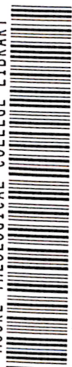


Facing Problems

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2 SORROW

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SORROW

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THE PROBLEM OF FACING SORROW

In our series on facing human problems, we now come to the problem of sorrow. Sorrow is an experience which comes to almost everyone in some degree, and at some time in his life. It is wise to bear this in mind, lest we feel that our experience is unique. Sorrow, like temptation, is "common to man" and your experience is probably one which a multitude of others have passed through.

The Bible often speaks of suffering and sorrow, and it was an experience which came even to those who were in a very close fellowship with Jesus. A very clear example of this is given in John Chapter 11, which I want to refer to for a moment.

In Verses 1-4 we read that Lazarus was ill, and that news of his illness came to Jesus. But at the very moment when it seemed that action was required, Jesus did nothing.

Verses 5-7: It reads as though He deliberately delayed at this point until it was too late. When He did eventually arrive at Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days.

Verses 17-21: Martha's words of anguish are later repeated by Mary - "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died", and are echoed by many of us when we encounter sorrow. Why did God not do something? Why did God allow it? How can God be loving when He allows such things to happen to me?

It is not easy to give the sufferer a satisfying answer to these questions because the answer is neither simple nor obvious. It is clear from the Bible and from our observations of life that sorrow, sickness and suffering are part and parcel of our world. But it was not intended to be this way; it was intended to be a world of physical, mental and spiritual health, with man in harmony with God, with his fellow men, and with his environment. This is the kind of world pictured for us in the first two Chapters of Genesis, where we are told that "God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good."

Our world, unfortunately, is not very good, as even a casual observation of life will quickly disclose. Whether we choose to

read the newspapers or our own hearts, we will arrive at the same conclusion. The world is sick. How has this discrepancy between the world of Genesis 1 & 2, and the world of our experience, come about?

Genesis answers this question in Chapter 3, where we read of man's act of rebellion against God, which not only broke his fellowship with God, but which brought in its train all the terrible evils which characterise the world at this moment, including sorrow and sickness, and most of all, death itself.

So in this sense we can say that sorrow is a consequence of man's sin. It is a testimony to the fact that we are fallen people living in a fallen world - and in such a world any of us could be called on to endure sorrow without there being any obvious reason.

However, we must avoid the assumption sometimes made that experiences of this kind are punishment for some specific sin on the part of the sufferer. Job's friends made this assumption and of his friends expressed it this way: "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same." (Job 4:7,8).

The disciples of Jesus also thought this way, because when they saw a blind man beside the road they asked Jesus, "Rabbi, and Jesus' answer points out the fallacy of any direct correlation of sin and sickness or sin and sorrow. He said, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him." (John 9:1-3).

It is worth comparing those words with His statement about the sickness of Lazarus before he died: "This illness is not unto death: it is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it."

So then, it is not that sorrow comes because you have sinned in a particularly serious way - that can bring sorrow, of course. - but more often than not, the reason is not obvious. The most

we can say is that "it is for the glory of God". God intends to turn it to His praise.

Here, then, is our answer to our question, "Why does God allow it?" He allows it because through it He will be glorified. Sorrow does not come by chance. God controls it and uses it to serve His purpose.

In Romans 8:28-30 the Apostle Paul points out that God's ultimate purpose for the Christian is that he be "conformed to the image of His Son", and there can be no doubt that sorrow is one of many experiences which God "works together" in order to bring the Christian into a closer likeness to Christ. This sense of God's sovereignty and control over our lives will help to face sorrow because it assures us that there is a PURPOSE in it. God is using it to fashion us into Christlike people, and as we become Christlike people, God is glorified.

However, it should be understood that grief or sorrow is a normal emotion. Look again at John 11.

Verses 32-37: "Jesus wept". Sometimes the Christian seeks to repress the emotion of sorrow because it may be misinterpreted - he feels it may appear un-Christian, or lacking in faith. Actually, there is no denial in the Christian's witness because the sufferer expresses the emotion of sorrow - even Christ Himself expressed grief. The sorrow and tears of Mary touched the loving heart of Jesus to such an extent that finally He Himself wept.

The Christian has the confidence that nothing can separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He will experience sorrow in just as real a way as any man, but in the midst of sorrow he is upheld by One Who knows our needs and is "able to sympathize with our weaknesses."

The Revd. M.A.P. Wood says, "The first stepping stone across the river of suffering is the personal, compassionate love of Jesus for those who suffer, and for those who have to watch their loved ones suffer The Devil tempts us to believe in a distant, impersonal, frowning Deity, aloof and alone in the comfort of His Heaven. The Holy Spirit in the Bible shows us the true, loving heart of God, seen in the life and love and healing work of His

Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus came to show us what God, His Father and our Creator, is like. "Jesus wept". That is what God is like. He is like His beloved Son. God loves you in the same way that His Son loved Lazarus." *

Of course, so far we have only seen a part of the story of Lazarus. The conclusion comes in Verses 38-44. But some may feel a sense of disappointment as you read this. Up to this point we have sensed that their experience was like our own. But now we have a happy ending which seems to rob the story of its real impact. After all, in our sorrows and griefs there is often no final reversal which puts everything right.

If we are tempted to feel this way, we should remind ourselves of Jesus' promise to Martha (Verses 23-26). The physical raising up of Lazarus was only a parable of the more important resurrection which God brings about in the lives of all who place their trust in Christ.

The question is often asked, "How can we believe that God is love when He allows me to suffer?" The answer to this question is surely that we see His love for us at the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. At Calvary Christ endured a degree of suffering which we can never fully understand, and He did it for us. He bore our sin; He bore our guilt and our judgment. This is how we know that God loves us.

But the fact that Christ died and rose again not only demonstrates God's love for us; it also guarantees the resurrection of all who receive Him as Lord and Saviour. It is the basis of Jesus' promise to Martha (Verses 25,26).

The Christian enjoys a quality of life which cannot be touched by distress or sorrow, or even physical death. To put it another way, the Christian is a citizen of the age to come, where there will be no more sorrow or tears or death (Rev. 21:1-4).

Suffering and distress may characterise human experience in this life, but the Christian knows that it will not always be so. It was this assurance that enabled Paul to say, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18), and it is

this assurance which will enable all who share Paul's confidence to endure hardship and sorrow as good soldiers of Jesus Christ.

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If you love people, you always run the risk of sorrow, for when someone you love suffers, you are affected. God understands this perfectly, and there is much in Scripture to help us find His way through such a trial. Tony Tress shows us, through the experience of Jesus Christ, something of how we should face this problem.

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