

Free To Suffer

I was an hour into my study Monday morning when a woman I hadn't seen in a while entered Starbucks. I could tell something was different about her at first glance. Was her face a little pale? Face thinner? I wasn't trying to give a hard look, but was her hair shorter? It was pulled back. "Hey, how are you doing? I haven't seen you in a good bit!" She always has a very sweet and quiet demeanor. She whispers, "Yeah, I've been out for a while. I've been through . . . a season. I had cancer (maybe still do)." She turns her head, "Hair is shorter, but I've got my hair." There's something in the face. The eyes. The expressions. The tone and body language. She's been through something heavy. It's changed her. The outward appearance gives away the inward pain. We were interrupted (she was meeting a client), so she returned and filled me in. I told her, "Truly, you have always had the most beautiful spirit and still do." She expressed how she couldn't have persevered without God and community. The last thing she said was, "There really is purpose in pain. I do believe that."

Purpose in pain. What is that purpose? It's beautiful that she had such a good response. You know, no one let Job in on the secret when he suffered the loss of his children. He said, "Though I am in the right, I cannot answer Him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser. If I summoned Him and He answered me, I would not believe that He was listening to my voice. For He crushes me with a tempest and multiplies my wounds without cause;" (Job 9:15-17). Consider what Job says (in his pain) in Job 24:1-12.

I want to offer a different perspective on suffering. We're not discussing all aspects of suffering. For example - we're not considering suffering caused by our own sins. We're not necessarily discussing wounds of persecution (have any of us experienced what our brethren endured long ago)? It's not about suffering to learn a lesson. We're focusing on the suffering that comes from living in a broken world or at the hands of others. It will not take away the pain or heal an ongoing wound, but one that will hopefully help endure the suffering.

Suffering. Here's a question: why is this world broken? Are we not suffering because of Adam and Eve's sin? Did God not curse the physical creation? Here's another question - why did God put them in a situation where pain was possible? Why give them a tree and tell them not to eat of it?

1) Putting aside the truth that God doesn't need our permission to create us, let's address a more basic fact: He can't ask the uncreated their opinion even if He wanted to . . . because they're not created. This may seem silly to you, but I heard this long ago, and it didn't land as a lazy answer to me; instead, it holds truth and weight. It's one that's overlooked. It's like the first time I thought, "Maybe a better question than 'Why do bad things happen' is 'Why do you do bad things? We immediately go into the blame game but must slow down and think it through. How many of you, before giving birth or adopting, knew that your child would face difficulties in life? So why did you adopt? Why have a child? What should we say about you? "Yes, but God KNEW what would happen?" And you don't know that at least, to some degree, your child will experience pain? That someone will hurt them? Or that they'll experience some self-inflicted wound? And here's the difference between you and God - you have much less power than God to provide and protect. Yet,

you went forward. Should we call you evil or irresponsible? When a woman gives birth, should we start shaming her instead of sending warm blessings?

2) Why the tree? Some of our younger crowd may have yet to think this through, but is it not about free will? What happens when you take away free will? It's not how we were made. God didn't desire pre-programmed robots. He wanted an authentic relationship. But to do so, you have to give humanity a choice. We don't always realize the implications of no pain and suffering. No pain or suffering - no genuine relationship with God. The only way for God to remove evil from this world is to remove you and your free will. Now, you can ask why God felt the need to curse the physical realm, but not you've entered into the discussion of His holiness and justice. You don't want Him to be unholy or unjust. See, this is what's behind Job's story. God wasn't trying to teach Job a lesson. God was making a point to Satan about Job. Job, overall, stayed the course that Satan himself could not. Satan's accusation against Job was that he only obeyed God because the Lord had put a hedge around him. In other words, "Of course he loves You - You protect him and give him all one could have!" Translation - the relationship isn't genuine. Let's read Job 2:1-6. Job's genuine obedience to God is getting under Satan's skin. But God has to give Job the free will to curse His maker. He has to allow him to turn away. Something is going on with the Accuser and God. The two have some bad blood, and Job is the middleman. Which Job do you want? The Job that is totally blessed without the possibility of sin? Or the Job that endures the suffering - who loses His family (temporarily) but keeps God? I'm not trying to minimize our suffering. It's why I'm pulling out the "big guns."

So, this leads to my main question: **Is fellowship with God worth the pain?** And if He's worth it, would that help you endure? **Can you suffer graciously?**

Anytime I study suffering, this passage comes to mind: 2 Corinthians 12:8-10: "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

And it was Paul who wrote in Philippians 3:8-11: "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

The more you know of Him, the more prepared you are to suffer for Him.

And what did we see in Jesus? He's considered the Suffering Savior, is He not? Do not the passages say that again and again? Did not Jesus say it Himself? Luke 9:22, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Do you know why Jesus' crucifixion is called the Passion of Christ? The Greek word for suffer was translated into Latin, passio, which was translated as passion in English. It means to suffer. But why did Jesus suffer? Can we end with Isaiah 53? Is it safe to say that Jesus was willing to suffer because He loved us and desired reconciliation? He was willing to suffer for those He loved.

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

Would you rather Him not suffer?