



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

1 PETER 5

OCTOBER 2019

The Way Of The Thorn

Suffering is often demonized in the current climate of “feel good” religious dogma. In an effort to attract more followers, leaders tend to over-emphasize the idea of pleasure and comfort afforded those who believe while neglecting or even rejecting the role of suffering. This is very dangerous.

It leaves the sheep of God's pasture vulnerable to the stalking predator who is seeking someone to attack.

“... Like a roaring lion our adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour.”
(1 Peter 5:8, NRSV)

Spiritual leaders are responsible to equip believers to survive and thrive in the battle with the devil and his purposes. Those who are not aware of the strategic role of suffering in the Christian journey become easy prey for the prowling lion. In fact, neglecting the role of suffering contributes to the exodus many churches are experiencing. Many who turn their backs on the Christian message have

been blindsided by trouble they were never equipped to expect and thus grow cynical about the entire message.

Peter's letter to the suffering believers of his day addressed the suffering that is part of the package of salvation. It is not the fine print that God hopes you never see. It is integral to our mission on earth and offers us the opportunity to display the glory of God in a way unique to the gospel. Philosophers through the centuries have tried to find a way to explain or handle the issue of suffering: Epicureans try to deny it by making today the only reality that exists; “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.” Stoics endure pain with little attention to emotions, feelings, or analysis. Resigned to a fatalistic

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secular providence, they embrace whatever happens as inevitable and muddle through it. Mystics try to transcend it. Materialists try to eliminate it. Christians, however, can embrace it with the grace that only comes through sharing the very life of Jesus.

Peter concludes his letter with a fantastic summary of how to live in the upside-down world of the kingdom of God.

“ . . . And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

(1 Peter 5:5–10, NRSV)

It is obvious how the text connects suffering to the tactics of the devil. Those who

are ill-informed and ill-prepared will likely be isolated, believing they are getting a raw deal where others are not. Becoming victims, they excuse destructive behavior and embrace cynicism. They face disillusionment because life is not turning out as they had expected. They feel they have been lied to. They are easy prey.

The good news is that we can resist the devil, steadfast in our faith, even as we face suffering :

1. **We can humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God.** We can follow the steps that Jesus revealed in his own suffering (see 1 Peter 2:21–25). If, as some claim, suffering has no part in the victorious Christian life, why did Jesus leave us steps to follow? While humbling ourselves, we know that in due time we shall be exalted. Willingness to wait for the final vindication is an act of humility.
2. **We can cast all anxiety on him.** Carrying our own fears and worries is refusing to trust him who cares for us more than we care for ourselves. We gave our lives to him. He is in charge of what he permits.
3. **We can discipline ourselves.** Bringing our thoughts in line with his words is the first discipline necessary for health. If we are allowing concepts

contrary to truth to fill our minds, we will walk in fear.

4. We can keep alert and be vigilant.

This is serious. We are being stalked. We must be constantly aware of the battle. We are Christ's ambassadors here and the enemy doesn't want us around.

The mystery of suffering hinges on the eternal dynamic that God reveals his true nature by giving his resources instead of requiring ours. He vindicates those who are wronged, and he forgives those who are wrong. Therefore, we are to take every opportunity to humble ourselves in this short time on earth, expecting the glory prepared for us.

The apostle Paul also was clear about the important role of suffering in the Christian journey. Maybe the best illustration was his own encounter with the "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). Because of his afflictions, Paul faced the accusation of being at best an inferior apostle. He had been in jail, stoned, shipwrecked, harassed, and had some mysterious affliction he calls "a thorn in the flesh." Other so-called apostles touted their prosperous lifestyle as evidence that they were blessed of God. They also claimed to have some special kind of anointing that gave them greater authority based on their better revelation. Hesitantly,

Paul recounts his story and views it as his qualification to be a true apostle.

If the accusing apostles had revelations, so did Paul. He was caught up into the third heaven and received revelations he was not permitted to tell. (In contrast to the accusing apostles who told everything they knew—and flaunted it.) As he prayed about being relieved from his thorn in the flesh, God revealed to him that it was there to prevent a self-righteousness that would ruin his usefulness. He would not be permitted to feel superior to anyone based on his greater insights. Further, God revealed to him that self-sufficiency was not permitted either:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

(2 Corinthians 12:9, NRSV)

The two big obstacles to usefulness in God's kingdom are confronted in this mysterious use of the thorn. Self-righteousness and self-sufficiency will wreck any attempt to reflect the glorious image of God.

We all have a need to be significant, and we are looking for ways to vindicate our worth. Our image, our effort, our accomplishments, our group identity, our intelligence, etc. are all ways of getting an edge on others. It can take the form of doctrine,

morality, and esteem. Sadly, the church has often been torn by various forms of self-righteousness. Protestant pride in doctrinal purity, Roman Catholic pride in historical tradition, Revivalists pride in new awakenings, Pentecostal pride, charismatic pride, progressive pride, social compassion pride . . . there is no end. A thorn in the flesh can level the ground. We are all needy. Though we have significance as individuals, we are part of the body of Christ, and none of us knows it all.

Self-sufficiency is the curse of believing that we can handle life without accessing the resources God has provided. We often mistake God's grace as his willingness to get us back on our feet so we can go about our independent lives. God loves the daily dependence we must show toward him. After all, it is his all-sufficient glory that we are displaying, not our ability to handle things. We live with the awareness that we are truly insufficient in ourselves, but fully equipped in our union with him. We are fully loved by God as persons, yet a part of his body and inter-dependently related to every other member. We live in the dynamic of a profound sense of unworthiness coupled with a settled confidence in God's abundant grace. We have no rights to claim on God, yet we have unlimited access to his resources.

"Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need"

(Hebrews 4:14-16, NRSV).

Though we cannot add to the redemptive sufferings of Jesus for the sins of humans, we are privileged to share the sufferings that reflect his nature and purpose on earth. We are the instruments of light that show how humility always defeats hubris. We show how weakness trumps strength. We show how love wins over hate. We get to share his life now as he lives it on earth through us. We, like Paul, embrace the way of the thorn.



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