

The Role of Suffering In God's Plan

1 Pet. 4:12-16

Introduction:

1. A week ago we began a three-part lesson.
2. We observed how some object to believing in God because they find it unacceptable that a good and powerful God could allow all the evil that exists in the world.
3. Scripture acknowledges that what is is not what ought to be. But it also indicates that God is in the business of taking what is and changing it into what ought to be.
4. What is is a necessary stage in the realization of what ought to be. God is a God of justice and righteousness, both good and powerful, and will not allow evil to continue unchecked.
5. The Bible teaches that all of history is moving in the direction of God making things right. Evil will be condemned and right will be vindicated.
6. In this lesson we ask, "What role does suffering play in God's plan to make things what they ought to be?" If what is is a necessary stage in the realization of what ought to be then the suffering we witness should play some role in God's redemptive work. What is it?

Discussion:

- I. The problem of suffering is not new.
 - A. Israel suffered at the hands of the Egyptians and God delivered them.
 1. In Ex. 15 they sang a song about how God had shattered the enemy, redeemed them and led them with His lovingkindness. They praised Him for His provision and sang, "The Lord shall reign forever and ever."
 2. But on their journey they began to suffer, and with their suffering they began to grumble (Ex. 17).
 - a. They complained about being hungry. God gave them manna.
 - b. They complained of thirst. And questioned, "Is God among us or not?"
 - B. I can hear them raising the same issue in Egypt. When they were threatened by Assyria. When they were being overpowered by Babylon. "If God is among us why are we suffering at the hands of the ungodly?"
 1. "The idolatrous nations have the upper hand? Is God among us or not?"
 2. But God raised up Cyrus, King of Persia and delivered them.
 3. They returned to the land but were still under the control of the nations—the Greeks and then the Romans. One empire after another came and went but Israel was always subject to them.
 - C. The problem was not just a problem of suffering as a nation. It was individual as well. We praise Job as a man of patience, and yet who can forget his suffering?
 1. He questions, "Why?" (3:11ff).
 2. He vindicates himself as righteous. Trusts in God's justice. All the while his friends question his righteousness and defend God as one who is acts in fairness.
 - a. Job is righteous.
 - b. God is trustworthy.

- c. And God is fair.
- d. How can all be true and the righteous still be suffering?

II. The Bible sees the problem from a broad perspective. It is not just a conflict between Israel and Egypt, Israel and Assyria, Israel and Babylon or Rome. It is a conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan that results in suffering, and individuals experience suffering at a very personal level.

- A. This is the way the suffering of Job is presented (1:6-2:7).
- B. Eph. 6:10ff presents the struggle as “not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness.”
- C. The struggle of the O.T. was not just with foreign nations, but also between the kingdom of God and the idolatrous kingdoms of the world. In the plagues God’s power over the gods of Egypt is demonstrated.
- D. This is the view of Jesus.
 - 1. Jesus sent out the 70 to preach the kingdom of God (Lk. 10:17-19). When they returned they marveled saying, “Even the demons are subject to us.” Jesus said, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.”
 - 2. John was imprisoned and questioned, “Are you the One, or shall we look for someone else?” Jesus said, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:2-5).
 - 3. When Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, Jesus said, “I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matt. 16:18).
 - 4. Jesus’ invitation, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28-30; cf. Isa. 35:5; 61:1ff).
- E. Suffering is a consequence of sin.
 - 1. Sometimes as a result of personal sin (Cain, under a curse).
 - 2. Sometimes as a result of the sins of others (ex. Abel).
 - 3. Sometimes as a result of being born outside the Garden of Eden.
 - 4. It is the result of both the justice of God and the grace of God.
 - a. It is only right that evil be punished.
 - b. But God’s grace would not punish it immediately to allow time for sinners to repent.
 - 5. The spiritual battle rages. Sometimes suffering results from our association with Jesus and His mission to overcome the spiritual forces of this darkness (1 Pet. 4:12ff).

III. There are some advantages to suffering.

- A. It tempers us (James 1:2-4).

- B. It drives us toward seeking relief (1 Cor. 5:5).
- C. We should learn obedience through suffering (Heb. 5:7-9).
 - 1. Obedience leads to escape from suffering. Obedience is “for our good always.”
 - 2. Both in this life (to some degree) and in the next.
- D. The suffering of Jesus paid the penalty for my sin (Rom. 5:9).
- E. Suffering as a result of being a Christian identifies us with Christ and with His kingdom and assures us that we can rejoice at the revelation of His glory (1 Pet. 4:13-14; Rom. 8:18ff). God is at work for us (Rom. 8:28). No power can conquer us (Rom. 8:35-39).

IV. There are two perspectives that can be taken on suffering. One is more self-centered, the other is more others-centered.

- A. The one more self-centered sees suffering as something that I must escape from.
 - 1. Many in Israel had this perspective.
 - 2. “We are the specially chosen people of God, we should not be suffering. If God is among us He should remove my suffering immediately.”
 - 3. These are those who view themselves as “the privileged.” They may take great pride in being the chosen people of God.
 - 4. They may be found grumbling about their suffering and demanding relief.
 - 5. They may see the **final reward as compensation** for their suffering. They will endure it **until a better time**.
- B. And then there are those who view suffering as something to be endured to reach others.
 - 1. They see suffering as part of the spiritual battle.
 - 2. They endure it in order to reach others.
 - 3. They accept suffering (Heb. 10:32-34). They embrace it in order **that better may come**. They see the **final reward as a result** of their suffering.
 - 4. They see themselves as bringing hope to the world. They are thankful and humble.
 - 5. They bring the message of hope to others and suffer in order to do so.
- C. Which one characterized the suffering of Jesus? 1 Pet. 2:21-24
- D. Therefore arm yourselves for suffering (1 Pet. 4:1).

Conclusion:

- 1. There is a spiritual battle going on. A war is raging between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.
- 2. Surely we realize that suffering is brought on by the spiritual forces of darkness.
- 3. The real question is, “Whose side are you on?”
- 4. The forces of darkness are defeated! Oh, the last enemy has not yet been destroyed. The final judgment has not been achieved, but the victory is certain!!