

HUMAN PAIN AND SUFFERING

There is not a single person that has not had to endure pain and suffering. It seems that some people go through more pain and suffering than others but all go through some form or degree of it. Many of us have witnessed someone who cried out, "Why me, God!" Because of inadequate answers to their cry, human pain and suffering made shipwreck of their faith. These are real people needing real answers to real problems!

The answer to the problem of human pain and suffering does not lie in the world. The world does not understand the meaning of life nor the purpose of life. The world thinks the meaning of life is pleasure. "Whatever makes me happy" or "whatever makes the majority happy" becomes the pursuit of life. However, what makes one happy often is the very thing that brings pain and suffering. The Bible which is the inspired word of God instructs as to the meaning of life. God said, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Further, the Bible informs man of certain principles that will answer the question of human pain and suffering.

THE FREEDOM OF CHOICE

God commanded Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, while in the garden of Eden saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17). The very fact that God commanded them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil implies that they could eat of it if they desired to go against the command of God. Thus man became a free moral agent. With choice came responsibility. Man as a free moral agent is responsible for the decisions he makes.

From the beginning, man has tried to shift the responsibility of his own guilt. Adam blamed Eve for his sin and Eve blamed the serpent but each was accountable for their own sin. Certainly, a person's decision is influenced by others. Still, we are accountable for our own actions.

Throughout the history of mankind, there has always been those who chose to do wrong. Seldom does it ever affect just the one making the choice. One may choose to smoke at an early age. He may think that it affects no one but himself. Sadly though, its effects are seen by everyone who breathes the smoke — the smoker and the non-smoker. There are many non-smokers dying today because of friends, relatives, and loved ones who smoke. This is an outrage and an injustice!

The spread of AIDS knows no boundaries. Innocent people of all races and nationalities are being killed by this dreaded disease. They are not homosexuals. They

are not intravenous illegal drug users. They are not promiscuous. They are innocent — often babies. They are guiltless victims of the poor decisions made by others. This is an outrage and an injustice!

Adolf Hitler could be called one of the most brutal men of recent history. Literally thousands lost their lives because of him. The effects of his brutality are still felt nearly fifty years after the Second World War. The physical scars can still be seen. The mental scars can still be heard. Why must people suffer so? Why must people grieve because of others like him? This is an outrage and an injustice!

"There is nothing new under the sun!" It has always been that the innocent suffers because of the decisions of others. The blood of righteous Abel still cries out. Wicked Cain's decision to murder affected not only innocent Abel but Cain's descendants. Nine hundred years before Christ, wise Solomon spoke of such pain and suffering. He said, "Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: And look! The tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter — on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they have no comforter. Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, more than the living who are still alive" (Ecclesiastes 4:1-2).

Often, the problem of human pain and suffering does not lie in any place other than man himself. He makes decisions that affect himself and he makes decisions that affect others both present and future. That is true whether those decisions are good or bad, beneficial or detrimental. Man's decisions of the past affect us today and man's decisions today will affect man in the future. When man makes poor decisions, man becomes man's own worst enemy!

Someone may well ask, "What about natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes?" One of the answers to this question lies in the geological changes that took place after God flooded the earth with water. Because "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5), God brought judgment upon man. The result of these geological changes is natural phenomena such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods. Man as a free moral agent, responsible for his actions, chose to sin.

Famine has its own interesting history. Recent discoveries show that many famines occurred in years of abundance. What caused the famines were wicked national leaders who chose to sell their nation's crops for personal wealth. Even more pitiful is the fact that some nations are allowing their children to starve to death while cattle roam the countryside unharmed because of idolatry. God's promise concerning idolatry rings loud and true. Moses recorded the commandment of God, "you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Exodus 20:5).

TEMPTATIONS FROM SATAN

The book of Job helps us to understand the universal question of human pain and suffering. Job is described as "blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1). These qualities were reiterated by God in verse 8 showing that they were not just man's opinions about Job but also God's. Satan, the adversary, disputes with God over the righteousness of Job. Satan claims that Job fears God because of God's protection and that if God would allow afflictions to come upon Job, Job would curse God.

As a result, God allowed Satan to afflict Job, but Job held true to his integrity. Job's reaction was threefold. His first reaction was sorrow. His second reaction was that "he fell to the ground and worshiped" God (Job 1:20). And his third reaction was that he understood life which is seen in his statement, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

However, defeated Satan was not satisfied. So Satan again contends with God over the righteousness of Job and God notes that even though Job suffered "without cause" "still he holds fast to his integrity" (Job 2:3). Satan further accuses God of protecting Job but this time from personal injury. Again God allows Satan to afflict Job but limits Satan in that Satan is not allowed to kill Job. Sadly, Job is afflicted by a dreadful disease from head to foot. Even his wife implores him to "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). Yet, faithful Job maintains his integrity and later said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him" (Job 13:15).

From the book of Job, we see that human pain and suffering does not always come as a result of sin. Afflictions in life are at times the result of godly living as was the case of Job. Also, from the example of Job, we learn the proper reaction to pain and suffering — which is that we ought to maintain our faithfulness to God. Thus, we see that God allows Satan to tempt us in order to test our integrity and our faithfulness to Him. Even with temptation, we can be assured that God cares for us. 1 Corinthians 10:13 is a source of great encouragement. Paul wrote, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

Further we see from the pages of the New Testament that temptations or trials can help us grow. James declares that a man is blessed when he endures temptation (James 1:12). The key is endurance, patience, and perseverance. When we are steadfast and endure temptation, then we grow in our maturity. For this reason, James instructs, "count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking

nothing" (James 1:2-4). Concerning these "various trials," Peter declared, "that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1Peter 1:6-7). Therefore, the trials of our faith helps us to grow to maturity. Because of this reason, Peter exhorted, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy" (1Peter 4:12-13).

THE MYSTERY OF LIFE

God has not revealed all things to man. There are some things that are a mystery to man and will remain a mystery to man. Moses declared, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). We know that God has "given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue" (2Peter 1:3). Since there are those things that only God knows, we must rely upon God. The evidence says that God will only do those things that are just and right. God's love is the evidence. God's love is demonstrated by His creation, by His provisions, and by His sending His only begotten Son into this world as a sacrifice for sin. God will only do that which is right!

From reading the book of Job, we know why Job suffered afflictions, but notice that God did not reveal it unto Job. God at the end of the book of Job asked Job some specific rhetorical questions concerning the nature of deity, where the world came from, and who is in control of the universe. By this means, God reminded Job that God was in control and that Job needed to trust in Him.

When God reveals His mystery, man cannot but help to be in awe of it. Paul proclaimed, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33).

CONCLUSION

Consider, please, the grandeur of heaven in light of human pain and suffering. Heaven would not have the appeal it does if it were not for the infirmities of this life. When describing heaven, John said, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). The "former things" are those things of this world — death, sorrow, and pain; but in heaven there is life, light, and liberty from sin, pain, and death.

Many of the Eastern religions offer reincarnation but who would want to come back into this world of sorrows and despair—especially as a cow destined for the butcher-block! What anticipation would a "dog's life" have? Reincarnation has no attraction! However, a place

of rest at the right hand of God has a tremendous appeal. Heaven is no fairy land! It is real and all men are invited but only the faithful will receive a "crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

Heaven, then, is for a prepared people. We prepare ourselves by obedience to the Lord and it begins with the plan of salvation. We obey the Lord's plan of salvation by believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Further, Jesus taught, "unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). Likewise we must confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said, "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33). Finally, Jesus taught that one had to be immersed in order to be saved. In Mark 16:16 Jesus said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." Because this is a new beginning, one must continue in faithfulness in worship and service with the church Jesus built.

Jesus depicted the great judgment when all nations shall be gathered before Him as "a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:32). To the faithful the Lord shall declare "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). However, sadly to those not living according to the standard God has established, Jesus will say, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

Yes, this life holds many difficult times of pain and suffering, but this life is a preparation for the life to come. Even if our present life is destroyed, if we are faithful to God we can say like Paul, "For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2Corinthians 5:1).



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