

**Sunday, 2 October 2016**

[Christian Caregiving 3- caring for the suffering](#)



[Job 2:8-3:1; Ps 22; 2 Cor 12:1-10; Mk 14:32-43](#)

We are continuing our series on Christian Caregiving this week. Last time we spoke about listening to someone we are caring for. This week we are speaking about caring for someone who is suffering.

Suffering can be one of the most difficult issues we deal with as Christians. I have found it helpful to deal with suffering on two levels. One level is the theological reality where I try to understand why suffering exists in the world. The other level is the emotional reality of the person who is suffering. I'm just going to share a few of the thoughts I have found helpful when dealing with suffering. They might bounce around a bit, so be patient with me.

On a philosophical/theological level we are confronted with the dilemma of how a loving and all-powerful God can allow suffering to exist. Suffering is an issue many theologians have wrestled with and we should be wary of giving any kind of easy answer to the problem of suffering. ... One thought that has helped me though is the question- "Is the goal of human life happiness in this life?" ... If we answer with anything but a "yes" we open the door to suffering of some kind. It doesn't answer the problem of suffering, but it opens the door to a possible answer that God might have some good reason for allowing suffering to exist.

As caregivers I think it can be helpful to have some explanation of suffering that you find helpful, but I think we have to be very cautious about dumping our understanding on the people we meet who are suffering.

One understanding of suffering I carry around in my soul is this- I tend to believe that God cares more about us developing a Jesus-like character in relationship with Him than he cares about us being comfortable in this moment. If delaying fixing my problem will bring some development of holiness to me, I suspect God will choose that over fixing me in that moment and losing the growth in holiness. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12, "a thorn was given me in the flesh ... to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the

power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:7-10). For Paul there was some suffering that was allowed in his life that he understood to have a holy purpose.

I believe that God can transform suffering to good ends. What was meant for evil God can transform and use for good (Gen 50:20). For example, to learn to be courageous we probably need a world with some danger in it. To learn to be patient we need a world with annoyance. To be compassionate we probably need a world with people whose suffering we can share. But, this probably doesn't account for all suffering.

There's another thought that I will often carry with me into being with someone who is suffering. Someone once asked me how I can believe in God when someone I love is suffering. I told them that in Christianity one of the places where God was most active in the world was on the cross as Jesus was dying. So I have to believe that while we feel like God is absent in the midst of suffering, the cross tells me exactly the opposite. God is incredibly present in the midst of suffering. Incarnation could be understood as Compassion. Compassion means to “suffer with”. God comes to suffer with us.

Another thought I carry is that we should beware of putting any sort of blame on the person who is suffering. Suffering is not a lack of faith. Remember that Jesus wept. Jesus seems to have

felt forsaken as he died on the cross (Ps 22; Mk 15:34). And Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane also seems to imply a prayer that was unanswered. Jesus says to the disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Mark 14:34). Then we read, "And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will' (Mk 14:35-36). Jesus suffered. God, through Jesus, knew suffering. If we remember the suffering of Christ when we come to someone who is suffering it should put us in a place of humility as we approach them.

While I believe some suffering is used to good purpose, I also believe there is some level of suffering in the world due to the sinful choices of human beings. If you drive drunk it is likely you will cause yourself suffering or cause someone else to suffer. To have free will means we have the freedom to hurt each other. I also believe that there is some level of chaos in the world, perhaps because we live in a fallen world. ...

Most people aren't bothered by suffering in an abstract theological way. Most are bothered by suffering in an experiential/ emotional way. When we are suffering, or, what is sometimes worse, when we are watching someone we care about suffer, that is when most of us feel tested. We feel like when we are in the presence of suffering that God has left the building. I think it was a moment like that that led to the psalmist writing, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1),

which became Jesus' words on the cross. I remember being with Seth in the hospital when he was 2 years old and praying for him to be healed and being incredibly impatient with God. It felt like, if Seth is healed then God is here, if Seth is still sick then God is not here. Emotionally that's how it felt. ...

Job's friends actually have a lot to teach us about caring for those who are suffering. We read that, "They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads towards heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." (Job 2:11-13). Compassion means to suffer with someone. Job's friends cried with him and they sat in the dust with him for seven days and didn't say a word. ... There is something about the profound nature of deep suffering that often makes silence the only healthy response. Job has lost his family, his possessions and his health. All his friends can do is weep with him and sit in silence.

I don't know if you have ever sat in silence with someone, but if you have there is a kind of tension that builds. I have heard that when you go to buy a car if you just give the salesperson the silent treatment the car will drop in price. The salesperson will speak to break the uncomfortable silence. We want to break the tension caused by the silence. When we are in silence with someone who is suffering there can be an incredible tension

inside us to talk. Sometimes we speak to distract from the suffering and we talk about the weather, or some bit of gossip. Sometimes we will use clichés or try to give answers to a person's suffering.

Job's friends eventually try to give answers to his suffering. They say God would not allow a good person to suffer, so Job must be being punished for some secret sin. This way of thinking is present in the prophets and wisdom literature of the Bible. Proverbs 13:21 says, "Disaster pursues sinners, but the righteous are rewarded with good." That sounds like what Job's friends are thinking. If you are experiencing disaster, then you must be a sinner. This might be generally true. For example, if you are constantly driving drunk you are likely to get in a car wreck, or if you are having an affair your marriage is likely to be destroyed. Sin eventually leads to disaster of some kind. However, it is not always the case that everyone who suffers, suffers because of their sin. In Job we read that Job was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Job was not being punished for some secret sin. Sometimes bad things happen to good people and sometimes good things happen to bad people. Things don't always add up the way we want them to.

In Job's story we find out that there was a disagreement between God and Satan. Satan says Job was only good because God rewarded him all the time- he made him prosperous. Satan says that if his prosperity was taken away that Job would no longer be righteous, he would even curse God. God believed otherwise.

... It is like a parent who gives a child a candy for cleaning up their room. Eventually you want the child to clean up because they love you and it's the right thing to do, not only because they get a candy. So Satan takes away Job's blessings- his family, his possessions, and his health. The question sits in the air, "will Job still love God and do what's right if he doesn't get rewarded for it?"

Job in the depth of his suffering cries back to God asking how he can be allowed to suffer like he is if he hasn't done anything wrong. Imagine a child who has cleaned their room and has been kind to their siblings- how can you deny them the candy you usually give them? Wouldn't it feel like a punishment to them? But how can you know if they will be good when there is no reward unless you deny them a reward? This is the dilemma of the book of Job.

The friends keep saying that there must be some hidden sin in Job's life. There must be some reason for this suffering that makes sense. We want an explanation for suffering that shows we live in a world that is predictable. If I do A then B will happen. But suffering doesn't make sense that way. We can try to explain suffering away or use clichés that tend to minimize the suffering, but really we are dealing with our own anxiety and usually we are making things worse for the person who's suffering, like Job's friends did. Not only did Job lose everything, but now he was being blamed for his tragedy because of a secret sin. Job's friends cared more about having an understanding of God and the universe that made sense to them,

than they seemed to care about Job.

In the end of the book of Job God comes in a whirlwind and human wisdom is shown to be nothing in comparison to God's wisdom. There are things going on in the universe that humans have no ability to grasp. Who are human beings to demand a response from the universe-creating God? God speaks to Job's friends saying, "my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:8). Those words should be in our minds whenever we try to explain away a person's suffering.

When dealing with suffering I have often thought about Jesus' mother, Mary, watching her son die on the cross. If you were standing with her, is there anything that you could say to Mary that would have made her feel better? What might you say? "Mary, don't worry, God is going to use this to do something great". Wouldn't she just be offended if you said something like that to her? Even though it's true, it probably wouldn't be appropriate and probably wouldn't help her in that moment.

I believe suffering can be transformed to good ends, just like the cross was. I don't believe God causes suffering, but I think God can transform suffering. I think from the point of view of eternity, our suffering will be viewed the way we view the cross now. Our sufferings will become badges of our victory through Christ. ... But, that is not necessarily something we can say to



someone in the midst of suffering, just as we couldn't talk to Mary about the good that will come from the cross as she watched her son dying on it.

So what does Mary need in that moment? She doesn't need some answer to explain suffering. She needs someone to share her tears. She needs someone to suffer with her. She needs someone to hug her. She needs a listening ear and a quiet presence. She might need someone to help her cry out her pain to God. God said that Job spoke rightly, and Job is the only one who speaks to God in the book. He speaks his questions and expresses his anger to God.

We do for Mary what God did for us. The Creator of the universe took on weak, suffering, human flesh. God has not abandoned us in our suffering. He has joined us in our suffering. God does not sit off in the distance watching us suffer. He joins us in all the tears, and the filth, in the pile of dust and ashes. No explanation is given, but God came to sit with us in our mess. ... As caregivers we also need to inwardly hold onto hope. God will not leave us in the mess. God will not let suffering have the last word in His good creation. Life does not end with a cross. It ends with resurrection and new life.

To conclude, it is helpful for us to have some inward understanding of why God might allow suffering and to also know that, In Christ, God came to share our suffering. But we

should also be aware that Job was given no reason for his suffering, that Jesus suffered, and that theologians have wrestled with this for a long time, so we should avoid easy answers to a person's suffering. We should also recognize that what people usually need when they are suffering isn't an explanation, but compassion. They need someone to suffer with them. When humanity suffers, God mounted the cross to share it with us, rather than explain it to us. AMEN