

THE GOD WHO SUFFERS WITH US

Luke 19:41-44; Hebrews 4:14-16

By

Dr. Myron J. Taylor, Minister Emeritus
Westwood Hills Christian Church

As soon as life grows difficult, when some of the hard blows of disaster pound upon us, we begin almost at once to ask, "What kind of world do we have?" The next question is "What kind of God do we have? Does God know what is happening to us? Does he care? Is it possible that all of this has been planned previously, everything is all set beforehand? Is everything that happens God's will? Is God a despot, or a dictator, or a manipulator?" Sometimes we picture God lounging, perhaps dozing, in some celestial deck chair, while the hungry millions starve to death, and the earth is shaken to the depths of its being. Do the homeless, and the ill, and the children, and the elderly make any difference? Sometimes it seems that God is an armchair spectator, almost gloating over the world's suffering, and enjoying his own isolation. Someone said, "God sits in his heaven and does nothing." The real sting of suffering is not misfortune itself, nor even the pain or the injustice of it, but the apparent God-forsakenness of it. Pain is endurable, but the seeming indifference of God is not.

The problem of suffering and pain and human misery face us squarely with the question, "How does God respond to our plight, does God suffer?" There is a term in philosophy which says God is impassable, that God cannot suffer. God is often pictured even in Christian thinking as a divine monarch or despot who is static, unchanging, and controls the world totally. God is made so great and so powerful and so almighty that he controls everything. Some have pushed God's power to such lengths that it denies human freedom, everything is fixed. It is all in the computer and only has to be played back. Whatever happens is God's will.

When I look at the Christian faith and Christian experience, I think I see something that has helped me tremendously. It came to me like turning on a light in a dark room. It is like warmth and love and kindness sweeping over your entire being. It makes your heart skip a beat and then leaps for joy.

I. LOOK AT THE SCRIPTURES.

The Old Testament authors wrote freely of the love, pity, anger, sorrow, and jealousy of God. Those words attribute to God human emotions, not to be taken literally but to be taken seriously, as telling us something about God that we needed to know. The Old Testament language is an accommodation to our human understanding, and God is

represented as having human emotions. God is great and powerful and orderly and wise. God is also worthy of trust, merciful, patient and full of loving kindness. Over and over again we hear "his steadfast love endures forever" (Psalm 136). The outstanding Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel in his book *The Prophets*, calls attention to God's *pathos* (God's feelings) and says, "The most exalted idea applied to God is not infinite wisdom, infinite power, but infinite concern." Before the flood God was "grieved" that he had made human beings "and his heart was filled with pain," when Israel was oppressed by foreigners during the time of the judges, God "could bear Israel's misery no longer." Most striking of all are the occasions when through the prophets God expresses his "yearning" and "compassion" for his people and addresses Israel directly; "I have loved you with my everlasting love...can a mother forget a baby at her breast?...Though she may forget, I will not forget you....How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused" (Hosea 11:8-9). That doesn't sound like the "Infinite Iceberg" of the philosophers. That doesn't sound like a God who does not care—cannot be touched—without feeling. "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him" (Psalm, 103:13).

If God's full and final revelation was given in Jesus, then Jesus' feelings and sufferings are an authentic reflection of the feelings and sufferings of God himself. The gospel writers attribute to Jesus the whole range of human emotions, from love and compassion through anger and indignation to sorrow and joy. The stubborn willful blindness of the human heart caused him distress and anger. Outside Lazarus' tomb, in the face of death for a dear friend, Jesus both "wept" and "snorted" with indignation. He wept over Jerusalem, and uttered a sad lament (a snort) over her blindness and obstinacy. And still today he is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (see Mark 3:5; John 11:35, 38; Luke 13:34ff, Luke 19:41ff). The writer to the Hebrews summed it up well, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15).

What does all this mean? What does it say to us today? Our God is not the God of the philosophers, "The Unmoved Mover" (Aristotle), "Eternal Energy" (Huxley), "The Unknown Absolute" (Arnold). Not the "First Principle", "Life Essence", "Divine Architect", "Life Force", "Supreme Intelligence", "Big Boss", "Man Upstairs". Our God is not the Big Bully who runs everything and has to have everything his way. God has power, sovereign power, almighty power, but God's power is always used consistent with his character, consistent with his purpose, and consistent with his patience. To say God is sovereign means God has the right to be himself. The question is not so much what God can do, as what God will do. God will not lie. God will not act in an unloving way, God will not do a foolish thing. God is a limited God. To the extent that he has made us free he must limit himself. If I am free, then my actions are not predetermined. If I am to be responsible, I must be free. God is still almighty; because his limitations are self-limitations. God chooses to limit himself. He makes himself vulnerable. Part of the

greatness of God is his desire to stoop to our needs, to accommodate himself to us. God values personal relationships and reaches out to each of us as persons. God has taken terrible risks with each one of us. We can say "yes" to him, and we can say "no" to him. That is the risk of freedom. We can also say, "I love you", and it can mean something because it is freely given. Our God is not the impassable God of the Greeks. Our God is the passionate God of the Hebrews. He is at least personal. He comes to us in the person of Jesus and empowers us by the person of the Holy Spirit. God respects us and addresses us as free persons. That makes God vulnerable, willing to take the risk. God works by persuasion, not coercion. This is most important to us because we become like the God we worship. Since our God is vulnerable, caring, compassionate, concerned, involved; that means he wants us to become that kind of person and enter into that kind of relationship with him. As Christians we are in a personal relationship with a personal God, not in a legal relationship with a Cosmic Lawyer or the Infinite Iceberg. Our God responds to us and to our world in all of its miseries in a caring and empathetic way.

II. DOES GOD SUFFER?

Because God cares—because God loves—He suffers. Rabbi Heschel says that divine pathos—divine caring—is at the heart of the prophetic message of the Old Testament. If God loves, then God suffers. To love is to be vulnerable—to be vulnerable means to be open to the hurts and risks that come with freedom. What meaning can there be in a love that is not costly to the lover? The German theologian Jürgen Moltman says, "The fundamental Christian assertion that God is love...in principle broke the spell of the Aristotelian doctrine of God (that God could not suffer)...Were God incapable of suffering...then he would also be incapable of Love." That is surely why Bonhoeffer wrote from prison to his friend Eberhard Bethge, nine months before his execution: "Only the suffering God can help." Two things we need to notice about our suffering God:

First, God suffers for us. The cross of Christ is the supreme demonstration of the suffering of God. Nowhere do we see the love of God so powerfully and so painfully as in the death of Jesus.

A popular monk in the Middle Ages announced that in the Cathedral that evening he would preach a sermon on the love of God. The people gathered and stood in silence waiting for the service while the sunlight streamed through the beautiful windows. When the last bit of color had faded from the windows the old monk went to the candelabrum, took a lighted candle and walking to the life-size statue on the cross, held the light beneath the wounds on Jesus' feet, then his hands, then his side. Then, still without a word, he let the light shine on the thorn-crowned brow. That was his sermon. The people stood in silence and wept, every one knowing that they were at the center of a mystery beyond their knowing, that they were indeed looking at the love of God—a love so deep, so wide, so eternal that no

words could express it and no mind could measure it.

That is the God for me. He laid aside his immunity to pain. He came to us as one of us in our world of flesh and blood and tears, and death. He suffered for us. As we often confess in our affirmation of faith in worship—"Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (I Cor. 15:3). P. T. Forsyth said, "The Cross of Christ is God's only self-justification in such a world as ours."

An old Scotsman lost two sons in The First World and his heart was so broken that he quit going to church. He felt God had let him down. No disappointment in life is so tragic as to be disappointed in God. The old man's Dominie—Minister—came by to visit and ask him why he wasn't in worship anymore. The old man said, "Where was God when my laddies died?" The minister paused briefly, then looked up and kindly said, "Right where he was on the day his Son died, right down in the middle of it all." People have every right to ask, "Where was God when the Twin Towers crashed to earth, the Pentagon exploded, the plane in Pennsylvania burst into flames and thousands of people lost their lives?" And we as God's people have every right to say, thoughtfully and kindly, "Right where he was when his son died, right down in the middle of it all, weeping and helping the firemen, the police and all who were trying to help." It takes some doing to believe that, but I believe it is true. When disaster strikes anywhere on this earth, God's great heart is the first to break. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..." The cross of Christ—God suffering and dying for us in God's only self-justification in such a world as ours.

Second, the God who suffered for us also suffers with us. God's love is absolute in its integrity forever. It isn't enough to ask if God once suffered for us. He still stands with us. We do not face the tragedies and the sorrows of this world alone. Our great God stands with us. Suffering does not jeopardize God's being or integrity. Although God suffers, he is not weak. The greatness of our God is not in his power but in his deep and genuine concern, his love. Our God is not the Divine Despot but the Divine Companion. Alfred North Whitehead described God as "the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands." God does not determine human history through any prearranged plan or the use of coercive power. The old debate about freewill, predestination and universalism, has never been expressed better than this statement by P. T. Forsyth: "We are all predestined in love to life, sooner or later—if we will" (*This Life and The Next*, 16). He stands with us and works through us to build a world of justice and peace and decency. God suffers with us and acts through us to overcome our suffering and lures us to cooperate in the alleviation of suffering. We are not to think of our God as lounging in a deck chair but suffering for us and with us on the cross.

Elie Weisel, the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner, writes in his powerful book, *Night*, a deeply moving account of his boyhood experiences in the death camps of Auschwitz, Buna,

and Buchenwald. In the midst of such awful cruelty and suffering he had to wonder where God was and why he did not answer their prayers. Many lost their faith in God in those dark days. Weisel wrestled with the question of where God was. He tells this story.

"Perhaps the most horrifying experience of all was when the guards first tortured and then hanged a young boy, a child with a refined and beautiful face, a sad-eyed angel. Just before the hanging Elie heard someone behind him whisper, Where is God? Where is he? Thousands of prisoners were forced to watch the hanging (it took the boy half an hour to die) and then to march past, looking him full in the face. Behind him Elie heard the same voice ask, Where is God now? And I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is he? Here he is—he is hanging here on this gallows...."

When you climb the steep mountain, or walk through the dark valley, when your heart is aching, and your eyes are blinded with tears—you can count on it—God cares. You feel so shut out, so cut off, so alone. But you are not alone. Through the Holy Spirit God is present with you as he was present with God's suffering people in Egypt, with Job in his trials and tribulations, as he was present with Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross. "I will never leave you nor forsake you", is a promise you can count on. When the tragedies of life crash upon us, when shock and deep sorrow come to our lives, God's great heart is the first to break. Our God is the God who suffers with us.