

"Big Question 4: Why does God let us suffer?"

Sunday 1 February 2009

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Readings:

Exodus 3:1-22

Psalms 137:1-6

Romans 8:18-28

Sermon

Up to now, as we have followed the story of Moses, it almost seems as though God has been on 'pause'. The Israelites had been in Egypt for four hundred years, since the time of Joseph. They had arrived as the family of Pharaoh's first minister ... but over the years their status had shifted ... from that of honoured guests, through tolerated minority and distrusted foreigners, to that of hated enemy and oppressed slaves.

What had happened in those intervening years?

It looks, at first sight, as though God had forgotten them ... or was it that they had forgotten God? There have been many periods in the history of God's people when they have turned their back on him and God has left them to their own devices, waiting patiently for them to come back to him ... and usually during those times his people have suffered the consequences of their sin and rebellion.

There are a number of issues to take note of here:

First, that suffering is always in some way connected with sin. Throughout their history, the Hebrew people, despite their special status as God's Chosen People, followed a pattern of sin and rebellion, turning away from God, until things got so bad for them that in desperation they cried out to God for mercy.

God's grace towards Israel was always undeserved. He watched over them not because they were good, because as a nation they were guilty ... but because he loved them.

Second, that the fact of suffering is not necessarily a sign of individual responsibility or sin ...so we could not say that every individual Hebrew at the time of Moses was responsible for their own suffering. Sometimes, as part of the outworking of a fallen creation, we suffer as a consequence of other people's sin.

This happens when suffering is inflicted by one person on another, like the young father tragically knifed to death at bus stop a few days ago, on his way to visit his wife and newborn son ... or by one group on another, such as the suffering inflicted on Gaza by Israel over the last few weeks. So the Hebrews suffered under the Egyptians, and the innocent suffered along with the guilty.

Third, that sometimes suffering is a means to a better end. We suffer in order to learn to depend more on God ... or in order to be changed in some way. Older people often look back to the sufferings of war as a time when people worked together and supported one-another. Many individuals point to times of suffering as times of growth.

For the Hebrew people, their time of slavery led them to cry out to God afresh ... which in turn meant that God could lead them into a better future.

This can apply in our personal lives too. When we become arrogant or neglectful and move away from God, and try to live by our own strength as though we don't need God ... God does not force himself upon us. Instead, he waits patiently for us to come to our senses.

Sometimes our suffering seems pointless and undeserved, and we do not understand why our loving Father should allow terrible things to happen to his children. Sometimes in our suffering we come to learn the lesson of how much we really depend on him ... and this leads us to come to our senses.

Some of this makes sense to us ... but if we are honest, some of it we struggle with. There are no simple answers, and I would not presume to offer simplistic answers as to why anyone here has suffered, or is suffering, in any particular way.

What I do believe, with all my heart, is that there is purpose, even when we are unable to understand it .. and there is hope, even when all seems hopeless ... and that God in his wisdom and mercy does not abandon us or leave us to suffer alone.

As for the people of Israel, whatever the state of the nation as a whole ... and, to be honest, Scripture doesn't give us much to go on ... there were still those who feared God and were trusting in his love for his people ... and even though they were suffering, there are many signs that God had not abandoned them.

We read in Exodus Chapter 1 how despite the best efforts of the Egyptians to carry out genocide on the Hebrews, their population continued to grow:

They: *'were fruitful and multiplied greatly'* (verse 7)

and: *'the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread'*. (verse 12)

Specifically, we read about the midwives who defied Pharaoh's order to kill the baby boys born to the Hebrew slaves, *'because they feared God'* (verses 17 & 21)... and because of this, God gave them families of their own. God had not abandoned them.

In Exodus Chapter 2 we read about Moses' mother, who placed him in a waterproofed basket among the reeds at the edge of the River Nile. Though it isn't stated explicitly, it is implied that she did so, trusting that God would do something. As events took their course, we see the hand of God at work as Moses was not only rescued from certain death, but brought to a position of influence in which God would be able to use him to save his people.

The faith of Moses' mother may only be implied in Exodus 2, but in fact, if we turn to Hebrews Chapter 11, we find what is implicit in Exodus 2 made explicit there:

"By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict."

So, we can see that despite the desperate plight of the Hebrew people, and the apparent inaction of God on their behalf, in reality God was at work in the background, preparing for action when the time was right ... and was with his people even in their suffering, if only they were aware of it, and willing to seek him.

But then it looked as though God's plan had gone terribly wrong, when Moses did a terrible thing, when he killed the Egyptian slave-driver, and fled to Midian.

How could God use a murderer? ... especially one who had lost the respect of his fellow-Hebrews, and even jeopardised their situation further by hiding a dead guard in the sand?

The suffering of the people continued ... Moses, by his own admission, had become '*an alien in a foreign land*', and it almost seems as though God was out of the picture altogether ... except we read in verse 23:

"During that long period (that is, the period when Moses was shepherding sheep in Midian), the King of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them."

What we have, then, is God biding his time ... waiting until the people were ready to turn back to him, and preparing the man who he had chosen to be his agent of change. Because Moses' forty years in Midian were not wasted years. If he thought sheep were hard to lead and care for, they were a walkover compared with the Israelites.

Often when we see suffering in the world ... or when we experience suffering in our lives ... we wonder why God doesn't do something. Our problem is that we are unable to see the Big Picture - to see the world ... or our own lives ... from God's eternal perspective. We know ourselves that quick fixes seldom work - like patching up a leaking pipe rather than doing a proper repair ... or like handing out money to a drug addict which only serves to feed their habit - quick fixes often lead to a more complex problem that takes even longer to put right.

So ... God had planned his strategy and had been putting the pieces in place ... and now he was ready move. To do that, he really had to get Moses' attention!

Probably most of you knew already the story of the Burning Bush ... how God called to Moses and revealed himself to him in the bush which was on fire but did not burn up ... a holy ground encounter in which Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

What followed was a debate between God and Moses about God's call on him to go and lead the Israelites out of slavery into freedom in the promised land ... and in particular about all Moses' excuses as to why he wasn't the man for the job, as though God would make a mistake!

Moses was very aware of his lack of qualifications. He didn't feel that his career choices to date had adequately equipped him for the job of National Leader ... but more of that when Karen preaches next week from Chapter 4. What we particularly see in this chapter is the concern and love which God has for his suffering people. Look at these verses again:

v7 *"The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.""*

v8 *"I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey."*

v9 *"And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them."*

v16b *"I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt."*

v21 *"I will make the Egyptians favourably disposed towards this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed."*

So:

- God sees, God hears, and God is concerned.
- God has chosen to act on behalf of his people.
- God holds out the promise of a better future.
- God has seen how they have suffered.
- God promises to bless his people in the future.

But if we are honest, that still leaves us with an unspoken question:

"Why now? Why not sooner?"

After all, generations have suffered. They have sweated and toiled under Egyptian whips. Many have lived and died as slaves. Couldn't God have rescued them years ago?

And this is where we have to hold up our hands and say: "I don't know!"

Which of us can claim to know the mind of God? ... except to say as we did earlier, that we suffer with the consequences of living in a fallen world, where sin has brought suffering with it, where the innocent suffer along with the guilty, and where somehow God works through it all to bring about his purposes.

And that being the case, we can only try to take the long view ... to see it all from God's eternal perspective ... and to trust in his promises that at the end of time, every wrong will be righted and every injustice will be satisfied. Until then, we can only go on trusting.

Those of you who are familiar with the C.S. Lewis story, "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" may recall Mr Beaver's words to the children when they first hear about Aslan, the Great Lion, who represents Jesus:

"Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again."

This is not to underplay or trivialise the reality of suffering. One of the reasons the Psalms are so helpful to us is that they speak into the real issues which touch our lives.

Psalm 137 recalls the Israelites in Exile, longing for home, tormented by their captors and unable to sing the songs of Zion because their hearts are heavy. Other Psalms speak about opposition, mourning, sickness, despondency and guilt.

Suffering touches all our lives at one level or another ... through bereavement, sickness, the breakdown of relationships, financial troubles and in many other ways. As the people of God we are called to stand with one-another in the face of suffering ... to be a community of love in which we seek to carry each other's burdens, and support one-another in the darkest times.

But we also need to help one-another to see suffering in the context of God's eternal plan ... to recognise that suffering may refine us and mature us ... and to understand that in Jesus we have the promise of eternal life where suffering will be no more.

In Romans 8, Paul helps us to do just that ... to recognise that our sufferings:

"... are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (verse 18)

What Paul is describing is the sense in which the whole of creation is suffering ... groaning in pain as it waits for the fulfilment of God's promises.

Since sin first entered the world, nothing has been entirely as God planned it to be. Disease and death, conflict and confusion ... none of these were part of God's intention for his perfect world.

It was only as man chose to go his own way, rather than follow the ways of his creator, that the world became a sad dangerous place. Even so, we see all around us in the beauty of creation and in the remaining goodness we find in other people, many hints of God's original intention.

We who have come to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour ... who have within us the Holy Spirit of God, working in our lives, and the assurance of eternal life with him ... have this hope within us of a world remade, of mankind restored, and of the end of all suffering.

The hope we have is not, as we have said before, the sort of hope that is really wishful thinking. We do not hope in the sense that people hope to win the lottery or hope for warm weather on their holidays. Our hope is founded on something much more certain – it is founded on the promises of God.

But Paul sets us a challenge here. Notice what he has to say in verses 22-25:

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pain of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

So, Paul is telling us that for the time being, suffering is part of the picture ... the way things are. All creation longs for the promises of God to be fulfilled in their proper time ... when all people everywhere will have had the opportunity to hear about Jesus Christ, repent of their sins, and turn to him as their Lord and Saviour. But many don't know what they are longing for. Our mission as God's Church is to share with them the hope of glory.

In the meantime, we share life as it is with the rest of creation ... not immune to the sufferings of the world, but part of them ... while at the same time having 'the first-fruits of the Spirit' – the down-payment or first instalment of all that God has in store for us.

In other words ... God has saved us ... God is saving us .. and God will save us. Our future is secure if we have put our trust in him, but the process is not yet complete.

For now, we will have trials and tribulations in the same way that everyone else does. The difference is that God has promised to be with us by his Spirit and to help us in our weakness, so we know we are not alone.

As we wait patiently for our final redemption, when we will receive all the promises of God in all their fullness ... the Lord calls us to be a people of prayer ... a community of hope ... a sanctuary for the suffering ... and a Church with a mission to share the good news of his saving love.