

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Suffering and faith

Presented by Harry Goodhew

INTRODUCTION

There's one thing about which each of us can be reasonably sure: at some point in our lives we will face suffering. It may be mild or profound, but few, if any, pass through life totally unscathed. You may be listening as a sufferer. You may have been spared the experience thus far, but be aware that suffering can, in an instant, turn your whole world upside down. When it happens it can become a test of any faith in God that we have: some lose faith, others grow stronger.

Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor, wrote: "Just as the small fire is extinguished by the storm whereas a large fire is enhanced by it, likewise a weak faith is weakened by predicaments and catastrophes whereas strong faith is strengthened by them."

After this music let's think a little about suffering and about faith in God in the face of suffering.

SEGMENT 1

One writer dealing with this matter of suffering and the loss of faith in God said, "I have sympathy for people who lose their faith, but any faith lost in suffering wasn't a faith worth keeping." That could sound a little harsh particularly considering some of the situations in which people find themselves and the horror of the tragic circumstances that some people are called to endure. However, the writer was endeavouring to make an important point. He was arguing that faith in God needs to be based on truth and not on circumstances.

Living life with God is no guarantee that the path will always be smooth and trouble free. Perhaps if we read the Psalms more thoughtfully we would quickly recognise that many of them are born out of an experiences of deep suffering. Here's just one example:

- ¹ O LORD, the God who saves me,
day and night I cry out before you.
- ² May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.
- ³ For my soul is full of trouble
and my life draws near the grave.
- ⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like a man without strength.
- ⁵ I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care.
- ⁶ You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.

⁷Your wrath lies heavily upon me;
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.¹

And so it continues for its full eighteen verses with apparently no immediate relief being experienced. Yet it is a prayer, an earnest and persistent prayer. It is not an abandonment of trust in God. He is depressed, he is bewildered, he is confused and in pain, but he is exhibiting faith, faith under pressure but not un-faith. The psalmist holds on and continues to cry to God because he has a confidence in God that has its roots not in his present circumstances but in something else. “The devastation of tragedy feels just as real for people whose faith endures suffering” as it does for those who abandon faith in God. But the former have something else. They hold as true something that remains with them when circumstances are adverse, painful, and heart-breaking.

So what is that truth that sustains? First and foremost it is that God is, and that he is always good, always loving, and always sovereign. That statement may need some further exploration so after this music we’ll look at it a little further.

SEGMENT 2

The Bible’s account of our present world is that suffering is a reality because sin and abandonment of God are realities. When humanity chose to desert God the present world became a place of suffering and death and it is a condition to which all are subject. Suffering is not evidence that God does not exist or that he is not good, loving, and sovereign. It simply reflects that this is a creation under judgment, itself waiting to be restored and renewed.

The suffering that God’s children experience derive from any number of sources but they are to be faced with the conviction that our God is good and he will bring good out of evil for his children. Paul expressed it in these terms, “... we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”² When in Mark’s Gospel a man addressed Jesus as Good Teacher, Jesus responded by saying that only God was good³. God is indeed good, supremely good and all he does will finally be seen to be an expression of goodness in a world where evil has abounded. In the midst of any suffering the truth to be held to is that God is always good, and good to me.

Not only is God good, he is loving and does what he does in love. As Love Himself he seeks the highest good and the deepest happiness of his child. If to promote that end discipline, difficulties, and trials are involved then Love will not turn from what is necessary to accomplish the task of bringing that son or daughter to his purposed glory. God’s love is to be trusted even when circumstances seem to carry a different message.

In addition it is vital in all circumstances to remember that God is sovereign over all. Nothing lies outside his span of influence. Not even a falling sparrow lies outside his Divine lordship. The evil that causes suffering and pain cannot thwart God’s final intentions and he will use it to good ends. Knowing who God is, and holding steadfastly to the fact that he is sovereign no matter what happens gives the most cogent reason for acknowledging him in every situation in life and trusting him whatever difficulties we may encounter. We may not be able immediately to answer the question “Why?” but we can be sure that we are able to answer the question “Who?” when it comes to who it is that we should trust in our moments of grief and despair.

It makes all the difference when facing suffering to wait upon the love and mercy of the Sovereign Lord of the universe than to be forced to contemplate the blank and inexorable process of chance and necessity.

¹ Psalm 88:1-7 (NIV)

² Romans 8:28 (NIV)

³ Mark 10:17ff

SEGMENT 3

One of the challenges that confronted the first disciples of Jesus was his repeated statements about the need for him to go to Jerusalem and there to be killed. That was not their expectation for the career of the Messiah. Peter, you may remember, was strongly rebuked by Jesus for seeking to dissuade him from pursuing that path. The length of the journey of understanding made by those men and women in a short space of time is reflected in the words of Peter to the crowds on the Day of Pentecost following our Lord's death resurrection and ascension into heaven:

“You men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God to you by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, even as you yourselves know; him, being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, you by the hand of lawless men did crucify and slay: whom God raised up, having loosed the pangs of death: because it was not possible that he should be held by it.”⁴

Suffering was part of the process by which our world was redeemed and eternal life offered to women and men of every tribe and nation. Somehow in the enormous reality represented by God, his creation, sin, and fallen creatures like ourselves, the suffering and death of the Messiah worked, you might say, a profound and deep magic that has, and will, transform God's marred and damaged creation and bring everything in heaven and earth under the obvious and incontestable Lordship of Jesus.

When it comes to our experience of suffering it is not to the present circumstances of our own experience that we are to look but to the truth of the love of God shown to us and to all humanity in the death of Jesus. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”. That is the demonstration of God's attitude that we look to when life turns bitter. In addition, if our suffering is somehow occasioned by loyalty to Jesus and the prosecution of his Kingdom in our world then suffering for the Name of Christ is to be worn as a badge of honour. Here are few encouragements presented to us:

“I consider that the **sufferings** of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”⁵

“not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and aperseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”⁶

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will **tribulation**, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”⁷

The answer is No. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

CONCLUSION

As a Preface to his famous little book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis explained how he was reluctant to write on a subject about which he was the least good example of how it might be handled personally. He wrote:

⁴ Acts 2:22-24

⁵ Romans 8:18

⁶ Luke 21:19

⁶ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA : The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Ro 5:3-5

⁷ Romans 8:35

“I must add, too, that the only purpose of the book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering: for the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified, nor have I anything to offer my readers except the conviction that when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all”

And so it is.