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Is There Value in Suffering?

Dorothy Sayers, in “The Whimsical Christian,” calls Christianity the only religion that gives value to suffering. The prime example is that of our Lord Jesus who suffered the tortures of the damned in hell upon the cross of Calvary (Matthew 27:46). From the greatest injustice and suffering has come the salvation of the whole world. He has won complete and total forgiveness. Martin Luther would remind us that where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

No one of course, goes looking for suffering. Suffering finds us. It finds us at the most inconvenient times too. Some of it can be short term, some long term, chronic. In most cases, it is physical suffering, which can be the result of accident, disease, or the aging process. Psalm 90 reminds us that we are to expect trouble in our golden years because these troubles are God’s reminders that this present age is not where we want to invest too heavily. This present age, as we know it, is passing away along with all its beauty.

Not much has changed since the days of Job. Job’s friends could make no sense out of his suffering. They offered their share of explanations though. Mostly, as you know, they called for Job to “curse God and die.” Many in our day share this same opinion. Even Christians can fall into this trap. When things don’t go well they can become angry with God and stay away from His house. “It’s just one thing after another,” they say. Yes, it is! Perhaps God is trying to get their attention so that He can do something good for them.

That brings us back to the question: “Is there value in suffering?” Suffering makes us ask questions of God. Mostly we ask, “Why me?” That might not be the best question to ask in light of the Law of God! Do we see our sinfulness?

Granted, most people have no concept of sin. The better question is: “Why not me?” Why shouldn’t God treat me this way? Does God owe me anything? These are all Law questions. The Law teaches us that no one is righteous in God’s sight (Romans 3:10). Any suffering that we get, we deserve. Don’t we confess in our worship service: *O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You and **justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment...*** (Lutheran Service Book, Divine Service, Setting Three, p. 184) Simply said, if it depends upon our unworthiness, then the only value to our suffering is indeed, punishment!

Christians are very often tempted to believe that God is punishing them for something. Perhaps the conscience is speaking loudly at this point. Perhaps there is unconfessed sin. If so, then one should confess those sins which one has kept hidden and is attempting to cover up. Know that it is impossible to conceal them from God! Covering them up simply fools the person who is denies them. In this sense a person would feel that God is punishing them, and deservedly so.

The Gospel tells us that Christ has suffered ALL our punishment in His very own body. His innocent suffering and death changes the value of our suffering from negative to positive. Paul writes: ¹ *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are Christ Jesus* (Romans 8, ESV). No condemnation for those who have been baptized, repented and believed in Jesus. Paul looks beyond these present sufferings and points his readers to our glorious future. He writes: ¹⁸ *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us* (ESV).

What good, then, comes from our suffering? Earlier in this same letter Paul addressed the issue of the value of Christian suffering. He wrote: ¹ *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* ² *Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.* ³ *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,* ⁴ *and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,* ⁵ *and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us* (Romans 5, ESV).

Enduring suffering requires faith. Faith does not see or it is not faith, it is knowledge. Faith does not see. Faith hears. Faith believes through the ear not through the eyes. And what does faith hear? Exactly what Paul has said! God has redeemed us in Christ Jesus, giving us peace with Him. He is not angry with us; rather, He is pleased with us because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done on our behalf. God allows suffering in order to draw us closer to Him, to comprehend our absolute dependence upon His grace and mercy. He allows suffering so that we will constantly be speaking to Him in prayer, asking for His blessings, not merely our deliverance from suffering.

In God’s good time we will be delivered from our sufferings, if not with healing in this life, then certainly in the life to come. Then the words of the Apostle John are fulfilled in us: ⁴ *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away* (Revelation 21, ESV).

No other religion or value system can make sense out of suffering! Only the Gospel our Lord Jesus Christ tells us what God thinks of us and what God has done for us. Only as we consider the cross of Jesus do we begin to understand the positive value of our suffering.

In His Service,
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