

The Haunting Question

by Fran Sciacca

In words that may be more relevant in the arena of suffering than in any other, Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote, *"The child of the light is sometimes found walking in darkness, but he goes on walking."*

Nevertheless, the darkness is real. Lloyd-Jones's mentor, G. Campbell Morgan, made these comments on Job's cry of anguish in Job 3: *"It is a great lamentation, pulsing with pain, expressive of the meanings of the most terrible of all sorrows: the sense of mystery, the inexplicability of it all."* The "why" of suffering is our most potent assassin, doggedly hunting us whenever our minds allow him.

It would be both foolish and futile to attempt a definitive answer to the question of suffering. Even the book of Job in its forty-two chapters does not contain a complete explanation of the "why" of his intense ordeal. But Scripture does include pockets of truth on this subject that can help us look beyond the surface of our suffering to the center—God himself. Though we cannot know in full God's motives for sovereignly allowing what seems to contradict what we know of his love, we can discover principles that at least help to sustain us, and to sustain others in their time of

need. When all seems darkness, even a flicker can appear as the light of full day.

A WIDER GAP

The first principle is that suffering helps us realize our radical dependence on God.

In the adolescent years of modern science, a concept known as the "God of the gaps" was popular. It held that God was a sort of empirical "fudge factor," an explanation for the unexplainable. When science could not produce an adequate reason for some process, phenomenon, or concept, this "God of the gaps" could be conveniently hauled out of his closet to plug this gap in man's knowledge. As modern science matured, these gaps became smaller and fewer in number, until scientists felt God was no longer needed.

In a similar fashion, today's Christianity tends to phase out God in the arena of faith. In this era of prosperity, technology, and the explosion of information—when our needs are met, our fears eased, and our questions answered—we are speaking of God with less and less affection, even though we may know more about him. The "gaps" in our lives are shrinking, and shrinking right along with them is the realization of our dependence on him who upholds the universe by his word of power. So God continues to use suffering to drive us back to himself, just as he let the

Israelites hunger and thirst in the wilderness to convince them of their need for him (Deut. 8:2-5). Paul realized this principle vividly after circumstances drove him to momentary despair:

We do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

AN ABNORMAL WORLD

A second principle is that suffering serves as a reminder that we live in a fallen, abnormal world, one in which things are not as they should be.

One of the most successful and influential self-improvement books in recent years has been Thomas A. Harris's *I'm OK—You're OK*. Though a heresy underlies the title, it is interesting that the author felt compelled to write on the subject. He apparently knew that many people feel they are *not* okay—something is wrong somewhere.

When Jesus saw the sorrow of Mary and Martha because of the recent death of their brother Lazarus, he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled," and he wept (Jn. 11:33-35). The Greek words John uses in this context convey also the idea of anger. We know that Jesus intended to raise Lazarus from the dead (Jn. 11:4-15),

so his weeping could not have been over the loss of Lazarus. Instead, as G. Campbell Morgan stated, "His approach to the grave revealed some of the deepest things in his own attitude. He was troubled in the presence of sin and unbelief which had its final expression in death." Jesus wept because he knew more vividly than anyone else that this world is abnormal.

Paul amplifies this principle in Romans 8:1-25, where he outlines the effects of man's sin on creation as a whole. It appears in Scripture that even the physical suffering associated with childbirth is intended by God as a guidepost, pointing the woman back to Eve's sin in the garden (Gen. 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:13-15).

KEEPING OTHERS ON THEIR FEET

A third principle is that our suffering is God's program for preparing us to adequately minister to others—to those he has already scheduled to be a part of our future.

Paul reminds us that God is "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so *that* we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

The Greek word rendered "affliction" in this passage is *thlipsis*, a picturesque word referring to anything that brings

physical pressure on someone—like the heavy weights that once were placed on the chests of criminals in England to punish them. So an "affliction" is anything that is crushing someone at a given moment in his own life and experience. A mother's battle with two preschool boys can be as much of an affliction as someone else's bout with crippling arthritis.

The Greek word translated "comfort" in this passage—which appears ten times in verses 3-7 in this chapter—is intimately related to the term *parakletos* used in John's gospel to describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7). New Testament scholar William Barclay maintains that this family of words refers "to that kind of comfort which keeps a man on his feet; when left to himself, he would collapse. It is the comfort which enables a man to pass the breaking-point and not break." This comfort, Barclay says, includes "exhorting men to noble deeds—and high thoughts; it is especially the word for courage before battle."

This is the comfort God wants to give me in my affliction *so that* I will be able to adequately and powerfully minister *this same comfort* to another in a similar trial. I will never pass judgment on the validity of this person's affliction, and I will not attempt to minister comfort which I have never received myself. Job called his friends "miserable comforters" (Job 16:2) because they tried to speak beyond their

own experience with God. They spoke the truth, but it lacked the divine anointing that comes only from prior experience with God in the school of suffering.

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