham tells the story of a friend who lost his job during the depression. Shortly afterwards, he lost his home and then his wife. But he tenaciously held onto his faith, the only thing he had left.

One day he watched some men doing stone work on a huge church. One of them was chiseling a triangular piece of stone. “What are you going to do with that?” asked the man. The worker said, “See that little opening way up there near the spire? Well, I’m shaping this down here so it will fit in up there.”

The man turned away to hide the tears which suddenly filled his eyes and he whispered, “Thank you, Lord.” For it seemed to him that God had spoken through the workman to explain the ordeal through which he was passing. “I am shaping you down here so you will fit in up there.”

In one of the modern translations Paul writes, “The pain God is allowed to guide ends in a saving repentance never to be regretted.” There’s the answer, my friends. God-guided pain! If with Christ we are willing to pray “not my will, but thine be done” then, with Christ, we will be made a “perfect through suffering.”

Yes, God has a plan and God’s plan is good because God’s plan is complete. It is not limited to time, but takes on the dimension of eternity. As someone has said, “We can count on the Afterwards,” knowing that “the future is as bright as the promises of God.”

If we take the short view, we will see a muddle instead of a meaning, a perversion instead of a purpose, and in our frustration and despair, we will cry

“Lord Christ, I’m blind!
I cannot see
How thou wilt work this out
For good to me.”

But if we take the long view, and see the purposes of God marching down the ages with irresistible tread, then we can add,

“Dear Lord, by faith,
Though not my own,
I take thee that thy word,
Trust Christ alone.

He never fails!
He satisfies
As God and Lord and friend!
And joy supplies.

Though dark the day
And weary, I
Cannot understand just how,
Nor why.

Yet by thy healing hand I know
The darkness will depart,
And I shall see as well as hear
Thy hand work in my heart.”

“Does God Care?” the skeptics asks. And we are bold to answer, Yes, God cares because he has a plan and his plan is good because it is complete.

An old missionary, who had served forty years on the foreign field, was returning home to America for the last time. It was a sad journey because he hated to leave the people and work he loved. And yet, it was a joyful one as well, because it meant going home.

Also on board the ship was a famous politician who was completing a world tour. Throughout the voyage he practiced the ancient adage, "eat, drink and be merry." He was almost never without one or two women on his arm or a cocktail glass in his hand. And, of course, in that atmosphere of joviality the missionary was completely ignored. But he didn't mind, because he knew that soon he would be home.

As the ship pulled into the New York harbor, she was greeted with the tooting of the tugs and the spraying water of the fire boats. In the background were the brilliant night lights of the city. A large crowd was gathered at the dock and even of band was playing.

The missionary wondered what all the fuss was about, and for just the briefest part of a moment he thought, "Could this welcome be for me?" And then he saw the politician step down the gangplank amid the wild cheers of his admirers. The old, retired servant of God was not used to such crowds and noise. It was also confusing. So he stood quietly by the railing of the ship searching the sea of faces below for one that looked familiar, but to no avail.

Gradually the crowd dispersed and still no one came to greet him. Perhaps they misunderstood the time of arrival, he thought. Surely they'll be along in a little while. And so he waited, but no one came.

It was too late to call the Missionary Board for the office would be closed. And so, gathering together his few pieces of luggage, he started walking until he came to a small hotel. The night clerk lead him down a dingy hallway, flung open a creaking door, flipped on the one dim light that swayed crazily from the ceiling, and walked off.

The old man sat on the edge of the bed and suddenly was overcome with a gigantic sense of loneliness. So this was his homecoming, after forty years, a dingy room in a third rate hotel and no one to welcome him home. Then his thoughts turned to the politicians whose language was coarse

and whose morals were loose and suddenly he was filled with a wave of bitterness.

He dropped to his knees and cried, “God, it isn't fair! Why should a man like that be given such a royal welcome? Bands playing and crowds of people, laughter and cheers, when I have sacrificed my whole life of the good of others, have spent 40 years in the jungles for Jesus and there isn't even one person to welcome me home.” As he knelt there, sobbing silently in the dim light of his dingy room, he seemed to hear a voice from heaven which gently said, “But son, you're not home yet.”

Beloved... we cannot understand God's plan for our life or the mystery and meaning of suffering except in the context of eternity. To take the short view will lead to despondency and despair. But when we see God's total plan, we are at peace. For *then* we know what Paul meant when he said, “All things work together for good to them that love God.”