

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: Why am I suffering? Why me? Where is God?

ANSWER: In some form...subtly...angrily...despairingly...most people who enter my office ask this question. Some actually want an answer...some demand an answer...almost all of them don't like the answer. I cannot do justice to the question of suffering in one small article, but I can offer a place to begin.

Minimize pain; maximize pleasure...this often the goal of most suburban Christians. For many, our faith simply becomes little more than the vehicle to achieve the kind of life we desire. (This desire should inspire a FUTURE hope of heaven...for we were not made for this world, but it rarely does...except in the wisdom of old age.)

When was the last time you heard a tele-evangelist say: "Come to Christ and learn to suffer well!"? Not a very popular message...not good marketing technique...not "up-beat" enough...certainly not entertaining enough. We like to focus on how Christ can help us live the "good life". We want him to help us AVOID suffering, but Christ did not come to minimize our pain and maximize our pleasure...he has a higher goal for us.

If we could ask someone from the first-century church to describe his or her Christian life, he or she would probably include the word "suffering". The early Christians were not masochistic, but they understood, even appreciated, the OPPORTUNITY OF SUFFERING. Some thoughts to ponder...

1. Suffering is inevitable. "In this world, you will have tribulation" Jesus said. "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (JN 15:20). Suffering will find us. God's goal is not to eliminate it, but to use it to TRANSFORM his people. (Some sufferings will not be healed in this world. All suffering will be eliminated in Heaven!)
2. Suffering has the most benefit and the deepest effect on our character if it is UNDESERVED (1 PE 2:20). To endure suffering under such circumstances is Christ-like and has God's approval. (Now-a-days, undeserved suffering is grounds to call a lawyer.)
3. Suffering should never come as a surprise to the Christian; it should be expected as a natural result of walking in the footsteps of our Lord (1 PE 4:12-16)...if we REALLY are interested in walking in his footsteps. When we sing: "Make me more like Jesus", do we really understand what that might mean, and how God will accomplish that transformation?
4. Jesus himself was "made perfect" through suffering (HEB 2:10). His incarnation and mission demanded the spiritual maturity that only comes through

suffering and endurance. In this world, suffering MUST happen to reveal the character of God. There are truths that can only be learned, and there is spiritual maturity that can only be developed in the context of suffering (PHIL 3:10).

5. Suffering enables us to help and empathize with those who also suffer (HEB 2:18). Suffering defeats arrogance and phariseeism; it creates brotherly love and compassion. Suffering allows the body of Christ to shine.

6. Suffering is an opportunity to produce real and lasting joy, because we are being honored by God (ACTS 5:41). Suffering can make us look longingly to our future glory (2 COR 4:16-18). Suffering can help us lose our love for this world and long for eternity with Christ.

7. Suffering is the catalyst for perseverance, character and hope (RM 5:3 and JA 1:2-4). If we are not so quick to flee suffering, we can reap the benefits of God working everything for our good. The most deeply caring, truly aware, and spiritually mature believers are always those who have emerged from great suffering.

8. Suffering prepares us for heaven's joys, makes our inheritance legitimate, and provides opportunity to share in the glory of Christ himself (RM 8:17-18). The early church understood suffering as a type of glorious "initiation" into both the temporal and eternal kingdom of God.

Ultimately, suffering is both the collective and individual result of sin, but no one likes that answer. God in his holy love for us takes suffering and uses it as an opportunity for transformation. Will we numb ourselves, flee, or seize this opportunity?

What if we could see beyond our obsession to avoid suffering, and instead embrace the possibility of transformation with the help of the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ? Not that we somehow pretend the pain is gone or deny our pain, but that the pain is just not as important as the opportunity to grow closer to Christ. Nietzsche once said: "He who has a WHY to live for can bear with almost any HOW."

God did not exempt his own Son from suffering. He responds to our questions of suffering not with an apology or an explanation, but with the INCARNATION.

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