

# Pulpit & People

**Essays in honour of William Still  
on his 75th birthday**

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# SUFFERING

## *A Study on Romans 8:18-30*

BRIAN MOORE

You live with your head in the sand if you fail to recognize that tragedy, pain, disease, infirmity, sorrow, death are the constant adjuncts of life and never far away from any of us. Nor are Christians immune. Indeed if anything those who pay God scant respect, or dismiss him as irrelevant, whose lives are devious, amoral and evil seem to suffer less. Of course comparisons are notoriously invidious and unreliable for they are usually coloured by our own experience.

Nonetheless this was a question that perplexed the psalmist —

I envied the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of  
the wicked.

They have no struggles;  
their bodies are healthy and  
strong.

They are free from the  
burdens common to man;  
they are not plagued by  
human ills.

Therefore pride is their  
necklace;  
they clothe themselves with  
violence.

From their callous hearts  
comes iniquity;  
the evil conceits of their  
minds know no limits.

(Psalm 73:3-7)

In other words while it can be argued that unbelievers on the whole *do* suffer less in this life Paul stresses that this should be seen as God's kindness towards them which is intended to lead them to repentance (see Romans 2:4).

Some troubles, however, come upon us (who are Christians) as a specific consequence of our Christian faith. It is this that Jesus alludes to when he warns his disciples, 'In this world you will have trouble' (John 16:33). Not so much in this case pain, disease, infirmity, sorrow or death, but hostility to our Christian stance, the pressure to conform to the standards and behaviour patterns of the world around us, the oppressiveness of evil, the feeling of evil leering at you as you walk past certain establishments, or listen to people talk, or read of a mugging incident, or a dastardly murder, or look at men and women who have

become dupes of evil. . . . Or a direct attack of evil, allowed by God, such as Job suffered.

Troubles we all face, then, whichever category they fall into. And nothing provides a sterner test of the reality of our faith. What is to be our response? Some think that the Christian should not turn a hair in trouble. 'There's nothing you can do about it. Just accept it. It is God's will and it is lack of faith that make you question and doubt and waver and hurt. . . .'

Such talk makes one want to cry for it indicates not only a faith that is lacking in sensitivity but a mind that is cocooned from reality. How different is the experience of the psalmists. Here are men (or women) of faith facing up to life and its troubles not with easy equanimity or unquestioning submission but with questions and doubts and a faith that battles through to a trust in God that is real and rugged and enduring.

Take Psalm 55, for example —

Listen to my prayer, O God,  
do not ignore my plea;  
hear me and answer me.  
My thoughts trouble me and I  
am distraught  
at the voice of the enemy;  
for they bring down suffering  
upon me  
and revile me in their anger.

My heart is in anguish within  
me;  
the terrors of death assail  
me.  
Fear and trembling have beset  
me.  
I said, "Oh, that I had the  
wings of a dove!  
I would flee far away  
and stay in the desert;  
I would hurry to my place of shelter,  
far from the tempest and  
storm."

But I call to God,  
and the LORD saves me.  
Evening, morning and noon  
I cry out in distress,  
and he hears my voice.  
He ransoms me unharmed  
from the battle waged  
against me,  
even though many oppose  
me.

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Cast your cares on the LORD  
and he will sustain you;  
he will never let  
the righteous fall.

But as for me, I trust in you.

(Psalm 55:1-8, 16-18, 22, 23).

Or take Jesus in his terrible agony on the cross as (in his human experience) he feels abandoned and cries out Why? Why? (Matt. 27:45, 46). But in his extremity he holds on, not accepting a drink until the job he had been given to do was completed (see John 19:30).

Others think we should praise God for our troubles. But in this regard we can not only be dangerously naive but hideously misled. C. S. Lewis' experience is instructive here. In 1960 after 4 intensely happy years of marriage Lewis' wife, Joy, died of cancer. In an effort to contain his grief and guard himself against losing his faith, he wrote a journal in which he openly expressed his feelings and doubts. A few years later the journal was published under the title, *A Grief Observed*. In the early pages, Lewis writes, 'Not that I am . . . in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not "So there's no God after all", but "So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer".'

It was this conclusion that Job came to at one point in the turmoil of his thoughts after the hammer blows of evil had left him hanging on desperately to the ropes.

How then can I dispute with  
him?  
How then can I find words to  
argue with him?  
Though I were innocent, I  
could not answer him;  
I could only plead with my  
Judge for mercy.  
Even if I summoned him and  
he responded,  
I do not believe he would  
give me a hearing.  
He would crush me with a  
storm  
and multiply my wounds for  
no reason.  
He would not let me regain  
my breath  
but would overwhelm me  
with misery

(Job 9: 14-18)

Let me hasten to add that that is not the end of the story, for Job regained his composure and rallied his faith.

What, then, should be our response to suffering, whatever form it

takes? In Romans 8:18ff. Paul makes up a number of points which, if grasped, could help us stand fast with the cutting wind of adversity in our face, calm and undeterred, resolute and unafraid.

*1 The sufferings of this present life are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (v 18).*

In Revelation 7 John is given a preview of heaven: 'After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God . . . and to the Lamb" ' (vv 9-10). 'Who do you think they are?' (v 13). 'You know.' 'They have come out of the troubles of life on earth' (v 14). And in a world where things seem to be growing worse and worse (read 2 Timothy 3:1ff) it's wonderful to look ahead to this future day when 'the troubles . . .' of this life will be left behind. There will be no more hunger, or thirst, no more suffering, or sorrow, or death and we shall live for ever in the glory of Immanuel's land (vv 16-17). This is not mere escapism or pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die romanticism. It is real. There is such a day coming.

This means that whatever dark experiences we pass through in life the sky will lighten and the dawn will break. Disease and death will not have the last word. Pain and suffering will one day be no more, and God will wipe all tears from our eyes.

Even the creation waits in eager anticipation (v 19). For when man rebelled against God's beneficent rule and insisted on living life on his terms as if he were God he brought nature down with him (that is, the sub-human creation) in that it was subjected to 'the frustration of not being able properly to fulfil the purpose of its existence'.

And, if the question is asked, "What sense can there be in saying that the sub-human creation — the Jungfrau, for example, or the Matterhorn, or the planet Venus — suffers frustration by being prevented from properly fulfilling the purpose of its existence?", the answer must surely be that the whole magnificent theatre of the universe, together with all its splendid properties and all the varied chorus of sub-human life, created for God's glory, is cheated of its true fulfilment so long as man, the chief actor in the drama of God's praise, fails to contribute his rational part. The Jungfrau and the Matterhorn and the planet Venus and all living things too, man alone excepted, do indeed glorify God in their own ways; but since their praise is destined to be not a collection of independent offerings but part of the whole creation, they are prevented from being fully that which they were created to be, so long as man's part is missing, just as all the other players in a concerto would be frustrated of their purpose if the soloist were to fail to play his part.' . . . 'So it is man, not the sub-human creation, which is to blame. . . .

(C. E. B. Cranfield)

As a result waste, futility and decay in all around we see (v 20). But on the day of revelation or consummation 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (v 21).

2 *The sufferings of this present life are really the birth pangs that precede new life.*

Paul now pictures the creation as groaning in travail like a woman in labour (v 22). He thinks, writes a commentator, of 'the suffering of animals — the weak devoured by the strong — the ruthless destruction of plant life, or natural catastrophes of all kinds (e.g. earthquakes, hurricanes, tidal waves, bush fires, volcanoes . . .); he listens to the crying of the wind and sea.' The travail of nature sighing for that moment when it will be, as it were, set free from the crampedness, struggles and frustration of the womb that it knows now, and enter into the freedom, joy and meaningfulness of new life (vv 19, 21).

And we are in the same condition, in travail waiting for the redemption of our bodies (v 23), that is, our full salvation. For although we have renounced our 'we-want-to-run-our-own-lives' spirit and committed ourselves instead to Christ for ever we still live out the new life we have found in him (our 'saved' life) in the context of the old life, that is, in this present body subject to the oppression of evil and the judgment of God and their inevitable concomitant — death which overshadows human life.

This haunting of life by death is vividly illustrated by Tchaikovsky's great B minor Symphony. The music is full of questioning and agitation with the exciting overwhelming rhythms of the march in the penultimate movement giving way to the tragic desolation of the last. James S. Stewart rightly suggests that over against this music of Tchaikovsky should be set, by way of complete contrast, Brahms' Requiem. 'Here death is still the theme, but pessimism there is none, and always the sombre mood merges into the great fortifying climaxes of victory and peace.'

However for the present our final salvation is not yet. Until that day when 'the trumpet will sound . . . and we shall be changed . . . and this perishable nature put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature put on immortality.' (1 Corinthians 15:52-53, cf. also vv 49-50), until that day we groan in travail.

In other words, this world is for the Christian a labour ward where he sighs and groans and suffers until the day of birth the confirmation of his sonship and the redemption of his body, that is, his complete deliverance from 'the principle of sin and death' (see v 2) and its disastrous side effects, and his 'investiture with glory'.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the dumb sing for joy . . . And the ransomed of the Lord shall . . . come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away' (Isaiah 35:5-6, 10).

Nor shall we be disappointed as women in travail sometimes are in that their new-born child is defective, malformed or still-born. For we have the guarantee in our hearts of a full and perfect salvation — the

Holy Spirit (v 23).

Here is the Christian hope, then, face to face with personal suffering and the suffering of our loved ones and our fellowmen and women in this life, that —

one far off divine event  
to which the whole creation moves

'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea [the symbol of evil] was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new"' (Revelation 21:1-5 see also 21:22-27, 22:3-5).

We don't see it now. Instead we hope for it and 'wait' for it with patience (vv 24-25). Not stiff upper lip stoical patience but Christian patience, 'patience with the lamp lit' as Tertullian described it in the third century, enduring suffering, despising its shame for the joy that is set before us, like Jesus 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

3 *The Spirit who is our guarantee of full and perfect salvation is also our Helper, Strengtheners, Adviser, and Counsellor (v 26) in the travail of this world.* 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me . . . . And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever . . .' (John 14 1,16). And nowhere is His ministry more significant and potent than in the realm of prayer (vv 26-27).

Previous English translations attribute the sighs or groans of which Paul writes here to the Spirit but John A. T. Robinson suggests that this is not easily intelligible. 'Rather, it is our groanings which the Spirit makes his own. He actually uses our groans as prayers and God the searcher of hearts knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's own people in God's own way . . . . There is an identity between God and the Spirit and an affinity or rapport between the Spirit and our spirits (cf v 16) and this is the secret of Christian prayer. Christian prayer has God on both sides of the relationship! In other words, God by his Spirit, on the one hand, constantly helps us in our weakness and inarticulations in prayer and, on the other, sovereignly works out through our feeble, stammering prayer his good and perfect will.

Whatever the future may hold we have this assurance: 'In everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose', that is, those who have responded to God's saving



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purpose in Jesus Christ and his call to them in particular by his Spirit, and love him (v 28).

Plainly and starkly this means that many things — even sickness, disease, bereavement, death, disappointment, failure, calamity . . . — God works for our good. Therefore we can sing with John Newton —

Since all that I meet shall turn to my good,  
The bitter is sweet, the medicine is food!  
Though painful at present, 'twill cease before long.  
And then, O how pleasant the conqueror's song!

That is to say we recognize that suffering has its use in God's scheme of things. For example:

(1) Suffering keeps us humble. The shattering blows that hampered Job in rapid succession left him a humbled man.

Naked I came from my mother's womb  
and naked I shall depart.  
The LORD gave and the LORD  
has taken away;  
may the name of the LORD  
be praised.

And Malcolm Muggeridge has written: 'Supposing you eliminated suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be! . . . because everything that corrects the tendency of . . . man to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered'.

(2) Suffering disciplines us. Whatever we experience in the realm of suffering should be thought of as part of 'the present discipline whereby God teaches us patience, courage, humility, faithfulness, and similar lessons' (J. I. Packer).

My son, do not make light of  
the Lord's discipline,  
and do not lose heart when  
he rebukes you,  
because the Lord disciplines  
those whom he loves,  
and he punishes everyone he  
accepts as a son.

(Hebrews 12:5, 6)

'He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful'. John 15:2

'Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word'. 'It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees'. Psalm 119:67, 71

(3) Suffering produces character and refines faith. 'Not only so, but we also rejoice in our suffering, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope' (James 1:2, 3).

'In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed' (Peter 1:6, 7).

4 *God's purpose in our salvation is not our health, or comfort, or happiness but our like-ness to Christ (v 29).* And that purpose, as Paul makes explicit, has its roots in God's choice in eternity, which is the meaning of predestination.

Clearly this teaching is beyond our minds to understand. But one thing we can affirm. All too often predestination is discussed and argued about as an abstract theological dogma which makes nonsense of man's moral responsibility. That is the wrong atmosphere in which to try to get to grips with it. For it is pre-eminently a doctrine of experience, something we come to learn as we commit ourselves to our Creator God and Lord and his Son our Saviour.

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
 He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;  
 It was not I that found, O Saviour true —  
 No, I was found by Thee.

Thou didst reach forth Thy hand and mine enfold;  
 I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea —  
 'Twas not so much that I on Thee took hold,  
 As Thou, dear Lord, on me.

I find, I walk, I love, but O the whole  
 Of love is but my answer, Lord, to Thee;  
 For Thou wast long beforehand with my soul,  
 Alway Thou lovedst me.

In essence that is what predestination means. Notice that in detailing the steps between God's choice of us in eternity and our final redemption Paul jumps from our calling by God at a specific point in time and his acquittal of us for Christ's sake (our justification) which marked the beginning of our Christian life to our glorification leaving out the whole of our Christian experience (v 30). As if to say, 'Your trials, adversities and sufferings in the maelstrom of life may be baffling and sore and grievous but glory is just around the corner. Of that you can be absolutely, incontrovertibly sure.'

A. M. Toplady put it into memorable words —

My name from the palms of His hands  
 Eternity will not erase;  
 Impressed on His heart it remains,  
 In marks of indelible grace.  
 Yes, I to the end shall endure,  
 As sure as the earnest [the guarantee,  
 the Holy Spirit] is given;  
 More happy, but not more secure,  
 The glorified spirits in heaven.