

# Joyful Suffering

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There is, perhaps, no question more frequently asked than the question concerning the goodness of God and the very real and deeply felt experience of suffering in all of its many forms in our daily lives. How is it that God, who is all-powerful, all knowing, and all loving, can allow such tragedy and hardships to be endured? This question has been asked for many millennia now, and I do not so much as pretend to present an answer to this most difficult of questions; I do, however, wish to offer a few reflections relating to the matter at hand.

## The suffering of Job

Whenever we dare begin to treat of suffering and its role in a person's life, we would do well to begin with the Book of Job. Job, the "blameless and upright man" (Jb 1:1), was allowed to undergo great suffering

to see if he would curse God once his many blessings were stripped away from him. One by one, Job loses all that he has, from his family to his health. As Job's suffering increases, his friends continually tell him to repent of his sins because it is on account of his sins that this suffering is brought upon him. Job adamantly denies that he has sinned and demands an explanation from God of the treatment he has received, going so far as to accuse the Lord of acting unjustly. The Lord responds with a lengthy series of questions calling into perspective Job's own power and knowledge of the world, culminating with the question: "Will we have arguing with the Almighty by the critic? Let him who would correct God give answer!" (Jb 40:2). These powerful questions remind Job of his proper place in the order of creation and so he responds, "Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I put my hand over

my mouth. Though I have spoken once, I will not do so again; though twice, I will do so no more" (Jb 40:4-5). Again God's barrage of questions are hurled at Job, leaving him no other reply than, "I have dealt with great things that I do not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know. I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (Jb 42:3-6).

Ultimately, the Book of Job does not offer an explanation of suffering. What Job does provide, however, is a reminder that the reality of suffering is so high above us that we cannot know the full reasons for suffering in the world. We must keep in mind, however, that this is not to say that we can know nothing of suffering or that there are no fruits of suffering.

Suffering is part and parcel of the Christian life; suffering is as necessary as food and water. We each need and receive varying amounts of food and water daily. Not only does the quantity we consume differ, but the quality of the food and the purity of the water differ as well. Suffering seems to be along those same lines, to a certain degree. Suffering is necessary for each individual life, but the degrees and shapes and forms of suffering will vary for each person, for any number of reasons, most of which we can only hope to know.

## The model of Christ

We can see the absolute necessity of suffering when we take even just a brief glimpse at the life of Christ Jesus who himself gave us "a model to follow" (Jn 13:15). In the fullness of time, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). This eternal Word of God came to "pitch his tent with us," to lead us back to the Father. In Christ Jesus, God "has visited and brought redemption to his people" (Lk 1:68). The Son of God saw us in our sinful condition, cast out of the presence of the Most High, and sought to draw us back to the Father. He laid aside all of the divinity and power of his divinity, choosing to be born of a Virgin in a lowly manger in a small village named for bread. He humbled himself and stooped down so far as to take on our humanity for our salvation. He came to us to save us and draw us to himself through the power of his death and resurrection. He came to us knowing he must die for us to pay the price for our sins. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says this: "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the

universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word. When he had accomplished purification from sins, he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high, as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (Heb 1:1-4).

In the fifty-third chapter of the

book that bears his name, the prophet Isaiah foretold what the Messiah must go through. Jesus was mocked, cursed, stripped, whipped, and beaten, all before being led to the hill of Calvary. Christ not only suffered greatly physically, but he suffered greatly spiritually and emotionally as well. During his agony in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, Jesus, knowing what was to come, said to his disciples, "My soul is sorrowful even to death" (Mt 26:38). While he prayed, he begged, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will" (Mt 26:39). In all of this, he submitted to the will of the Father; he did not resist the suffering and pain and death he knew were his to come.

Christ's Passion culminates with his death on the cross, the cross of our salvation. After suffering and enduring his passion for our sake, and after hanging on the cross for several hours, he said, "It is finished." And bowing his head, he handed over his spirit" (Jn 19:30). The tyrannical

reign of sin and death is finished. Our banishment from the presence of God is finished, "For it was fitting that he, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the leader to their salvation perfect through suffering" (Heb 2:10). Through his suffering and death on the cross, Christ broke forever the chains of sin and death and set us free.

## Resurrection

Three days later, the women went to the tomb to properly bury his body.

"On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. He said to them, 'Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold, the place where they laid him'" (Mk 16:5-6). Because Christ was obedient to the will of the Father and carried out all that was required of him, the Father raised him from the dead, opening for us the way to salvation. The cross of Christ is the way to eternal life with God. Death was not the end for Jesus; death was only the beginning, and so it is with us.

Fifty days after the resurrection he ascended to heaven, saying to the apostles, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). As the apostles, bewildered, stared into the sky, two more men dressed in white appeared, and they said to them, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will return in the same way you have seen him going into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Though he is not here with us today physically, he sends his Spirit to us to lead us and to guide us along our way to him.

It was truly necessary for Christ to suffer death, "even death on a cross," in order for him to enter into his glory (Phil 2:8). It is precisely in his passion and death that Jesus becomes our King and our High Priest. "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:8-10).

## The Paschal Mystery in the Christian life

Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus continually told the disciples what was necessary for him to enter into his glory; namely, that he must suffer and die. He would reclaim the dignity and power of his divinity through his suffering and death. The disciples, though, simply could not

understand this until after it had taken place. It was not until the resurrection that it finally started to sink in and they realized the truth behind his words.

The Paschal Mystery, though not simply something that Jesus himself lived; rather, the Paschal Mystery is something for each baptized Christian to live. St. Paul eloquently asks us, "are you unaware that who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead and now lives in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection" (Rom 6:3-5). We are in union with him when we share our sufferings like him. Jesus repeatedly calls his followers, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk 9:23-24). In short, suffering is necessary in the life of the Christian. The Prince of the Apostles makes this more explicit when he says, "Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his

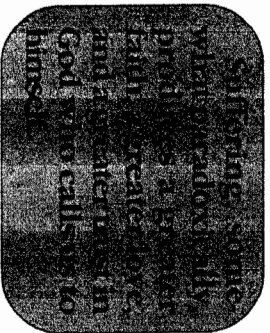
is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly" (1 Pt 4:12-13). For us to share in the glory of the resurrection, it is necessary that we share in the passion and death.

Quite frequently today we hear it proclaimed that if you would but follow Jesus with your heart and accept him as your "personal Lord and Savior," life would be perfect.

Your health will dramatically increase, you will be financially secure, your marriage will be without argument, and your children will be faultless, and so on and so forth. This message is, though, very often a direct contradiction of the authentic Gospel message. Christ Jesus himself endured great suffering on our account; why should it be any different with us? "Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you" (1 Pt 4:12).

Suffering, in the Christian life, is not something to be avoided, but rather something to be accepted and even embraced. Indeed, we are to "Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let your perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and com-

plete, lacking in nothing" (Jas 1:2-4). For "unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn 12:24). The



grain, in this case, is our very lives. If we simply continue to live our life as though nothing were different after our baptism, then there is nothing fantastic, earth shattering, of spiritually

enriching about our lives. If, however, we are willing to "fall to the ground and die," if we are willing to humble ourselves before God, if we are willing to die to ourselves, if we are willing to share in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, then our lives will bear "much fruit." It is precisely in our sufferings that we come to know and experience the great power of Christ's love. New life is not possible without death. By sharing in his suffering and death, we will come to share in his resurrection. Suffering, somewhat paradoxically, produces a greater faith, a greater love, and a greater trust in God who calls us to himself.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes, "in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1:24). What is lacking in the sufferings on Christ? Objectively speaking, absolutely nothing. Christ's sacrifice on the Cross is per-

fect and takes away sin once and for all. Subjectively speaking, though, our sufferings are lacking in the suffering of Christ. If we wish to share in the joy and the glory of his resurrection we should also be willing to share in the sufferings that are to come, in whatever form and manner we may find them.

Suffering comes in any number of manifestations, be it through hunger or thirst, fire, earthquakes, or floods, sickness or disease, death or betrayal. Each of these forms of suffering is distinct and unique to each individual person and each of these sufferings may have greater or lesser – or even equal – degrees of pain for the person. What is the same, however, is the promise of our Savior to be with us and to see us through this suffering. We must always remember that "This saying is trustworthy: If we have died with him we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him" (2 Tm 2:11-12).

Throughout our lives, suffering will always be with us in one form or another; but along with this suffering great joy will also be present in our lives. Christ Jesus himself commands us, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). But at the same time, Jesus also reminds us, "I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and

your joy might be complete" (Jn 15:11). Jesus makes clear in his own life and example the presence of both joy and suffering. Both must be accepted and both must be lived.

There is no remedy for suffering save the Kingdom of Heaven, where we hope to hear our Lord say to us, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy" (Mt 25:21). It is often suggested that time will heal all pains, but in my experience that simply is not the case. Time cannot heal all of our wounds or mend our hurts; only the love and power of God can do that. Time can, however, make our sufferings easier to bear and easier to live with. Time allows us the ability to more fully accept our suffering, to learn how to live with our suffering, and to unite our own suffering with the sufferings of Christ. With Paul, we would do well to say, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ" (Col 1:24). All that is still lacking in the suffering of Christ is nothing more than our own participation in his suffering.

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*If young people are given the encouragement . . . to grow in their relationship of love and trust with a person - Jesus - then vocations will come.*

—Archbishop Timothy Dolan