

The Role of Suffering in the Pastoral Ministry

(The Ministry of Comfort)

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Suffering is real to the human experience. From the time of man and woman's fall in Eden forward, every human being knows this world's thistles and thorns are real and they hurt. As ministers of Christ we are not exempt. We feel them too. What can we learn from our own times of suffering? What lessons does God want us to absorb as we minister to suffering members and prospects? How can this discussion of suffering improve our pastoral hearts and minds?

Prior to serving here in Wisconsin, my ministry had been spent in Florida. I remember becoming a Circuit pastor at the ripe old age of 27. Why a circuit pastor at that age? At 27, I was one of the old guys in the Gold-Coast circuit! I believe at one point, our circuit of six congregations had a net pastoral experience of 10 years. We don't have that problem here. We have age! I have age! The collective pastoral experience in this room is a tremendous blessing. My hope is that this paper would serve as a springboard for sharing ideas and insights about the ministry of comfort, allowing us to learn from each other.

Suffering for the Christian is Reality

Believers are not exempt from the pain of suffering (although we all wish that were so). God has promised us many things, but he has not included immunity from this life's pain among those promises. *"A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all."* (Psalm 34:19). *"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* (2 Timothy 3:12). The list of passages which speak of the believer enduring painful moments in life, **physically** – **spiritually** – **emotionally**, is extensive. Let there be no doubt as to the Biblical teaching that, until the return of Jesus at the dawning of heaven, suffering is a reality for the believer.

Much of what claims today to be vibrant Christianity would cringe at the above paragraph. Turn on the television and listen to a host of polished speakers in sharp suits talk about Jesus' will for your life as one of only sweetness, comfort and prosperity.¹ As they seek followers for their flocks, they argue that one who is "in covenant with God" will escape serious suffering by either rebuking it in Jesus' name or by calling upon God to immediately come and rescue. In my former hometown of Houston, Joel Osteen has built a church in the N.B.A. Rocket's old basketball arena on this theology of the Christian easy life.

With his health, wealth and happiness message Brother Joel packs the seats of Lakewood mega-church and according to the ratings, has grown the largest television ministry of all those on the air today!

Houston's Joel has the promise right, but he has the timing of it way wrong! We do have the promise that God will completely rescue us from all sadness and suffering. The time is coming when tears no longer will sting our eyes. Here in time, however, we WILL know both tears and suffering. Why must this be so? God has his reasons for it. The answers are not always simple.

What is Suffering?

As stated above, Christian suffering can be comprised of one or more of three components: physical, emotional and spiritual. As a working definition, suffering is **anything which God in love allows to hurt or irritate the believer**. In the wisdom of God, sufferings he allows to touch us always make us think. From a Biblical perspective, they are among the tools God uses not only to get our attention, but more importantly to accomplish His purposes in our lives in ways that would never occur without the trial or irritation.

Luther certainly had a way with words. He spoke of sufferings as getting “carved up” by the Lord:

“He is the Carpenter and we are the wood... He plies his tools and works on us, planes and carves us, in order to kill the old man within us together with his wisdom, prudence, holiness, nay, with all his vices, and in this way completely to prepare us to be his new creation. To this end he must take large axes, hatchets, saws, wedges (for the old adam is a tough churl and rogue)... this work of God goes on till death. Through this work, Christendom became great and strong. Through it the beloved martyrs went to heaven. Through it the holy fathers were enlightened in the Scriptures. Through it Christians become experienced and trained people, good for giving advice and help in all things.”ⁱⁱ

The dogmaticians have been very careful in speaking about the cause of suffering. All suffering is the result of man's sinfulness, not of God's holiness. Suffering is sin-induced. For that reason, they speak in terms of the *permissive* or *consequential will* of God. Alongside this, what is called *punishment* for the unbeliever is called *chastisement* for the believer, though outwardly they may appear to be quite the same. No matter what we endure, be it a stroke or the flu, a troubled marriage or persecution at the hands of the ungodly, God in love is using our sufferings for our eternal good among the “all things” we encounter in this life.

Sufferings which God allows to touch our lives are always blessings. Again, listen to Luther:

“If I really recognize my blessings, my heart laughs; and if he sends me misfortune, trouble, and danger, I take to thanking him and say: God be forever praised for chastising

me in this way. Formerly I might have thought that God had utterly forsaken me; but now sickness is as welcome to me as health, and a dungeon and prison seem to me a royal hall. For since God is a gracious Father, all this is lovely and precious.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Kinds of Sufferings

Sufferings can come in many different shapes, sizes and intensities. Here is a list to get a handle on what kinds of sufferings are common to us. It is not meant to be all-encompassing, but rather a general thumbnail of suffering.

1. In general, we suffer because of the sin in us and around us. Diseases have become a part of life on planet earth because of sin. Discord between people and peoples has grown out of sin’s infection. The world groans under the weight of sin as calamities in nature fall upon us.
2. Sometimes suffering is of our own foolish creation. In this life we do reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7-9). In weakness, we leap before we look. Our sinful arrogance leads us to go our own way and when it does, the consequences many times cause us pain.
3. We sometimes suffer because it is specifically God’s discipline calling us back from our wanderings or apathy. “Because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Heb. 12:6).
4. We may suffer troubles because of our faith, especially when we openly take a stand on biblical issues, i.e., suffering for righteousness sake (2 Tim. 3:12). Sometimes, this soul-wrenching pain can even happen within the family of believers (Matthew 18:15). Sufferings that come to us specifically because of faith are the “cross” the Savior invites us to take up and follow him with.

God’s Reasons for Suffering

As was noted before, in love God allows things to enter our lives that hurt and irritate us so that he might use them as tools in dealing with our individual needs. Consider the following ways that God uses the tool of suffering in the believer’s life (add freely to this list):

- ✓ **We suffer** that we might witness to others the certainty of faith in Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:8-10; 2 Cor. 4:12; 1 Pet. 3:13-17). When believers handle suffering patiently and joyfully, it becomes a marvelous testimony before others of the importance of belonging to Christ. When I was in the hospital, one of my respiratory therapists who was an unbeliever watched and wondered... and later was brought to faith through his watching and wondering and finally listening. My illness was God’s way of touching this young man
- ✓ **We suffer** so that our own capacity and sympathy in comforting others grows (2 Cor. 1:3-5). It is amazing, no one challenges my place at their bedside now since the stroke happened to me. In fact, more often than not I see in eyes the unspoken words “he understands.”
- ✓ **We suffer** to keep down pride (2 Cor. 12:7). God has a way of knowing when our old adam is getting a bit smug about himself. I wonder if God saw that in Paul? The Apostle Paul saw his

thorn in the flesh as given to help him maintain a spirit of humility and dependence. God uses us in prominent ways, could it be that he has that in mind when we suffer?

- ✓ **We suffer** because it is a training tool. God lovingly and faithfully uses suffering to cause our faith to mature (Heb. 12:5f; 1 Pet. 1:6; Jam. 1:2-4). He may be pruning to remove dead wood from our lives (weaknesses, sins of ignorance, immature attitudes and values, etc.) He might be pulling us toward a greater reliance upon him and His Word. He might be using his tool to test/purify our faith and strengthen it.
- ✓ **We suffer** to bring about continued dependence on the grace and power of God. Suffering is designed to cause us to walk by God's ability, power, and provision rather than by our own (2 Cor. 11:24-32; Eph. 6:10f). It causes us to turn from our resources to His resources.
- ✓ **We suffer** so that this world doesn't look like heaven on earth and we lose sight of heaven (Luke 12:32-34).
- ✓ (insert other reasons here: _____)

It is a good exercise to read through the above list and consider your last hospital call, shut-in visit, and counseling appointment. As you prayed for the person(s) you met with, did you pause to reflect upon what God might be up to? Of course, many times we cannot see it or totally understand it. But helping a fellow Christian see the possible ways God is at work can open their hearts to understand the blessing even found in times of trouble.

Ministry to the Suffering (The Ministry of Comfort)

It had been some time since I read the section on "The Ministry of Comfort" in The Shepherd Under Christ. I heard the voice of my teachers, Professors Habeck and Schuetze, in the words they left behind for the pastors that would follow them. In prefacing their advice in this section they wrote:

"But his main concern (the pastor), in line with his call, will be the spiritual needs of his people when calamity has overtaken them, since it is at such times that the temptation to murmur, doubt, or despair is especially strong. He will not take it for granted that his stronger members will come through a time of trial unscathed. He will show his concern for all his members when they are afflicted by bringing them comfort which they need (1 Th 5:14; 2 Cor 1:4)."^{iv}

Their insight into the hearts of suffering believers is on the mark. When we suffer, although the Lord is using the tool to improve us, the cutting and carving sometimes can shake even the strongest of God's people. When suffering is not short-lived but long in duration, human fatigue can set in and in weakness a believer can feel abandoned by God. The questions of "Why me, Lord?" and "What did I do to deserve this?" and "Why don't you care about me, Jesus?" can set in on any battle-weary believer. It is in these

moments of spiritual fatigue and weakness that a Seelsorger is most needed in this personal face-to-face ministry of bringing words of comfort to restore peace to the troubled soul in his care.

Visiting the Sick and Dying

God is at work in the words shared by the minister at the sick bed. The words spoken will have a ready audience. When the comfort of this earthly existence is challenged, the reality of eternity and heaven is seen with a new, clear focus. The words shared by the pastor at the sick bed have tremendous impact upon the faith of the one visited.

Each pastor is a unique person, gifted in different ways. So, be yourself, not someone else. I have found, when the moment is right, personal talk and light humor helps to break the tension in a room that has been so fraught with worry and concern. However, at times light words are out of place. The pastor will work consistently to develop and improve his bedside manner, so as not to place an obstacle in the way of the message he has come to deliver.

I have always tried to have a Law/Gospel devotion that highlights the way of salvation. Sometimes you can hear in the words spoken by a suffering believer the shaking of their faith, at times you can see it in fearful eyes and sometimes it is there, but seen only by God who is able to see beyond the exterior of things. Like Habeck and Schuetze advised, never take it for granted that because someone seems strong in faith to you... they are ok. Preach the Gospel! Carry the message of Christ crucified for our sins and heaven's door open to every believer (no matter what the past might hold). Carry that certainty also in your private communion kit and offer it to the sufferer. We need the assurance of forgiveness and life especially in those moments when the devil perches near us as we suffer. Christ will chase the devil away with his words of comfort and eternal hope.

It goes without saying, that whoever requests the shepherd's time in moments of duress will find time in his busy schedule (ie. faithful member, weak member, the excommunicated and the unbelieving prospect). Again, remember that in life's troubles God is at work. Words that may not have been able to be shared previously often find an open heart. How many times have we had a devotion with a member of our congregation and when finished heard from the other side of the room, "Pastor, could you come over here, too?" or have had the opportunity to speak about Jesus with family/friends of the person we came to visit? Look for these opportunities. Invite, those connected to the sufferer to also receive spiritual comfort and advice from your ministry.

One of my mentors in the early days of my ministry was Ray Wiechmann, a member of my congregation at Clearwater. “Uncle Ray” as he was known in the South-Atlantic district where he served for many years as District president, was a friend, and one of two pastors I’ve been privileged to minister to at the end of their earthly lives and then to conduct their joyful funerals. When I attended my first district meeting in 1985 I felt Ray’s hand on my shoulder and he said, “David, always remember to laugh and cry with your people. If you do that, while you preach the Word, your ministry will serve Jesus well.” (Then I got Ray’s famous support your synod speech or I’ll come and get you!) Those words have stuck across the twenty years since I heard them. The ministry of comfort, has such a profound effect upon your ministry to all of God’s people. As you serve those who suffer, the members of your flock will see you as one of Jesus’ shepherds and their trust and confidence in your ministry will blossom into many blessings. Neglect this important facet of ministry and it can discredit your entire ministry, disconnecting you from the people you have been called to serve.

Counseling/Visiting the Suffering Believer

While in most instances, sickness and/or the approach of death will result in a readiness to listen to the Gospel, oftentimes troubles in other areas of life bring about a struggle for control in a person’s life. Many times “my will” replaces “Thy will” in one’s quest for happiness. Our old adam wants desperately to believe that this life is about me. The conscience, jaded by sin, wants to excuse the actions of unbelief with the words “God wouldn’t want me to be so unhappy.” Again, consider the seemingly Christian message of be-happy-ness as the goal of life on earth that swirls around our members constantly. This same message many times has been offered as “holy” advice by others in the sufferer’s life (as harmful as Job’s ill-advised friends).

In my work with our new substance abuse ministry, dramatically it is demonstrated that only after a fall that is recognized and repentance, does real change take place in the heart and then the life. In the same way, speaking the truth in love is often called for in dealing with one whose troubles are the cause of a wandering from faithfulness. The law must be applied to crush the sinful attitude and actions. A person must be confronted with the truth that God’s will for life is not one’s unbridled happiness.

When sinful hearts repent, then the pastor will assure of forgiveness. He will also again point to some of God’s purposes in troubles encountered in life. He will also offer practical advice on how to live a faithful life. I have found it helpful to speak to a person going through challenging spiritual troubles in

terms of the future. “How do I live these moments in my life in a way that brings glory to God, so that when I look back in days to come I can rejoice and say: ‘God strengthened and helped me to live to his glory through my challenge.’” The pastor also will point to faithfulness in Word and Sacrament as the manner in which God strengthens faith.

By no means is this a comprehensive primer on ministering to the suffering. When we were vicars we had opportunity to shadow our supervisor. Our ministry was to large degree shaped by that learning experience. Imagine what a wonderful experience it would be if we could all shadow each other and learn. It is my hope that in the discussion that follows, you will share both experiences and insights and thereby help strengthen your brothers in this ministry of comfort.

Preach and Teach

I tend to do better at tests in life where I have had a chance to think and learn and prepare before having to take them. So also it is with the tests of faith we encounter along the path of our lives. As pastors who share the whole counsel of God, it is important that we speak from the pulpit on the subject of suffering.

We of course, have as the most vivid object lesson of all, the sufferings of the Savior for the sin of the world. No one will ever know the depth of his suffering, shouldering the weight of every sin. Patiently, lovingly, forgivingly, he suffered. We can learn much by watching him suffer. Our people learn much watching him.

Following Jesus will place challenges in our path. People need to know this! Point out the ways in which God uses suffering for our good. Prepare people for suffering. As the paper stated at the beginning, suffering is reality in a sinful world. Try as we might to avoid it, it will happen to us all.

Preach and also teach. Use Bible class time to ready hearts for trials that will come. Regularly have Bible classes that either specifically address the subject of suffering (Job, topical study) or touch upon suffering in discussion content. Prepare your people for the struggles they most certainly will face before they are with the Lord in heaven.

Bible Study & “Trouble” Directory

I include a very simple Bible study on suffering. Also, we have handed out the “Yellow Pages” sheet several times to our members. Members are encouraged to use it and keep it in their Bibles for ready reference in times of challenge.

Now to the discussion, the paper is at an end. Be gentle, I suffered greatly writing this paper. I need comforting ☺

ⁱ From Publishers Weekly: Houston megachurch pastor and inspirational TV host Osteen offers an overblown and redundant self-help debut. Many Christian readers will undoubtedly be put off by the book’s shallow name-it-and-claim-it theology; although the first chapter claims that “we serve the God that created the universe,” the book as a rule suggests the reverse: it’s a treatise on how to get God to serve the demands of self-centered individuals. Osteen tells readers that God wants them to prosper, offering examples of obtaining an elegant mansion or a larger salary (“don’t ever get satisfied with where you are,” he cautions). In seven parts, he details how readers should enlarge their vision, develop self-esteem, discover the power of thought, let go of the past, find strength through adversity, give back to others and choose to be happy. The section on giving comes as too little, too late—Osteen’s message to remember others and “get your mind off yourself” flies in the face of the previous 200 pages. There are some good pockets of advice, such as letting go of past hurts and avoiding bitterness. Editorially, the book would have packed more of a punch if a third of its repetitive slogans and stories had been pruned. Theologically, its materialism and superficial portrayal of God as the granter of earthly wishes will alienate many Christian readers who can imagine a much bigger God.

ⁱⁱ “What Luther Says: An Anthology” (Concordia Publishing House, 1972) reference 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ “What Luther Says: An Anthology” (Concordia Publishing House, 1972), reference 37.

^{iv} “The Shepherd Under Christ,” Habeck/Schuetze (Northwestern Publishing House, 1982) p. 159.