

The Hard Road To Life

by Steve Zeisler

The book of Job is a dissertation on human suffering. The Old Testament saint left us a powerful record of his seeking to understand why he had been made to suffer so terribly. Here is an example of his wrestling with God for an answer to his problems:

**I loathe my life;
I will give free utterance to my complaint;
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
I will say to God, "Do not condemn me;
Let me know why Thou dost contend against me.
Does it seem good to Thee to oppress,
To despise the work of Thy hands,
And favor the designs of the wicked?
Hast Thou eyes of flesh?
Dost Thou see as man sees?
Are Thy days as the days of man,
Or Thy years as man's years,
That Thou dost seek out my iniquity,
And search for my sin?
Although Thou knowest I am not guilty;
And there is none to deliver me out of Thy hand." (Job 10:1-7)**

Why is suffering such a large part of our experience? There are few subjects in Scripture that receive more attention than that of human suffering, yet it appears the Bible leaves us with more questions than answers. This was the heart of Job's complaint against God: "I will say to God, 'Do not condemn me. Let me know why Thou dost contend against me.'" In other words, Why me, Lord? What have I done to deserve this? Why now, when I feel so weak and defenseless? Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked seem to go unpunished for their sins? Why are the innocent, the young and attractive called upon to suffer? Why? Though Scripture comments on the "why" of suffering, in the long run it does not answer the question to our satisfaction. God's final answer to Job was, in effect, "You must be satisfied with my love and authority because in your finiteness any explanation I give you will not satisfy you."

While Scripture frequently leaves many of the whys of suffering unanswered, it does give a tremendous amount of information on how we should respond to suffering. In the Bible we learn how to respond in faith when we are called upon to suffer. In our study of the letters to the seven churches in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation, we have come to the letter to the church in Smyrna. Here was a church that was assigned by the Lord to undergo suffering.

One of the saddest days of my life began with a phone call from Jack Crabtree, who ministered here at Peninsula Bible Church for a number of years. He had been, perhaps, my closest brother in the Lord. Jack called to tell me that his two-year-old son had choked to death on a piece of food, just as Jody, Jack's wife, was about to go into labor and give birth to their second child. Though paramedics and doctors toiled to save the boy's life, their efforts were in vain. Their son died just a few hours before the birth of their second child. As I drove to the hospital to be with Jack I felt miserably ambivalent. What do you say to someone in such sorrow? How could I come up with a context that would make sense of what had happened? I came to realize how inadequate I was to offer words of comfort to that suffering family.

This letter to the church at Smyrna has something of that quality about it: it does not say very much. Actually, it is the shortest and least eloquent of the seven letters. Even the Lord, as he addresses this suffering church, does not seem to have many words to say. But what he does say ministers to the needs of these people. He

offers a clear statement of what they need to know in order to overcome their trials. What he offers them is himself. As I hope we see here in these verses, that is enough. Chapter 2, verse 8:

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

Let us look for a moment at what this church was facing in terms of suffering. We have already seen that there is a pattern to these letters in Revelation. Generally speaking, the Lord initially says something positive to the church in question. He then follows with something negative, and concludes with a word of correction. But there is no correction for the church at Smyrna. There does not appear to be any failure among them that requires his attention. Thus we can surmise that the suffering they are undergoing has not resulted from sin.

All of us at times have endured suffering which resulted from sin. That, perhaps, is one kind of suffering we can live with--suffering resulting from choices we should not have made, when we knew what the consequences would be but went ahead anyway. One of the thieves who was crucified next to Jesus said to the other thief who reviled the Lord, "We are receiving what we deserve. Will you even now revile this one?" This man's recognition that his fate resulted from certain things he had done in his past was what helped him make his appeal to Jesus, "Will you remember me when you come into your kingdom?" If we are suffering for something we have done, and it is very clear to us and everybody else that that is why we are suffering, that in itself will not make the trial go away, but it sometimes makes it possible to bear.

But that was not the case with the church at Smyrna. What they were going through, evidently, was persecution for their faith. As Peter points out in his letter, on such occasions we are "sharing in the sufferings of Christ." The world hates the Lord and at times it will hate us because we are the fragrance of Christ to the world. Suffering for doing what is right, or even worse, for no apparent reason, is much more difficult to bear than suffering we know we deserve.

Smyrna was a wealthy, sophisticated, beautiful, and politically astute city. She had always managed to align herself with all the correct political parties of Rome. Smyrna was one of the first cities in the region to build a temple to the emperor of Rome, thus it became a center of worship of the emperor. This was a source of civic pride to them, but the deification of Caesar was a disaster for the Christians of the city and of the empire. Everybody was required to declare at least once a year, "Caesar is lord." Christians, of course, who had Christ as their Lord refused to do so. Relentless persecution was their lot as a result.

A sizeable Jewish community in the city was committed to going along with Rome. Remember the evil alliance at the time of Christ between the Roman hierarchy and the Jewish authorities who combined together to put the Messiah to death. Many of the Jews wanted to be accepted in the Roman Empire and thereby lose their status as a minority community, and one of the ways they did it effectively in Smyrna and other places was by persecuting another minority, the Christians. Evidently that was what this church in Smyrna was facing. They suffered because of their commitment to Christ and their refusal to sell out to the secular powers. Some years later, Polycarp, one of the great martyrs of the faith, was executed at Smyrna. Threatened with death if he did not worship Caesar, he simply said, "Eighty--six years I have served him and he has done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The Jews of Smyrna were among those who energetically gathered wood for the fire that led to Polycarp's death.

Consider two other issues the Lord raises for the Smyrnans: fear and testing (v. 10). At times our dread of something we are anticipating makes us want to give up before the situation ever comes upon us. We are tempted to sell out before the test is even applied. Here the Lord is reminding the church at Smyrna that he is in control of everything, and that fear itself is the enemy they have to deal with. He is in control. He can sustain them when the hour of testing comes, so do not be overtaken with fear, he tells them.

The suffering they are facing, he says further, is a test. Suffering always has that quality about it: it reveals something about an individual that you might not otherwise discern. While Satan seeks to destroy us by the test, the Lord intends that the test bring about endurance and character. This is true in every setting. I have been coaching a Little League baseball team this year, and I have been very interested to watch what pressure situations do to kids. We have some outstanding athletes on our team, but they are not necessarily the best clutch hitters. Some of the less talented kids are the ones who respond best when the pressure is on and the team needs a hit. Suffering and pressure sometimes reveal an inner quality that may have gone unnoticed until the test is applied.

Times of suffering also reveal who your real friends are. Jesus said that where your treasure is, there will your heart be. It may be very difficult for us to find out what it is we treasure most in life until we are threatened and much is taken from us. Jesus said, "The first will be last and the last will be first." When the heat is applied, when there is suffering, hurt, danger and pressure, then people will really be seen for who they are. Thus the Lord reminds the church at Smyrna that the testing they are going through will reveal something about them.

Let us look at some of the words the Lord uses in telling these people what they are going to face. "I know your tribulation," the Lord says. "Pressure" is the root meaning of this word. In classical Greek, this word was used to describe a man slowly being crushed to death by the ever-increasing pressure of a heavy boulder. That is often how suffering is also--it has a relentless pressure about it. It does not come at convenient moments. We can't turn it on and off. It usually goes on and on and seems to last beyond our ability to cope with it. We can't make it go away when we want to. That is the kind of burdening pressure the Lord speaks of first: "I know about your tribulation. I know about the relentless burden that is bearing down on you that will not go away."

In the past couple of years I have had occasion to minister to people who were suffering acute depression. In some cases this was chemically--induced depression. Something inside their bodies triggered some mechanism and made them depressed for long periods of time. They could do nothing to make it go away. They went to sleep depressed, they woke up depressed. Everything they sought to do was for them a great effort. They wondered would the pressure ever let up. Why should they take medicine'? they asked. Why exercise? Why reach out to people'? They were facing relentless pressure.

Other people have inner compulsions that also seemed relentless. They face compulsions to perverted sexuality, to drugs, to drink and to overeating. That kind of drive can seem relentless too. I had a roommate once who had lost an arm in a boating accident when he was a child. I was always struck by the many ways the loss of his arm affected his everyday life. Everything he did was impacted somehow or other by the fact that he had lost an arm. Zippers, shoelaces, jars with twist-off lids, all kinds of things that I took for granted gave him trouble. There was no relief from the fact that he had only one arm. What the Lord is saying to these people is, "I know your tribulation. I know you have been called upon to bear something that seems to last forever, something that is pressing down upon you."

The second word our Lord uses is "poverty." This again is an extreme term in Greek severe poverty is what is in mind. The church was located in a very wealthy city, a beautiful, garden-bedecked city. But the Christians were the poor of the city. They did not have what that society demanded people have in order to grant them value. Poverty often has a spiralling effect. If you don't have enough money today you will have even less tomorrow because you will fall further and further behind in the race. And beyond an insufficiency of food, clothing, shelter, and so on, poverty also can be personally degrading and humiliating.

Thirdly, our Lord says that they experienced "blasphemy." "Slander" would probably be a better translation. Their reputations had been destroyed. We are told in Hebrews that when the Lord went to the cross, he "endured the cross, despising the shame" associated with it. As painful as it was to die on the cross, as painful as the nails in his hands and feet were, as painful as the separation from his Heavenly Father was, the writer reminds us of the cost to Jesus of being branded a criminal, that slander and vilification were as painful as any element of the cross. The Lord is saying to this church in Smyrna, "You are being forced to live with an analysis of yourself that is not true, and there is no way to change the bad name you have been given into a good name again."

Fourthly, our Lord speaks of imprisonment. "You will be dominated and restricted. Others will have the right to take away your choices from you, your freedom, your creativity. They can keep from you freedom of movement, food or water or anything else. Someone is in a position to dominate everything about you and there is nothing you can do about it." Illness can have some of the same qualities about it. A virus can take away your freedom, building walls tighter and tighter around you, restricting your movement; you have less opportunity, less energy to interact with people, fewer options in life.

Finally, Jesus says, "Be faithful to the point of death." Death, the final threat, was the ultimate suffering they faced. Just as Polycarp was martyred, some of them would probably die as a result of what they were being called to suffer. Pressure, poverty, slander, restriction and death are all elements of the suffering these people faced.

The question we need to ask is, "If the Lord is addressing human suffering here, and his concern is to teach us how to respond to suffering, what does he say that will help these people have a godly response to suffering?" When we are called on to suffer, what information do we have here and throughout Scripture that will give us what we need to face it and not feel sorry for ourselves, to not quit but to trust the Lord and honor him in the midst of it?"

We will be helped if we look at some other phrases that are found throughout this letter. First, notice in verse 9 the Lord says, "I know " your tribulation. The Lord knows what is happening to them. They are not going through it alone, for no purpose. He is "the first and the last," we are told in verse 8. He was before the beginning, and he will be beyond the end. He is the majestic Sovereign of the universe and as such he knows what his people are going through. They are not being called to suffer in vain. It ought to be comforting to realize that whatever price is being extracted from us. it has the attention of the Lord who loves us.

The second thing that he says is, in effect, "I empathize with you." Jesus said of himself, "I am the one who was dead and is alive. I know what it is like to suffer as you are suffering. I know what it is like to go through what you are going through." Dorothy Sayers has written:

For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is, limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death, he had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from men that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life, the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace, and thought it well worthwhile.

The One who is ministering to us in our suffering has suffered himself. He was dead and came to life again. He went through all that can be assigned to us. We are told in Hebrews 2, "Therefore, he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make payment for the sins of the people, for because he himself has suffered and has been tempted, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." When we are suffering, one of the great truths we should remember about the Lord is that he has been there. He is empathetic. He understands. He will minister to us in our suffering. He is a merciful and faithful high priest.

Thirdly, he says, in effect, "I understand. I see what is really going on. The lies, the rejection, the distortion has not swayed me. Smyrna says you have nothing of value to offer, that you are poor, you cannot even feed or shelter yourselves. But I say you are rich. You have everything that is valuable and worth having. If you are being slandered by those who are serving Satan, be well aware that I understand it is slander. I see things as they really are. Your reputation is safe with me." The Lord sees things as they really are, thus they can count on him.

Fourthly, he reminds them, " I control the world you live in. In the last analysis, I am the One who is in charge of it all." He says they will face a period of imprisonment, ten days. Though the number is probably symbolic,

the point here is that he will determine the length of time they will be imprisoned. There is a great word in 1 Corinthians that reminds us, "no temptation has overtaken you but such is common to man, and God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide a way of escape that you may be able to endure it." You will not be tempted beyond what you can endure. The Lord's determination of what we can endure is often different than ours, but clearly, he is in final control. We can receive tremendous comfort from the recognition that the One who loves us and is committed to US is in control of our circumstances.

Lastly, he says, "I will reward those of you who are faithful." Those who overcome will never have to deal with the second (eternal) death. Even more poetically, he speaks of those who succeed as "receiving the crown of life." That is the victor's wreath, rewarded to athletes who won great victories in competition. In creating man God breathed into him the breath of life. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." The longing of every heart is to have life from the Creator, to have the vitality, usefulness, joy and verve that comes from a right relationship with God. He breathed his life into us. None of us want merely to pass from our existence and amount to nothing. We want to have life. That is what the Lord offers. The crown, which is life itself, belongs to those like these ones in Smyrna who learn to trust him even in the extremes of suffering.

"I know what you are going through," he says. "I empathize with what you are going through. I understand the reality behind it. I am in control of the circumstances; and I will reward those who are faithful." In saying those things he has given us what we need to make it. He has reminded us of enough of the truth to enable us to face suffering. Even if we do not have answers to all our questions, we have him.

The old spiritual says, "Nobody knows the troubles I've seen. Nobody knows my sorrow. Nobody knows but Jesus." Let us not be naive about suffering. Many here have not been called on to suffer very much. Many others have been given extremely painful, difficult assignments in life, assignments which call upon them to trust the Lord. I do not think we should for a moment allow ourselves to be naive about whatever someone else is having to face. But in the final analysis the words of the Lord apply. He is the One who has faced it all himself and he offers himself to those who are suffering. The only way we receive life, the only way we become anything worthwhile is through the testing process, the suffering process. That is how we learn to lean on the Lord, to trust him. If we do we will receive that great reward at the end, the crown of life which he promises to us.

Let us pray for each other that we will be the kind of people who will hear what the Lord is saying in this letter to the church at Smyrna; that we will trust him and learn to count on him when we face the kind of suffering that he has described.

Father, thank you for your generous offering of yourself. Though we are often confused, you understand. Even when we do not have answers to why our world is as it is, we know that you have done the things that we are facing, and that you long to be our comfort. Grant us the ears to hear, the willingness to trust, that will produce for us in the end the crown of life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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