

THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

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At various times in each of our lives we have felt severe physical pain. Sometimes it was almost overwhelming. Disease brings excruciating Pain to sufferers the world over. Accidents bring pain; a fall and broken bones ... a severe burn ... an automobile accident causing the body to be cut and mangled. Then there is the gnawing pain of starvation and thirst. There is the matter of physical pain which tyrants have used to break the will of an enemy. Too, there is mental and spiritual pain, which are often more difficult to bear than physical pain. Someone has said, "Man enters the world with a cry and leaves it with a moan."

Is there some reason for man's pain? Does it serve some good purpose? Is there an adequate explanation for pain? One of the most puzzling of all problems is the problem of human suffering. Why must humanity suffer? Why must there be disease and death? Especially, why must the innocent suffer? For example, why must children suffer?

Although he himself was a believer in Christ and a defender of Christianity, C. S. Lewis included in his fine book, *The Problem of Pain*, the critic's question, "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both." Is there an answer to this question?

A Result Of Man's Sin

When God created man he made him a creature with freedom of choice and freedom of will. When God chose to make man a creature of freedom, an inevitable result was that man could choose evil as well as good. God determined that man should not be merely an automaton, but a creature of freedom who could choose good. Thus, when man chooses to love God it has real significance. The decision that man should have freedom having been made, it was necessary that this freedom include the possibility of choosing evil as well as good. Because man has freedom of will, there have been mistakes, blunders, and wrong choices. The events of history give ample evidence of the fact that man has often chosen wrongly and has suffered as a result.

Suffering often is a result of man's own sin. There are many evidences of suffering as a result of man's own sin. The man who drinks heavily, after a while, pays the price in his own body and in the tangled strands of his own life. The person who misuses his body in any way will eventually pay the price. The liar the cheat, the hypocrite also inevitably suffer. They bring suffering upon themselves by their wrong actions.

When we say that suffering is the result of man's sin the explanation is incomplete. It explains much suffering, but it certainly does not explain all suffering. In the thirteenth chapter of the gospel according to Luke our Lord faced this question. "Now there were some at that very season who told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered, and said unto them, Think ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they have suffered these things? I tell you, nay; but except ye repent ye shall all in like manner perish." (Luke 11:1-3). Christ was saying that these catastrophes did not come upon them because they were more wicked than the rest.

In the gospel according to John the same subject is discussed briefly: "As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind? Jesus answered, Neither did this man sin, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." (John 9:1-1). Taking the word of Christ as final authority, we turn from the idea that sin in one's own life is the full explanation of suffering. Much suffering comes to the innocent without his having deserved it in a special way.

Further explanation of why men suffer lies in the fact that men live together. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "For none of us liveth to himself, and none dieth to himself." (Rom. 14:7). The second of the ten commandments in the Old Testament had indicated much earlier that the iniquity of the fathers would have its painful effects upon their children even to the third and fourth generation. (Ex. 20:5). The nature of the universe is such that when certain causes are put into operation certain effects must inevitably follow. Sin, which is essentially rebellion against the will of God, inevitably causes suffering.

Sometimes the sin of a drunken driver on the highway must be paid for in part by innocent travelers who have never met the sinner until in the agonies of painful death. When it was decided that men should live together upon the earth, it was inevitable that the innocent should sometimes suffer. It should be remembered, however, that living together also brings many of the most cherished blessings that mankind knows.

The nature of the universe helps to explain human suffering. Let us think for a moment of what we call the laws of nature. As we look at the whole universe it is a system of law and order, a system in which everything is faithful. Scientific investigations made in one part of the world can be verified through the same experiments in another. There is uniformity throughout the natural laws of our universe. There must be, or our world could not operate. Principles true today must be true in another.

This uniformity, this system of law and order, also has much to do with man's suffering in the world. For example, take the subject of fire. The natural laws of the universe which God has created include certain principles which enable man, if he uses the right elements and the right processes, to create fire. The same law that enables us to have fire for the cooking of our meals and the heating of our homes also enables us to have fire which will burn our houses and destroy our lives. The law that made it possible to have fire for constructive purposes may be misused for destructive purposes.

One of man's greatest achievements has been the production of the automobile, but along with its fine uses there are also tragic uses. Similarly, steel which makes possible great buildings can also be used for guns and tanks which destroy lives in war. The principles of nature, if used properly result in good. If used improperly, they carry the power of destruction.

But this is not the whole story. When God created the universe with its natural laws, he established the system by which the seas provide moisture for the continents. As the sun's rays cause water to evaporate and to form clouds, as the winds move the clouds across the continents, as temperature changes cause rainfall, and as the water falls gently upon the fields, God is providing the means for all life to exist. However, in this same process, the rain will sometime cause houses to be torn from their foundations and lives to be lost. In the whole process of nature there is an occasional by-product or side-effect--a storm. This is a further explanation of the suffering of man,

Is Suffering Always Evil?

When the subject of human suffering is mentioned, man generally assumes that all suffering is evil. Let us examine this pre-supposition to see if it is true. Is the negative value which we put on suffering its real value? Let us see. Man's Primary purpose in existence is to honor and glorify God, and to become as God-like as it is humanly possible to become. This being so, everything that takes him away from God is evil, and everything that brings him toward God is good.

When we have accepted this standard, we can see the events of our world in a different light. It is quite possible that the riches, the honors, and the pleasures of the world are actually hindrances rather than helps. It is quite conceivable that illness, loss of money, and even the loss of friends might ultimately serve some good purpose. Under certain circumstances poverty is better than riches. At least Jesus once said, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." (Luke 12:15). All too often the material things of our world blind us to the spiritual things and thus become curses instead of blessings, not just for a time, but for eternity. Riches, honors and pleasures are not necessarily evil; they can also be blessings. It depends on our attitude toward them; it depends on how we use them. Do they draw us closer to God or pry us away from God? No one would claim that suffering is good in itself, but what is good is that through suffering man is often brought into submission to God's will.

Often Beneficial

Suffering is often beneficial. Much of the pain that we suffer is remedial in character. It is a part of the deceitfulness of sin that so long as things are going well with us there is little disposition to give up error and sin. It is when we are hurt that we feel a need for God. It is through suffering that we overcome. A man who has no sorrow in his life is immature. It is through hard work that we develop physical stamina. It is through suffering that we develop spiritual strength. We learn to overcome the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. Things that looked so glamorous before, after a period of crisis in which we come face-to-face with the real issues of life, look like tinsel and glitter, mere baubles on a Christmas tree.

Some people live their lives as if the chief end in life was their own happiness--a freedom from pain or suffering or anything unpleasant. The worst thing about such a notion as the main goal in life is that it removes God from the center of things. On the other hand, since God ought to be the center of our lives, it is possible that pain is his method of bringing us back to him. As a father loves his child and corrects him and disciplines him for his own good, so God lets his children suffer that they may have the greater blessings which both life and eternity have to offer.

There is a passage in the letter to the Hebrews which reads, "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourageth every son whom he receiveth. It is for chastening that ye endure; God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father chasteneth not?" (Heb. 12:6-7). This is also what David meant when he said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I may learn thy statutes." (Ps. 119:71).

Suffering Builds Character

Suffering also has the power to beautify and ennoble the character and the spirit of the sufferer. Some people seem to feel that the love of God guarantees that they will be able to have everything for which they wish. This is an unreasonable expectation, for God's love

for man is never described in the scriptures as the soft, indulgent, humoring love. God is described as a potter who works carefully and painstakingly to make out of the shapeless clay a vessel of honor. He is pictured as a builder who cuts and places stones in such a way as to make a beautiful edifice. He is a shepherd who devotedly cares for, but also guides and restricts, his flock for their own safety. He is a Father who disciplines and corrects every son whom he receives. A human father who genuinely loves his child must from time to time cause that child to suffer through the administration of discipline, lest the child destroy himself and bring upon himself greater suffering by his own blunders. Loving care involves discipline.

If God promised immunity from suffering to those who follow him, men would serve him out of self-interest. If God offered immunity from suffering to all those who followed him it would also rob them of the means of developing the beauty and strength of character for which all should strive. No, God does not promise his children that they will be immune to all suffering, but he does promise, "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28).

Look Up Toward Heaven

The Bible describes man's existence on the earth as a temporary sojourn through which man is prepared for a better and more permanent abode in heaven. We read that Abraham "looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God." (Heb. 11:10). In the same chapter we also read that Moses made his choice to live and work among God's people rather than to enjoy the pleasures of Egypt, "for he looked unto the recompense of reward." (Heb. 11:26). At another time the apostle Paul said, "For our citizenship is in heaven." (Phil. 3:20). Paul also said, "Therefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceeding an eternal weight of glory ... For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (II Cor. 4:16-17; 5:1). To the Romans Paul wrote, "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to usward." (Rom. 8:18).

God has prepared for us a home and to that home he wishes us to come. Were it not for the heartaches, disappointments, and sufferings of this world we might forget the greater destiny that lies before us. The sufferings of this world were designed, in part, to cause all of us not to be satisfied here, but to lift our eyes toward the more wonderful world to come.