

When Suffering Comes Calling

‘A little girl was riding along on her bike when she bumped her head on the low hanging branch of a tree. She ran into the house hollering, “Mom! Mom, Joey hurt me!” Mom looked up from what she was doing and said, “Sissy, Joey didn’t hurt you. Joey’s not even here. He went to the grocery store with your daddy”. The little girl got this startled look on her face. Then in a bewildered sort of voice she said, “That means stuff like this can happen on its own at anytime. ... Bummer!”’

Bummer, indeed! Sudden pains are bad enough, but suffering that seemingly never ends is next to impossible for our very finite minds to understand. The Apostle Paul’s statement to the Philippians in 3:10, “I want to suffer with Him, sharing in His death”, on its face, is just as incomprehensible. Far from Paul’s only seemingly unfathomable statement on just this subject, in Colossians 1:24, he states cryptically: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am supplementing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions in behalf of His body, which is the church” (NASB). At first glance, how could there be anything lacking in Christ’s sufferings for the world, let alone the Church? How could anything Paul suffered “supplement”, or “make up for”, or “fill up” anything Christ hadn’t suffered enough for? Well, since

it makes no sense that Christ didn't suffer enough, that can't be what it means. What is lacking is the suffering of Christ's Church to extend His Gospel and Kingdom to all the world. All on behalf of Christ the Lord's work on the cross. In other words, according to many modern interpreters [see Phil Thompson], it requires suffering on the part of missionaries and ordinary believers to bring others to faith in Christ. Such suffering can take many forms. What's easiest to imagine here is self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice manifests in myriad ways. Just consider today how missionaries and Christian aid workers, such as those of Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse, are sacrificing their safety, time and treasure, to help the millions of Ukrainian refugees. Coming alongside the Ukrainian Christians in their own efforts to minister to their own countrymen, caring for them and leading them to the Lord of all sufferings, Christ Jesus, in Whom they can find peace in the midst of the falling bombs, destruction and death all around them. Think of the people in Mariupol now, who are unable to evacuate, as ceasefires are declared only to be broken as soon as people try to escape. No food, no water, no heat; are they suffering?

But that kind of physical suffering is only one kind of suffering. For all people on earth experience suffering of one kind or another. Continuing with the current newsy example of Ukraine, the women and children fleeing while leaving their husbands and fathers of fighting age behind is an emotional suffering. The bodily infirmities that eventually come on all people, is yet another.

For too many of them, they spend most if not all of their lives in some state of disability. Others are struck down in the prime of their lives. Among Christians, perhaps the most well-known is Joni Eareckson Tada, who at the age of 17, a 1967 tragic diving accident left her a quadriplegic in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the shoulders down. You probably have seen some of her artwork, which she paints holding a brush between her teeth, or read one of her over forty books, or even seen the 1979 autobiographical movie of her life. Her father had been an alternate for the 1932 United States Olympic wrestling team, who was honored as a Distinguished Member of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum in 1996. So athleticism ran in the family. Which made it all the more grievous for her to suddenly lose control of her body. Yet, in spite of all this suffering, by God's grace, she has become one of the most important evangelists for the Gospel of Christ Jesus in the modern world. But her life is still one of daily, unending suffering. She has written about how difficult it is simply to wake up in the morning, dress and live another day. For she is not just unable to move by herself, she suffers both physical pain and more so, emotional pain. But she soldiers on, always thankful to Lord Jesus for daily being with her and enabling her to live each and every day to His glory.

She reminds me of another quadriplegic who came to witness at the junior-senior high girls school that I taught at while in Kôbe, Japan. At one of the weekly chapel services, this woman

was pulled in on a low, wheeled stretcher. I can no longer remember what accident she suffered that caused her whole body paralysis, but she lives on that stretcher, never leaving it. Yet, it was a result of that accident that some Christians shared the Gospel with her and she came to know the Lord. And for the joy of knowing God, she remains forever thankful that she is the way she is. The microphone lowered near to the floor in front of her face, her joy of being saved and “walking” with the Lord caused absolute amazement in the hundreds of girls sitting in chapel that day. They could hardly believe their eyes that someone lived in such a pitiable condition, but would not trade it for the world, glorying in it because by it she’d come to know the incomparable blessings of experiencing the unstoppable love of Christ Jesus.

When suffering comes calling on us, an avalanche of mixed emotions often thunders down burying us. We often demand God answer for allowing such misfortune to happen. We often question what we could have done to “deserve” such treatment, either to ourselves, or to someone we love. It is, unfortunately, human nature to think that somehow, because we have been “faithful” in serving God, in living our lives for Him, that we should somehow be always protected from the frequent calamities and “accidents” that are truly, part and parcel of current life on this earth. If the very Son of God could not live a “charmed” life with no problems and no pain, then how can we expect ours to be different? Why, if He hadn’t endured and experienced all the tribulations humans

are exposed to in this life, how could He be expected to be the once and forever High Priest that forever intercedes to Father God on our behalf? Furthermore, it is precisely because He has experienced the full gamut of human emotions, afflictions and sufferings that He can totally walk with us in absolute and perfect understanding. When suffering comes calling, we must resist the temptation to focus on ourselves or our loved ones, thinking “woe is me” or “woe are they”, and instead, look up to our Savior. Thank Him that He is walking with us, and often times, as that famous poem so vividly puts it, He often does not just walk with us, He carries us through the most difficult times of our lives. If we but look up to Him, and pray, ask for help, that He tame and put down our raging emotions and pains, He will. It’s called the peace that passes understanding. His peace will wash over us like a refreshing waterfall that puts our minds at ease with the knowledge that because He is with us, no matter what happens, we and our loved ones will be alright in the end. For it is He, and only He, Who holds the future. His promises, His prophecies are inviolable. They *will* come to pass. They will never fail. If ever there was a sure thing, an investment that will never lose value, it’s our Lord and His promises. He is totally bankable!

We forget that this world is temporarily under the control of satan. This evil creature never knew suffering before he rebelled against God. Herein lies another reason why we humans must experience suffering. Suffering is not a punishment from God.

Recall just two weeks ago we read in Luke 13 when our Lord Himself asked the question about the eighteen on whom the Tower of Siloam fell, whether they were worse sinners than others because this tragic accident happened to them. The answer was no. Like that girl in the joke who realized that bad stuff just happens. Well, as we learned from Job, though he himself never knew the reasons, calamitous things can happen to us. God allows things, and He only knows the reasons. But as He completely and totally bankable, His reasons are always just, true and compassionate. For He is good. Totally. And despite the loss of everything, what did Job declare in 13:15? “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him” (NASB). What did Habakkuk say in 3:17-18? “Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!” For we learn faithfulness through suffering.

In the midst of life’s worst calamities, sufferings and agonies, we can live steadfastly, buoyed by the shalom, the peace of God. Even if the devil whips up tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes and exploding volcanoes, God in Christ will command them, “Peace! Be still!”. And though the entire universe collapse around us, yet we will be unshaken, standing firm on the unbreakable promises of God. So never, never take your hand out of His!

