

Romans 8:16-30 Suffering

Romans 8 contains various themes which are twisted together like a rope with many strands, with each theme connected to each other. We have been pulling these strands apart a bit, looking at the theme of walking not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4) and our adoption as sons (Romans 8:15). Today we will look at another strand, the strand of suffering.

In Romans 8:17-18 Paul assumes that suffering is part of the deal for followers of Christ: we follow a Suffering Messiah. We need to be aware of this as we are living in times when to follow the way of righteousness is becoming more costly. However, have you ever heard anyone say, "How can an all-powerful, all-loving God allow so much suffering in the world?"

This is not just an academic question since suffering affects all of us. Friday marked the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster. A mudslide hit the village and smothered the school. The children had been singing "All Things Bright and Beautiful" in their school assembly just before the disaster struck. Most of the children came from church going families. 116 children and 28 adults lost their lives that day, and many lost their faith. A BBC website records the testimonies of some who lost their faith.¹

How should the community have addressed the question of "Why" to those who were struggling, and how can we answer the same question today, for example, as we observe the tragedy of Aleppo? The Bible doesn't duck this question. In fact it's not only the atheist or agnostic who struggles with this question. The great man of faith King David struggled with this 'Why?' question as well (Psalm 22:1).

Yet, maybe we have to admit that the atheists are right after all: terrible suffering proves there can be no God! But then what? Atheism has nothing else to offer and no message of hope. Not everyone turned away from God on 21st October 1966. Many turned to God in prayer for those who were suffering, and many who were affected by the Aberfan disaster continued strong in their faith, even to this day.

Job was a man acquainted with suffering. It seems his wife lost her faith, at least for a while, and she told Job, *Curse God and die*. Sometimes it can be harder to observe others suffer than when you yourself suffer, especially when it is loved ones. But Job maintained his faith and his integrity.

Evangelist Nick Vujicic was born without arms and legs. He says, *Often people ask how I manage to be happy despite having no arms and no legs. The quick answer is that I have a choice. I can be angry about not having limbs, or I can be thankful that I have a purpose. I chose gratitude.*²

It is a choice, and the Christian message is one of hope, even in the valley of the shadow of death. God deeply cares for us, and enters into our suffering: we suffer with Him (Romans 8:17). And this suffering is not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). Nick Vujicic again, *Hope is in the name of God, the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hope is when you compare your suffering to the infinite, immeasurable love and grace of God*. He comforts us and promises always to be with us (Isaiah 3:2-5). We are still His children, even in the hard times. Yet all this still doesn't really answer the big 'Why?' question.

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/witness/october/21/newsid_3194000/3194860.stm?first=4

² See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOzsJEmjHs>

We need to understand that God has given human beings free will and we can't blame Him for everything that goes wrong. There were at least 8 warning signs which could have been heeded before the Aberfan disaster.³ Was this a God-made disaster or a human-made disaster, even failing to hear the warnings God was sending? God gave warning after warning to the prophets of Israel, but they were totally ignored, with disastrous results.

But even when we mess up, God is still with us (Isaiah 63:9). And he often uses suffering for His greater purposes (Romans 8:28). Joseph is the best biblical example. He was sold by his brothers into Egypt and then unjustly imprisoned. But throughout the story we read, "And the Lord was with Joseph." Joseph was remarkably raised up to be Prime Minister of Egypt to administer the food during the crisis of a great famine, and at the end of his life he said to his brothers, *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives* (Genesis 50:20).

Part of God's purpose in suffering is to conform our character to the image of his Son (Romans 5:3-5, 8:29). Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross said, *The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of those depths.*

So not all suffering is bad, and God continues to work out His purposes through it. The best example of positive suffering is childbirth, pain and suffering in order to give new life to another (John 16:21, 2Corinthians 4:12). But it's not just human beings. Paul says the whole of creation is in labour (Romans 8:22), with the intention of bringing forth a new heavens and a new earth.

We ask why God doesn't intervene. The truth is that He has intervened, and He is intervening, but not always in that way we would like, and not on our timescale. One day, but not yet, *the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes* (Revelation 7:17). Paul's stoic perspective on his present suffering was this, *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us* (Romans 8:18).

Paul wasn't speaking theoretically, but from very real experience. He had known tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword (Romans 8:35). But can any of these separate him from the love of Christ in Christ Jesus our Lord? He answers with a resounding, 'No!'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39)

Even in all that has been said, suffering can sometimes be very hard to explain. Yet God is still present. Don Moen wrote a song called, "God Will Make A Way". The story behind this song was one of immense suffering,⁴ yet ... clearly God's Presence and grace was with this family in their grief.

³ 1 Aberfan: The Fight for Justice. BBC, first broadcast on 18 October 2016. [Available on iPlayer.](#)

⁴ <http://staugustine.com/living/religion/2015-08-06/story-behind-song-god-will-make-way>