

4 QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR SUFFERING WRITTEN AND READ BY MARK TALBOT

1. Why are we to rejoice in our suffering?

Several New Testament passages report the joy our Lord's first followers felt when they suffered (see, e.g., Rom. 5:3-5; Col. 1:24; Heb. 10:34). Several others tell us that, as Jesus' followers, we should—indeed, we *must*¹—rejoice, be glad, and consider ourselves blessed when we suffer or undergo persecution, trials, and any other sort of difficulties (see, e.g., Matt. 5:11-12; 2 Cor. 12:10; James 1:2; 1 Pet. 4:13). But undergoing these things is, by its very nature, unpleasant and, in fact, suffering can be defined as experiencing something that is unpleasant enough that we want it to end. So why are we to rejoice in our suffering?

It is because we are to possess the mind of Christ, who, even though he was God, emptied himself to become a human being so that he could suffer and die for our sins (see Phil. 2:5-11; Mark 10:45; Rev. 5:9). During his earthly lifetime, his disciples had rejected his claim that he, as the one whom they had become convinced was the Messiah sent to redeem Israel, would have to suffer and die (see Matt. 16:21-23). When he died, his death seemed to clinch the fact that he was not the Promised One (see Luke 24:21). But his resurrection changed everything, convincing them that the way to everlasting life does not go around suffering and death, but through them (see Heb. 12:1-3).

Jesus' first followers rejoiced in their suffering because it assured them that they were following in his footsteps (see Rom. 8:16-17). Very early in his earthly ministry, Jesus had told them, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12; see 1 Pet. 4:14).

And so Luke tells us that, early in the growth of the church in Acts, after the Jewish authorities had arrested and jailed the apostles, and then had them flogged and ordered them not to speak in Jesus' name, the apostles left them, "rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:41).

We should rejoice when we suffer similarly, for the same reason. It shows that we are, as we must be if we are to be saved (see Matt. 10:32-33), publicly identified with our Lord. And we also rejoice because suffering often proves itself to be an *unsought gift*: as both Paul and James tell us, in the midst of some grave illness, accident, or tragedy we will find something happening within us that may not change our outward situation but that builds our character by correcting our scale of values so that we see more clearly life's true meaning (see Rom. 5:3-5; James 1:2-4). When I broke my back after falling off a Tarzan-like ropeswing when I was 17, I found that most of the teenage trivialities that had been distracting me fell away, enabling me to concentrate on what was truly important. My struggles with paralysis ever since have kept me close to God. That was also the experience of a high school student I knew who, when she was diagnosed with an almost certainly terminal cancer, found her sense of God's Spirit witnessing in her heart of God the Father's love for her to be infinitely more precious than any presumption that she would live a normal life (see Gal. 4:6). In the midst of her suffering and even at her death, her fellowship with God enabled her to lift her eyes from the things of this world and filled her with hope for the glories of the life to come (see Rom. 5:5).

So suffering can corroborate that we are Christ's and mortify our worldliness and sin.

2. Why do we suffer in the ways that we do, and why do some suffer much more than others?

Sometimes the specific ways in which we or those we love are suf-

fering puzzle us. Why are you plagued with depression? Why did I get cancer just as my career was taking off? Why does your mother have Alzheimer's, especially since she worked hard to keep herself in good physical and mental shape? Why does our son suffer from same-sex attraction? Sometimes the enormously uneven distribution of suffering also puzzles us. Why do some of us suffer so little and others suffer so much?

The sage who wrote Ecclesiastes makes it clear that the answers to some of these questions are beyond our finding out: "There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous" (Eccl. 8:14). Often the best we can do is to attribute these disquieting unpredictabilities to the fall.² When God created the world, he created it to be inhabited; he did not create it to be an empty chaos (see Isa. 45:18). It was to be a home of stable processes that we could progressively understand and explore (see Gen. 1:26-28). But after Adam and Eve rebelled by disobeying God's command not to eat from the forbidden tree, creation itself was subjected to futility (see Rom. 8:19-22). Now the causal regularities that God has written into the world's DNA have become somewhat opaque to us and so from our standpoint "time and chance happens to [us] all" (Eccl. 9:11).

So we often can't know why some suffer as they do. Perhaps your depression has its roots in the world's damaged causal regularities, especially since your father and grandmother suffered from depression, too. We can know that the excruciating loss that the nineteenth-century theologian Robert Dabney felt when three of his young sons died from diphtheria would be prevented now because there is a diphtheria vaccine. Yet what the author of Ecclesiastes emphasizes is that not even the wisest of us can make sense of it all (see Eccl. 8:16-17). Now, all we can know is that ultimately nothing that happens to us falls out of God's hand (see Eccl. 3:14; 9:1), and

that if we are his children, then nothing can separate us from his love (see Rom. 8:35-39). As our Lord showed in his model prayer, it is right for us to pray that God will deliver us from evil. Yet God deigns for the world to go on in ways we only partly understand. Often, he uses the world's causal processes to show his goodness to us, "giving [us] rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and thus satisfying [our] hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). But who knows how often something bad befalls us because God has chosen not to intervene in the world's fallen causal processes when they are about to bring us disability or disease (see Eccl. 11:5)?³

3. What should we think about the mild forms of suffering that we regularly encounter in daily life?

They should remind us that something has gone wrong in our world. We learn about some of this kind of suffering in Genesis 3:14-19. In the midst of declaring the dooms that would fall upon the serpent, the woman, and the man because of their disobedience, God proclaimed the *protevangelium*—the first glimmer of the gospel's good news:

“And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.” (Gen. 3:15)

While suffering the pains of childbirth and the ups-and-downs of marriage, Eve could remember God's promise. When scratching out a living for his family from the now-cursed ground, and even as his painful toil foretold that someday he would again become mere dust, Adam could anticipate a time yet unknown when God would send into the world another Adam, a greater Son. Our world includes

much pleasure (see Acts 14:17), but it also includes much painful toil and weariness (see Eccl. 1:8). Both the pleasure and the pain should prompt us each day to look up and seek God, remembering both the paradise that sin has lost and anticipating the one that by our Lord's righteousness will be regained.

4. Why doesn't God usually answer our prayers for him to end our suffering?

Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of Christian suffering follows from our misunderstanding some words that our Lord addressed to his disciples in Matthew's gospel. He said:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:7-11)

It is easy for us to take these promises as blank checks—“*Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive*” (Matt. 21:22). And so, as Bruner writes, “Everyone who has made a difficult prayer request, and who has honestly mustered as much faith as possible and then been disappointed, has read this verse or verses like it, and been hurt.”⁴

But just a little thinking should make it clear that these promises can't be blank checks. Just as what a child may consider to be a good gift may not be what a parent considers to be a good gift, so what we as parents consider to be good gifts may not be what God

considers to be good gifts. As James puts it, we must do more than ask; we must ask for the right reasons: “You don’t have what you want because you don’t ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don’t get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure” (James 4:2-3).

Placed as they are near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, it should be clear that our Lord’s words in that sermon should guide our asking, seeking, and knocking (see Matt. 7:24-27). We will ask for spiritual gifts such as righteousness, gentleness, and purity of heart. We will seek to be the world’s salt and light. We won’t be knocking as self-seekers who are anxious to secure our earthly lives and eager to store up worldly wealth. We will pray for the accomplishment of our Father’s will rather than our own, and not simply that we may experience miracles done in his name (see Matt. 7:21-23).

Asking, seeking, and knocking like this, we can pray freely and confidently, knowing that God will supply whatever we truly need, even if we only discover through what he grants and what he lovingly withholds what the good gifts are that he has promised and what it is that we should not seek.

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¹ The Greek words for *rejoice* and *be glad* in Matt. 5:12, for *count* (or *consider*) in James 1:2, and for the first *rejoice* in 1 Pet. 4:13 are all imperatives—and so Christians are actually *commanded* to respond positively to persecution, trials, or suffering.

² See David Clemens, “The law of sin and death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1-3,” *Themelios* 19 (1994). Clemens argues that Ecclesiastes is best understood “as an arresting but thoroughly orthodox exposition of Genesis 1–3.” In particular, it makes “the painful consequences of the fall . . . central,” clarifying how disconcerting life after the fall can be.

³ Calvin is among the strongest advocates of the position that nothing falls out of God’s providential ordering of all things: “All events are governed by God’s secret plan.” Yet he nevertheless grants that from our limited standpoint

things not only appear but are fortuitous: “Since the sluggishness of our mind lies far beneath the height of God’s providence, we must employ a distinction to lift it up. Therefore I shall put it this way: *however all things may be ordained by God’s plan, according to a sure dispensation, for us they are fortuitous*” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960], 1.16.2, 9; my emphasis).

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume. 2: The Churchbook, *Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 367.