

SUFFERING

Suffering is something that affects all of mankind in one way or another. Whether a person is rich or poor, old or young, good or bad, all will experience suffering to one degree or another. It may be ill-health, poverty, accident, disability, crime, act of war, famine or one of the many other ills that beset mankind, but all will experience the mental anguish that comes because of pain and loss. Why a God who is omnipotent and all powerful permits pain, anguish and suffering is a question that has filled the minds of thinking men and women, when they consider these problems of life. The true answer to this question is not understood by most people, particularly when a major calamity or disaster has struck. Some see suffering as the unjust punishments of a disinterested God, who allows His creation to experience trauma and tragedy without reason. Such may therefore turn from religion to seek their own solutions to life. Others believe in fatalism, assuming that every circumstance in life is pre-determined, and cannot be altered; that we are the victims of a vengeful Deity. Others may refuse to seek for reasons, preferring to indulge in an endless pursuit of personal happiness, with the attitude of 'eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die'.

There appears to be a great anomaly. The Bible teaches that an all-wise, Almighty Creator formed this wonderful universe in which we live by His infinite wisdom, foresight and care. Yet humanity experiences continual difficulties, stresses and troubles. Families suffer through disease, disabilities or death. Often, through no fault of their own, individuals face times of trauma and they try to grapple with the question as to why they suffer.

There is a reason for the suffering that is fundamental to human life. It is part of the present state of things, not caused by the design or purpose of God, but by the folly of mankind in the very beginning of history - and perpetuated, in many cases, by the foolish actions of an ignorant and disobedient world. This equally applies to illness, in that it is part of our present human condition. God takes no pleasure in this state of things and does not intend it to continue. The problem from a human perception is that God's timescale is different from our own. We live but a few short years, God has eternity, to Him we read a thousand years is as a day. In the beginning, when God created man He provided ideal conditions, unmarred by the myriad sources of suffering that affect mankind now. Adam and Eve were in an environment in which the evils that beset mankind now were unknown and where violence and death were not experienced. It was a paradise, yet despite the idyllic setting man rejected God's overruling hand and the result was alienation from his Creator. The only time the majority of mankind seek God now, is when they are in great need and they soon forget Him again once the danger is passed.

Following Adams disobedience he was told: "Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return" Gen 3:17-19.

Thus at the time of Adam a change occurred in the condition of creation. No longer was it "very good" Genesis 1:31, with all creatures dwelling in harmony with God's laws. No longer did Adam and Eve enjoying the myriad benefits of Paradise and find pleasure in doing God's will. From this time onward creation was marred by the effects of sin. Affliction, anguish, pain and decay was to be the experience of all mankind.

This situation came about not by God's will, but by mans disobedience. The state of the world was allowed not out of vindictiveness of God's part, nor out of indifference, but out of His wisdom that man should learn from his mistakes. History shows that it takes great calamity and suffering to even begin to affect society to make positive changes. Thus man only learns the lessons of God by reacting in the right way to the trials and tribulations of life. The world is full of evil-doers. Even those who think that they are morally good, who endeavour to benefit their fellow man and are prepared to sacrifice their own pleasure that others might profit, do not please God if they refuse to heed His Word as revealed in the Bible, or seek to change the meaning of the divine instructions. Should we wonder at the presence of evil and suffering when humanity despises the very means of its solution? Or seeks to find their own way to salvation apart from God's way?

But, say some, God could remove all these dreadful circumstances. Certainly, He could. But if He did so without reason and purpose, providing sinful mankind with every blessing and benefit without restriction, man would never change and God would never accomplish His ultimate purpose which is to produce a people "for His Name" Acts 15:14, and to teach mankind the wisdom of His ways. Without an understanding of God's Word, men do not acknowledge divine instruction, and are not prepared to accept God's teaching. Man will not naturally follow the way of righteousness. The prophet Jeremiah declared: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Jeremiah 17:9.

Jesus declared: "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile a man" Mark 7:21-23.

These evil characteristics are the root cause of much of humanity's suffering. A society that throws off the restraint of the Scriptures, causes the glaring injustices against their fellows which are so evident today. If God were to remove all the causes of suffering from society, He would open the floodgates for personal gratification, complete ruthlessness and

selfishness, threatening the destruction of all His creation by those who see no need to honour God, and His ways. It would be a self-centred, spiritually-shallow civilization.

Notwithstanding what has already been said, it is a sad fact of life that the righteous suffer just as do the unrighteous. Men and women, who endeavour to worship God with the right attitude and in truth, often find themselves subjected to the opposition of others, or to circumstances of great trial be it illness of themselves or in others close to them. Why should God permit even His own beloved people, who wish to do good, to suffer the hurtful effects of evil? Well hard as it may appear, it is for their ultimate personal spiritual development. It is also to help others understand the reason for suffering.

In the scriptures we can read about a man of great wisdom and righteousness. His name is synonymous with suffering, even today. The phrase, a Job's comforter, describes one who aggravates a person's distress under the pretext of comforting him. Job we read was a servant of God, and "there is none like him in the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God, and shuns evil" Job 1:8. It could be considered that such a man would be protected by the God he served, from the evil experience of suffering. But it was not to be. Job lost everything, possessions, family, his own health.

Why? God saw that there would be benefits gained by Job personally, and by those like him in every age who would read of Job's faithfulness even under such dire trials. Job did not condemn God for the losses he endured, because he realised that all he possessed came from God and belonged to Him. Job comments:

"Naked I came from my mothers womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord" Job 1:20-21.

It is not for us to blame God for any troubles that might come our way, in the beginning we had nothing and at the end we can take nothing with us, God provides all! So trials in life may in fact be God's means of perfecting our character, preparing us for the greater purpose He has in store for those who prove to be faithful. Thus the Bible comments about Job: "In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong" Job. 1:22. No, Job looked for the reason behind his suffering.

However, for a time Job felt that he was alienated from God: "Oh that I knew where I might find Him! that I might come even to His seat" Job 23:3. Yet his cry to God for relief seemed to go unheeded. He did not realise that a certain time was to elapse before God would answer, and reveal the true purpose of the matter. The same situation can face us, when we have to wait for God to solve Our problems - seemingly praying in vain. This is not so, for God will answer prayers in His own time and according to His infallible wisdom. We also need to be aware that the answer we get may not be the one we expected or hoped for, but it will be an answer which is for our ultimate good.

For his faithful endurance in the light of such suffering, Job was greatly rewarded: "So the LORD blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning; for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses" Job 42:12.

For those who remain faithful now despite the trials, sorrows and tribulations of life their latter end will indeed be blessed abundantly in the Kingdom age. Even in death God has a purpose for allowing the righteous to die: "The righteous perish, and no-one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no-one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death." Isaiah 57:1-2

They die and rest, yet await the resurrection from the dead to life in the Kingdom of God. The apostle Paul wrote that it is "through much tribulation" that believers will "enter the kingdom of God" Acts 14:22. God does not exempt His servants from suffering and trials, for it is by such means that they are able to prove their courage and conviction for the things they believe. Not only so, it is through difficulties that a person is made stronger in character, more understanding and compassionate, and more faithful in disposition. These are the characteristics with which God is well-pleased.

Those who "by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality" will be granted "eternal life" Romans 2:7 - the promise of "divine nature" 2 Peter 1:4, and the privilege of reigning as "kings and priests" with Jesus Christ Revelation 5:10. No more will the weaknesses of human nature be felt; no longer the diseases, distresses, vagaries and frustrations of life; no longer the realization of increasing age, with all its weaknesses and concerns, no more the sorrowing for loved ones. The joy of immortality is beautifully expressed in the vibrant words of the prophet Isaiah: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" Isaiah 40:31.

Granted the power of endless life, they will enjoy complete freedom from the anxieties and weaknesses of the present, and find absolute enjoyment in participating in the setting up of the wonderful Kingdom that is to come. This is what the Almighty God has promised and this is what will most certainly happen. God's word is sure and will not change.

Then the time will come when truly: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" Revelation 21:4.